

Book Review

Song, M. (2019).

Hanguk Hip Hop: Global Rap in South Korea. Palgrave Macmillan.

Crystal S. Anderson

African and African
American Studies, George
Mason University, USA

Corresponding to

Crystal S. Anderson

African and African
American Studies, George
Mason University, 4400
University Drive, MS 4D6,
Fairfax, VA 22030, USA
Email: cander8@gmu.edu

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Korean popular music has exploded in popularity around the globe in recent years. While the idols of K-pop generate a great deal of scholarship, few books focus specifically on Korean hip hop as part of the discourse on the globalization of Korean popular culture. Not only does Korean hip hop inform the more pop-oriented modes of Korean popular music directed towards a global audience, it also engages with the established tradition of hip hop pioneered in the United States. Myoung-Sun Song's *Hanguk Hip Hop: Global Rap in South Korea* expands our understanding of Korean hip hop by meditating on the implications of race, nation, identity, and aesthetics and examining Korean hip hop as a unique music tradition informed by the history and culture of South Korea.

The persistent tension between the influence of American hip hop and the development of distinct Korean hip hop informs *Hanguk Hip Hop's* overarching argument. Song argues that Korean hip hop artists frequently invoke a mode of authenticity derived from American hip hop. The book maps the parameters of this authenticity, recognizing that what is considered "real" Korean hip hop is linked to the musical structures developed in the United States. At the same time, Song asserts that Korean rappers seek to define Korean hip hop as unique and distinct from American hip hop. The book uses the Korean concept of *buran* as a lens to interpret the ways that Korean artists adapt American hip hop. The book defines *buran* as "Korean for personal, as well as societal anxiety or uncertainty that is manifested on many levels, including psychological, sociocultural, and economic dimension" (p. 7). It is a concept that is suffused throughout Korean society and culture and impacts how Korean artists navigate through society and shapes their aspirations.

Song's book consists of an introductory chapter that contextualizes the analysis of Korean hip hop artists and subsequent chapters that

explore the interaction between popular music and national identity in hip hop. In Chapter 1, Song establishes the foundation of the book by providing a historical and methodological context for her study of Korean hip hop and combining several approaches, including interviews, snowball sampling, analysis of lyrics and reviews of social media. The bulk of the book draws on the analysis of qualitative data gathered from interviews conducted between 2014 and 2018 with artists that include rappers, DJs, a photographer, and an art director. Instead of using snowball sampling, Song obtained interviews through individual contact with prospective interviewees. In addition to asking formal questions of each artist, Song conducted “life timeline interviews,” where she asked “each artist to freely draw her/his life on a large sketchbook to record important moments in life” (p. 19). These interviews were followed up with narrations of the lives of the artists, which contribute to the overall oral history. Rather than relying solely on music theory, which sometimes fails to acknowledge the experiences and voices of actual artists, Song relies on the practitioners of hip hop to tell their own stories. These practitioners range from veteran rappers to up-and-coming artists, thus covering individuals at various stages of their careers. These interviews show a range of views on the nature and significance of Korean hip hop, thus avoiding the trap of viewing Korean hip hop as a monolith. Song combines this oral history with various types of data collected through the analysis of lyrics, visits to sites of hip hop production to collect ethnographic data, an overview of hip hop music and music videos, and observations of online fan boards and forums.

Using the framework described in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 explores the defining elements of Korean hip hop, its differences from American hip hop, and the role played by the concept of authenticity. While Korean artists adapt American hip hop to Korean culture, Song also notes a lack of consensus on what constitutes Korean hip hop.

Some artists insist on a distinctive Korean form of hip hop, sampling from Korean music sources and using themes that view their Korean experiences through a hip hop lens. Other artists see Korean hip hop as an extension of American hip hop. This American sound is inextricably linked to blackness, and Korean artists frequently refer to hip hop as a distinctly black phenomenon.

After defining the parameters of Korean hip hop, Chapter 3 explores the role of technology in both physical and virtual communal spaces that underscore authentic Korean hip hop. Here, Song argues that online communities create opportunities for communal listening as well as collaboration by eliminating the limits of a physical location. Beyond PC communities, physical locations like Hongdae in Seoul function as a gathering site, a playground, an imaginative hometown, and a place for practitioners to hone their skills. Hongdae also functions as a metaphorical space that represents an independent music scene. As both a physical and imaginative space, it represents “a contested space between authenticity and commercialization” (p. 72).

While hip hop’s geography underscores authenticity in Korean hip hop, the self-development discourse embodied in hip hop forms the basis of Chapter 4’s examination of the hip hop record label, Illionaire Records. Informed by *buran*, the other common theme in Song’s study, “success becomes linked to materialistic gain for which individualism is encouraged. Whereas in the past, personal success was tied to the success of the nation; after the Asian Financial Crisis, success becomes individualized” (p. 99). As a result of this shift, Song argues that economic success by rappers “can be read as a self-development text in neoliberal South Korea” that becomes “reframed through the lens of hip-hop” (pp. 93–94). Using Illionaire as a case study, Song shows how the ethos of the personnel of the company uses hip hop to cope with *buran*. Korean cultural values of frugality, conflicts with the dogged pursuit of wealth that Korean rappers undertake. The

founders of Illionaire seek the freedom to make their own music, but also frequently invoke the quest to make money found in American hip hop. Material pursuit becomes interpreted as authentic hip hop. This self-development discourse also draws on the theme of hard work within Korean society but operates as an alternative to the competitive attainment of education and a good traditional job. For rappers, economic success must be interpreted through a lens of hip hop.

