

“It’s better than American Idol”: Korean Americans in K-pop¹

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This paper explores the role of Korean Americans, or *gyopo*, in the development of Korean contemporary popular music, and discusses how Korean pop modernity has been closely intertwined with Korean diasporic identity. In particular, this paper examines 1) how the Korean music industry has made a consistent effort to innovate its music by incorporating the images and talent of Korean American musicians and 2) how Korean American musicians have constantly negotiated their liminal identities to pioneer new territory and secure their space in K-pop² industry.

1. Backgrounds and terminology

Before discussing about the activity of Korean American musicians in depth, I clarify some of the terms and the context that I draw here, explaining in what context these definitions and categorizations should be meaningful to use.

1.1 Korean American discourse in the study of popular culture

Korean Americans in American culture had rarely been documented as main theme in academia until the early 1990s, more accurately until the Rodney King trial and the ensuing riot in Los Angeles Korean town. The chains of event had provided a chance for many people to finally reconsider about the presence and problem of Asian minorities especially Korean American community.³ Still, most of these scholarships dealing with an issue about Korean American identity are primarily focused on school activities to see how the second (or in some cases, 1.5) generation high school and college students have constructed their ethnic identities in negotiating the duality of Korean American-ness. The framework was thus draws a lot from the pre-existing minority discourse that underscores the racial struggles and the marginal stauts in American mainstream society. Popular culture, especially in regard to the trajectory of Korean American people, is relatively uncharted field until now. Only few attempts to uncover the relationships between popular culture and the identity of Korean American youths were made. Pop music scholar Wang introduced an earlier example of Korean American hip-hop that was active during the late 1980s, but did not provide further accounts on more recent development of other streams. Jung provided maybe the most updated writing to consult, yet she still briefly surveys a few examples of Korean American musicians as a new media cultural movement.⁴ The recent global success of K-pop drew international attention in academic field, but the presence of Korean Americans was treated only peripheral effect in scholarly works.

I attempt, instead, to provide more historical scope on Korean American music in Korean context. First of all, while I do consider Korean Americans as a marginal entity that has been

¹ This conference paper is a summarized version of the dissertation draft.

² The definition of the term “K-pop” is debatable and also problematic in its extensive use. One could point out two different applications in the scholarships of K-pop. It often refers to “Korean popular music” in rather generic sense, but it often has strictly mainstream nuance as an “idol” pop category.

³ Espiritu, 1996; Abelman 2013

⁴ Jung, 2014. Ethnomusicology 58(1)

primarily associated with minority discourse including racial struggles and identity negotiation in American social system, I want to rather focus on the dynamics between Korean Americans and their ancestral “homelands”, evoking the situation where they are given more diverse role and status. To elaborate this, I have to essentially expand my perspective on Korean Americans and their identity issue to transnational context to reveal the process how Korean music scene could potentially be a “field of opportunity” for new generation Korean American, similar to the way in which America has been an opportunity for their parents’ generations. In other words, I observe how different sense of “Korean American” could be constructed through negotiating an empowering yet liminal cultural identity to claim their spaces in the emerging K-pop industry.

1.2 Korean diaspora and the division of generation

It has been known that Korean emigration to the United States has begun as early as the early 1900s, but Korean American community has been grown on a large scale after the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Throughout this period, the first and second-generation communities were established and developed mostly in larger metropolitan areas. Along with these legitimate divisions, 1.5 generation has been suggested as a new category by a number of scholars, yet it is loosely defined term: it generally refers to a group of youth, who are roughly pre-teen aged group, who emigrated to U.S. along with their parents. It is, however, a less meaningful in demographical sense than in cultural sense. Nevertheless, I consider it is still necessary to examine the division in order to understand more complex landscape of Korean American community, in terms of how this generation features distinctive identity from other two generations and the difference cause different ways of cultural positioning.⁵ In this research, I pay attention to the way in which a number of 1.5 generation Korean Americans perform an important role in the modernization of Korean popular music, especially during the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

Still, the categorization would not sufficiently uncover the complexity of Korean diasporic identities. First of all, Korea American communities often encompass a wide range of pan-Korean people, including a permanent resident Koreans in the U.S., who are not technically a U.S. citizen. