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Reterritorialization’**

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After Two Decades: Korean Hip-hop and ‘Cultural Reterritorialization’

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Marking the 20th anniversary of Seo Taeji and Boys’ first album, *Nan Arayo (I Know)*, released on 23 March 1992, several Korean newspapers and online blogs have recently published feature articles about this first successful Korean hip-hop group. The headline in the *Yonhap News* suggested that their music was a ‘Cultural Revolution’ that has had a lasting impact on Korean youth culture, popular music and the society as a whole. How do we take this proposition further to understand the development of Korean hip-hop as a localized artistic practice of this global music genre? What does its trajectory tell us about the relationships between Korean local, Asian regional and global music making and the media with respect to its production, distribution and consumption?

By looking at some of the recent Korean hip-hop outputs and their associated contexts, this paper will explore the ways in which Korean hip-hop has gained its local specificities by way of combining and recontextualizing Afro-American and Korean popular musical elements and aesthetics in its performance and identification. Particular attention will be paid to the use and choice of languages and their poetic expressions all of which afford communicability between the rappers and their audiences. The relevance of ‘cultural reterritorialization’ in the context of the consumption and commodification of Korean hip-hop, along with mainstream Korean popular music (known as K-pop), as a localised cultural product will also be discussed.

Hip-hop: between global and local

Hip-hop and rap is global but emerged as a quintessentially African American cultural form and diasporic expression, especially in the contexts of subcultural, underground resistance against the dominant hegemony (Gilroy 1993; Lipsitz 1994; Rose 1994; Potter 1995; see also Thornton 1995). At the same time, hip-hop is a postmodern music in which the creative process is to ‘cut and mix’ different musical styles and cultural references, allowing for a continuous process of hybridisation and syncretism. Hip-hop and rap has become a ‘vehicle for global youth affiliation and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world’; as a universally recognised popular genre, it also draws our attention to local specificities and their implications (Mitchell 2001: 1–2).

In this context, Korean hip-hop and rap can be best understood as a mobile, not fixed, nexus between *global* and *local* in terms of its production and between *regional* and *domestic* with respect to its consumption. Obviously the national dimension in music and its associated political mediation will also play important roles in this framework. Bennett (2001) suggests that Lull's concept of 'cultural reterritorialisation' offers us a useful model for understanding the cultural mobility of rap. Reterritorialisation, according to Lull (1995: 159), embraces two coactive phenomena. Firstly, the foundations of cultural territory (that is ways of life, artefacts, symbols and contexts) are 'all open to new interpretations and understandings'. Secondly, reterritorialisation also implies that culture 'is constantly reconstituted through social interaction, sometimes by creative uses of personal communication, technology and the mass media'. The process of cultural reterritorialisation, Bennett further elaborates, 'recasts cultural forms as malleable resources that can be inscribed with new meanings relating to the particular local contexts within which such products are appropriated' (2001: 95). The process of appropriation of African American hip-hop and rap into a Korean popular musical form has come about through multiple selective strategies of adoption and adaptation with respect to its associated cultural, musical and linguistic components.

Korean hip-hop and rap: the local specificities

The 'local specificities' of hip-hop culture in Korea emerged two decades ago in the early 1990s when this new music began to gain popularity amongst the Korean youth as an identity marker of the culture of a new generation (*sinsedae munhwa*). Due to its rapid growth over the past three decades, South Korea became the tenth largest world economy by the early 1990s. Politically, Korea was also experiencing some major changes: three decades of authoritarian military rule finally ended when the civilian government headed by Kim Yöngsam was inaugurated in 1993. The relaxation of state censorship on popular music, which began in the late 1980s, allowed songwriters and singers to explore their artistic freedom and creativity (Mun 2004). All of these economic, political and social changes provided the contexts in which hip-hop in Korea could take root as part of local youth culture. For example, Korean youth culture of the 1970s and 1980s was largely associated with university students in their early twenties. The 1970s youth culture, according to Kim Ch'angnam (2010: 224), was 'liberal and idealistic' in its outlook while the young people in the 1980s were leaning toward 'mass-oriented and political radicalism'. In contrast, the youth of the 1990s, known as the *sinsedae* generation, was largely made up of teenagers. Born in the era of economic stability, these teenagers embraced consumerism, and western popular culture including Anglo American pop, while rebelling against the established social and cultural rules. The emerging importance of hip-hop amongst Korean teenagers is exemplified by the term 'Seo Taeji Syndrome', named after the iconic rocker-cum-hip-hop artist Seo Taeji (Kim Ch'angnam. *ibid.*).

Seo Taeji, a former member of the heavy metal band Sinawi, adapted rap to pop in his 1992 song 'I Know' (*Nan Arayo*), and has been credited as the first Korean rapper. However, more recently it has been suggested that Hong Söböm's song 'Wondering

Bard Kim with a straw hat' (*Kim Satkat*), performed in 1989, was the first proto-type Korean rap.¹ A year later, in 1990, Hyön Chinyöng performed 'Sad Mannequin' which brought singing, dancing and rapping together for the first time. This song, which included influence of the new jack swing of the late 1980s, is now widely accepted as a milestone in Korean hip-hop (Kim Yöngdae et al. 2008: 32–36).

Seo Taeji's 'I Know' (*Nan Arayo*) is a love song and consists of rap verses and sung chorus with instrumental solo interludes played on an electric guitar. Seo Taeji and Boys danced while rapping and singing. This format and style, combining Korean pop ballad, dance and rap, became a template for Korean hip-hop and continued to be employed by the ensuing pop idols and mainstream hip-hop artists in Korea, for example, in H.O.T's 'We Are the Future' (1997) and DJ DOC's 'Run To You' (2000). A new term, 'rap dance' was created to refer to this hybrid form of early Korean hip-hop, which indicated that it was more dance and singing centred:

[Instrumental intro]

Rap:

I know that you will leave me after tonight is over and over
I know the reason now.
I did not say that I love you.
And it is too late.
What was I doing?
Your smile was so beautiful.

[Instrumental interlude (electric guitar solo)]

Song:

I really loved you and loved you only.
You have given so much sorrow.
Don't say that you are leaving.
You mean everything to me.
Oh, please don't go. Do you really leave me now?
Oh, please don't go. Don't you see that I am crying now?
[etc]

From his second album in 1993, Seo Taeji's rap began to pay attention to various social issues. For example, his 1994 song '*Kyosil Idea*' (Classroom Ideology) critiqued the education system. The fact that Seo Taeji left high school without a diploma made this song 'real' and its message powerful; it therefore appealed to young audiences as the authentic, defiant expression of youth culture. The issue of the severe and demanding education system has also been taken up as a topic in other East Asian hip-hop. For

¹ 'A History of Korean Hip-hop, Part 3', The webzine *Rhythmer*, at <http://board.rhythmer.net/src/magazine/feature/view.php?n=904&c=21&s=feature>. Accessed January 20, 2011.

example, the Japanese rapper King Giddra's song 'Bullet of Truth' (*Shinjitsu no Dangan*) (1995) questions the education system that 'crushes the dreams of children'.²

From the mid 1990s, the mainstream Korean music industry began to create pop-oriented rappers and dance groups. The five piece boy band H.O.T (an acronym for 'High-five of Teenagers'), created in 1996 by SM Entertainment,³ was one of the first examples of teen idol K-pop. The individual members were selected and trained to sing and dance a variety of popular styles, including ballad, rock, teen pop and hip-hop. Although disbanded in 2001, their success and popularity presented a great potential for K-pop idol development. YG Entertainment⁴ successfully launched the hip-hop duo Jinusean's first album into the mainstream chart in 1997; their song 'Please Tell Me' (*Malhaejuo*) featured the dance music diva Uhm Jung Hwa who sang the ballad while break dancers complemented the performance.

Targeting the young audience, JYP Entertainment released the rap dance album *The Power of the Twins (Ssangdunggi Power)* performed by the then twelve years old twins Ryang-hyŏn and Ryang-ha in 2000. Written and produced by JYP's CEO Park Jin Young, who is a singer, dancer and composer himself, this album is about being a child in contemporary South Korea and how children have to cope with the pressures of 'doing well' in their studies and other curricular activities. The Korean children's song 'Stop Right There' (*Kŭdaero Mŏmchŏra*) was sampled in the title song 'What Is Dance Anyway?' (*Ch'umi Muŏgillae*), to create an intertextuality between the nursery rhyme, childhood, hip-hop and Korean youth culture. The twins' rap and acrobatic dance routines, as well as their cascading hair dyed platinum blonde, were popular amongst both the audiences of the targeted age groups (teens and pre-teens) as well as adult audiences. From the young audience's point of view, this music was 'telling it like it is' for them, and therefore it produced what Moore called 'second person authenticity' or an authenticity of experience (Moore 2002: 218). In addition, although created by the industry, the perfect age match of the performers provided the twins' album an additional aura of being real, which, according to Moore, arises 'when the originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience' (2002: 214).

Clearly, by the end of the 1990s, Korean popular music had moved from 'being dominantly aural to visual' (Morelli 2001: 253). So dance music topped the charts (notably in the dancing duo CLON), although the importance of ballads (songs about love) in Korean popular music never waned, as Howard (2002) notes. In fact, the ballads were integrated into new genres, such as mainstream Korean hip-hop performed by pop idols created by the moguls of the Korean entertainment industry.

² 'Japanese Hip-hop by Ian Condry (MIT),' at <http://web.mit.edu/condry/www/jhh/>, accessed April 30, 2011.

³ SM Entertainment was founded in 1995 by Lee Soo Man, a graduate of Seoul National University. Lee was a singer, DJ, and TV and radio host in the 1970s and 1980s.

⁴ YG Entertainment was founded in 1996 by Yang Hyun-suk, a former member of Seo Taeji and Boys.

Creating local and national characteristics: sound and image

While borrowing elements from the international/American hip-hop idiom, such as sampling techniques, clothing and dance style, Korean hip-hop has also developed distinct local characteristics by introducing elements of Korean music (both popular and traditional) and by mixing Korean and English lyrics in ways that are meaningful to its domestic audience. The local/national character in Korean hip-hop was first introduced by Seo Taeji in his '*Hayöga*' (1993), by adding a short solo playing of the traditional Korean conical oboe *t'aep'yöngso*. MC Sniper, an underground rapper and the founder of the hip-hop crew Buddha Baby, is notably credited for his early use of traditional musical and religious elements including the twelve stringed zither *kayagŭm* and the transverse bamboo flute *taegŭm*, and the Buddhist wooden percussion *mokt'ak*, in his productions. His album covers and sleeve notes also feature traditional images and symbols such as folk paintings and patterns, for instance as on his 2003 album *The First Journey (Ch'ohaeng)*. The cover of the compilation album produced by the Seoul based hip-hop label Master Plan Production develops this artistic device further by adapting a late nineteenth century Korean folk painting by Kim Hongdo which depicts a group of young men playing chess sitting on the ground. While maintaining the original composition and style, the image on the CD cover depicts a crew DJ-ing and MC-ing in their hip-hop clothing and headphones. OneSun, a Master Plan Production artist, is known for his crossover experiments between hip-hop and Korean traditional music. In his debut single album in 2001, Byungki Hwang's 1977 suite for traditional Korean instruments, *Child Minder (Aibogae)*, was sampled in 'Prologue' (*Sösa*) while Yi Charam, a young singer of the traditional musical drama *p'ansori*, featured in his 'Fisherman's Ode' (*Öbusa*). OneSun's sampling also includes other types of 'world music', for example, *qawwali* (Sufi devotional music of South Asia) in his album *For Whom* (2003), a seeming attempt to develop pan-Asian characteristics in his work. OneSun's distinctively Korean hip-hop was highly praised by scholars and critics at the time. But young audiences in Korea did not appear to appreciate such an experimental approach, although, in contrast, his 'Asian hip-hop' has been received more favourably overseas by Chinese speaking audiences.

Local and transnational Korean hip-hop: language choice, identity politics and economy

From the late 1990s onwards, the rappers with transnational connections, particularly Korean Americans (*chaemi kyop'o*), joined the Korean hip-hop scene, especially in the Apkujöng-dong area in the south of Seoul. These included Drunken Tiger,⁵ Solid and Uptown. These transnational/overseas Korean artists were characterised by their emphasis on rap (often in English) and sampling (of non-Korean pop sources), in contrast to the ballad singing and dancing orientation of domestic Korean hip-hop of the late 1990s. The reception of local audiences was rather mixed. Clearly the choice

⁵ In 2000 Drunken Tiger also formed the hip-hop crew called The Movement⁵ in an effort to bring 'real hip-hop' into the mainstream music of Korea.

and use of the English language and the stylistic differences set transnational hip-hop apart from its K-pop infused local counterpart.