An authenticity informed by aesthetics connects Korean hip hop and K-pop, and Chapter 5 shows how K-pop incorporates elements of hip hop. Song avoids pitting Korean hip hop and K-pop against one another. Using the idol group BTS as the example, she shows that authenticity must be proven by idol rappers, whose authenticity is rarely acknowledged. Two members of BTS who emerged from hip hop's underground seek to connect hip hop to mainstream popular music. Yet, they face challenges because rappers perceive pop music as essentially commercial, while "real" hip hop uses elements of one's life to tell stories of struggle. Song reads the group's participation in the reality show *American Hustle Life* as the means by which BTS seeks authenticity through the mentorship of black male rappers. Authentication takes place outside Korea, for the group comes to the United States, the place of origin for hip hop. Here, they learn that hip hop is not scary, but they also replicate some of the common stereotypes about American hip hop in general and African Americans in particular.

The impact of gender on expressions of authenticity in hip hop takes center stage in Chapter 6, which uses an analysis of the reality competition program *Unpretty Rapstar* to explain the lack of female rappers in Korean hip hop. Song acknowledges issues surrounding the skill of female rappers, but the male-dominated field of hip hop has the most impact on female rappers. While consumers of Korean hip hop are largely female, male fans are considered serious aficionados. Female rappers themselves

also note a lack of female role models and envy the community of male rappers. Song argues that *Unpretty Rapstar* reveals the impact of male perceptions of female rappers. Concerns expressed by judges about the female rappers include questions about their skills as well as the emotional nature of their lyrics. The style of female rappers diverges from "real" hip hop, which for male rappers, has a more aggressive style that is best expressed by male rappers. *Unpretty Rapstar's* format differs radically from its parent show, *Show Me the Money*, which featured male rappers. The female-centric show features an absence of female hosts, leaving the female contestants to be judged by male panelists, who tend to focus on their appearance. Song argues that women are judged on their identities as women rather than their skill as rappers. She also demonstrates that the show plays up the conflict among the female contestants themselves, reflecting stereotypical perceptions of the interaction between women.

Beyond this summary, the book adeptly analyzes the impact of authenticity on the development of Korean hip hop. It represents an important intervention in the study of hip hop and Korean popular culture. Song's work complements other scholarship that considers hip hop beyond the United States and shows how it has been adapted by global cultures. It reveals how black cultural production can function as a language for expression by those in a different culture. At the same time, the book contributes an expanded interpretative language for Korean popular culture. Rather than locating discrete elements of a monolithic Korean culture, the book examines Korean hip hop as a continuum that defies consensus.

At the same time, Song's book could interrogate some of the ramifications of the rappers' perceptions of Korean hip hop. For example, Song acknowledges that Korean artists draw on the most commercial forms of American hip hop: "What is considered mainstream or commercial hip hop in America could very well be taken as

‘underground’ in Korea” (p. 39). Yet, Song’s book does not explore how this focus on genres of the mainstream American hip hop limits Korean hip hop. To establish authenticity, the book argues that Korean rappers draw from gangsta rap, a subgenre of hip hop known for its controversial lyrics that celebrate gangs, illegal behavior and violence. By failing to interrogate this perception of hip hop based on its most controversial genre, the book forecloses the impact of other genre influences on Korean hip hop. There are other subgenres of hip hop, including boom bap, conscious, southern and trap, that reflect social commentary as well as musical creativity. The United States also has a thriving underground hip hop scene that technology makes possible for Korean artists to access. The book could explain how this overreliance on gangster rap could limit the expression and growth of the Korean rap scene.

Hanguk Hip Hop could also explore the impact of the ways that male rappers act as gatekeepers to the hip hop tradition for female rappers. Song brings to the fore the unique experience of female rappers, who are often overlooked in examinations of Korean hip hop. She notes that female rappers lack Korean role models, but the book could interrogate the reasons that they fail to draw from the well-established tradition of American female rappers. The book maps out how male rappers access the American hip hop tradition, but does not examine how female rappers’ failure to do the same impacts their experience as female rappers and their desire for role models. If female rappers’ perceptions of hip hop are wholly filtered through male rappers, this may further explain why they embody the views of Korean male rappers about their appearance and skills.

Overall, the book is an important contribution to our understanding of Korean popular music. It reviews the ways that hip hop traverses the globe. It also examines the development of Korean hip hop in Korea.

REFERENCES

- Song, M.-S. (2019). *Hanguk hip hop: Global rap in South Korea*. Palgrave Macmillan.