It should be noted that other Korean American hip-hop artists, such as Jamez Chang (born in LA and moved to New York) and Dumbfoundead (Jonathan Park, born in Buenos Aires and moved to LA) present different cases. The voice of these Korean American rappers is highly hybridised and multifaceted. But, at the same time, when collaborating with South Korean hip-hop or pop acts, transnational hip-hop artists provide their American accent, as seen for example in Dumbfoundead's collaboration with Epik High. The importance of the American accent in rapping is illustrated by the fact that many K-pop acts include American-born Korean rappers to provide the appropriate accent. The difference, however, between the Korean American rappers in the US and the American born South Korean acts is the respective cultural territory from which the poetics of their rap emerge – the multiethnic America for the former and South Korea in a global world for the latter.

The authenticity and aesthetics of hip-hop in this particular local context probably requires several different interpretations. The transnational Korean hip-hop with emphasis on rapping and sampling was perceived to be authentic because it adhered to or emulated the American hip-hop genre rules and styles (illustrated by Drunken Tiger's derogatory comments in 'Do You Understand What Is Real Hip-hop?'). On the other hand, homegrown hip-hop is perceived to be more 'real' by many local audiences because they appreciate the poetic-musical associations between lyrics and music (K-pop oriented ballad and samples) that are specifically meaningful and comprehensible.

Stylistically speaking, the visual aspects associated with dance routines and clothing are equally, if not more, important, especially in the case of mainstream rap dance groups. The complex rhymes and flows, on the other hand, are the essential technical and aesthetic criteria for 'serious' underground hip-hop artists. The intricate rhythmic articulation of the Korean language is highly regarded. For example, Kim Jin Pyo is respected by many Korean rappers for his skilful use of the Korean language. Outsider, one of the underground rappers, is famous for his extremely fast but clear diction and Verbal Jint is recognised for his intricate 'literary' rapping style. The underground hip duo Garion (MC Meta and Nach'al) are regarded as the most authentic Korean hip-hop artists because they only use Korean in their rapping.⁶

It is also notable that some hip-hop artists began to use regional dialects in their rapping to give a strong regional identity – for example, J'Tong's '*Kugugaga*' and MC Meta (of Garion) and Wrex's '*Mukkakki Haiso*' (Yes, Yes, Y'all) employ the Kyöngsang province dialect. Clearly, this language choice is indicative of another phase of Korean hip-hop's localisation or cultural reterritorialisation. However, and ironically, '*Mukkaki Haiso*' was rejected by the three main mass media of Korea (KBS, MBC and SBS) which considered that its lyrics in the southeastern dialect sounded rather like Japanese, revealing the Seoul-centred media policy and nationalist (anti-Japanese)

⁶ Garion received three awards at the 2011 Korean Music Award, including best album of the year and best hip-hop album for *Garion 2*, and best hip-hop single for 'Zero'.

undercurrent within the media industry. In contrast, the language choice for mainstream K-pop is strategically more open and multi-lingual. K-pop idols such as Big Bang (YG), Girls Generation (SM) and Wonder Girls (JYP) are trained to speak and sing in Japanese, Chinese and English to target the inter-Asia and global audiences beyond the South Korean music market which has a population of 50 million (Shin 2009a, 2009b).

The artistic and technical merits of underground hip-hop and its associated authenticity is duly recognised by the mainstream music industry as key market strategies. Therefore, the underground label 'YG Underground' was launched in 2005 by YG Entertainment to create alternative music within the mainstream framework. The five-piece boy band Big Bang was created in 2006 through a reality talent show by YG Entertainment. Since their debut, the individual talent and creativity of band members, for example, G-Dragon as a confident producer and rapper, has been continuously promoted. In fact, the boundary between the underground and 'overground' or indie and mainstream is not always clear. It is sometimes the self-identification of artists rather than the stylistic features or characteristics of their music consumption. Given the limited market size within Korea and the dominance of entertainment agencies, many rappers have collaborated with singers of other musical genres. Teaching hip-hop in pop music academies has also become one of their main sources of income.

The interplay between Korean and English has also become a technical and aesthetic device in Korean hip-hop, this being a kind of dialectics of linguistic dualism. For example, Lee Hyun Do, a former member of DEUX, interweaves the two languages in a circular mode in '*Toni Money?*' from his third solo album *Wanjŏn Hip-hop (Complete Hip-hop)* released in 2000. The song title has two words: '*ton*' refers to 'money' and the second English word 'money' also means 'what is [it]?' in Korean. Manabe's (2006) and Condry's (2006) studies of Japanese rap rhyming suggest that the global and local interface in hip-hop result in highly individual and creative poetic strategies. These language aesthetics relate to what Krims (2000: 1–2) stresses as poetics of rap that ultimately help us to understand how culture works and identities are formulated.

Capitalising the subcultural capital: mutual dependency between Korean hip-hop and the mainstream music industry

In connection with language issues, it is worth noting that underground hip-hop artists claim 'subcultural capital' by assuming cultural and social alterity or marginality (see Thornton 1995). Strong language is often used to underline their assumed or imagined political stance. The act of ritualised verbal attack on other rappers, known as 'diss', has also been observed in Korea as part of the genre rules. More specifically, a routinised critique on the mainstream music industry by Korean rappers is part of the established local genre rules, for the underground in particular, as an act of self-authentication and self-promotion. For example, J'Kyun's acerbic song 'If I Were To Go' (*Naega Kandamyŏn*) mockingly criticises the major Korean entertainment agencies

including YG, SM and JYP (see below for the lyrics).⁷ However, there are also unwritten rules that a fierce challenge or criticism of senior rappers would be frowned upon as improper and impolite.

If I were to go,
To go to YG,
I will become a much bigger *money maker* than *Big Bang* [YG's 5 piece boy band].
I am so sorry but I luv you haters.
I would quickly ascend if I were a cheat and say good-bye to poverty forever.
My rhyme is costly,
Like a dandy smart from head to toes completely,
1Tym [YG's 4 piece male hip-hop group]
Once getting into it, the fragrance of my style is as strong as *Stony Skunk's* [YG's reggae duo]
Like sugar-free, I am a guy who is straightforward.
My rap will linger in your ears for *twenty four-seven*.
Once getting into it, it is unstoppable.
When Gummy [YG's female R&B singer] and Boss Yang [CEO of YG] hear it,
They will say, 'what a masterpiece!'
Sign here right now,
Design my album cover right now,
If you want my favour, put your tie on right now.
I am always arrogant, *to anyone*,
So make sure you have my number on your phone!
[etc]

It should be noted that, since its inception in the early 1990s, South Korean hip-hop has always been associated with the middle class, educated, moderate and religious (Christian) elements of society. The rappers' religious orientation is often made public by including their 'Thanks to God' in performances or on their CD sleeves. In many ways, as with Korean punk (Wise 2008: 97), Korean hip-hop embraces aesthetic and ethical themes rather than political controversy.⁸ Historically, the 1970s and 1980s campus song movement fulfilled social and political functions in Korea, for example, protesting against the authoritarian military regimes (Hwang 2008). In contrast, many of the new century's hip-hop lyrics are about everyday life and personal stories (underground/non-mainstream) or love (mainstream). For example, Drunken Tiger's acclaimed piece '8:45 Heaven' (2007) is based on grief over the bereavement of a family member and 'Keep the Change' (2009) by the Dynamic Duo (Choiza and Gaeko) relates a conversation with a taxi driver.

From the industry's point of view, the sale of Korean hip-hop artists is very small, especially in comparison with mainstream K-pop produced by the major music industries such as SM, YG and JYP. For example, the 2010 and 2011 statistics of the national record chart Gaon list only a few hip-hop entries at its lower end. However,

⁷ The lyrics are mainly in Korean with a few lines in English indicated in italics.

⁸ This tendency is also found in other milieu of the South Korean middle class culture associated with Confucian ethics and Taoist aesthetics.

rap, together with dance and ballad, is always included in all mainstream K-pop productions although the rapping may not feature as the main component. Together with b-boying, which gained prominence through international dance competitions, the Korean music industry in collaboration with the state has promoted hip-hop as part of K-pop globally. The creative output of underground hip-hop artists is an invaluable source for the industry while for fans and audiences this genre is an important component of their youth culture as symbolic signifier of the individual and their social identity. The subcultural capital of Korean hip-hop, especially 'the underground', and their aesthetic of resistance will continue to remain central to defining the local specificities and the process of cultural reterritorialisation.

In conclusion, this review of the development of Korean hip-hop shows that there are complex and divergent routes to localisation. We need to understand the contour of 'local specificities' as necessarily including a number of factors such as pop/underground; domestic Korean and transnational influences; youth culture; language, aural and visual elements; national and regional characteristics; the music industry, and so on. We also can see that these processes of cultural reterritorialisation are charged with social and cultural politics that direct the evolution of Korean hip-hop to exemplify other dynamic aspects of its society, media and culture. Having considered all these factors and influences, I would like to suggest that Seo T'aeji's rap was a catalyst for an ongoing evolution of Korean hip-hop rather than a single cause of 'Cultural Revolution'.

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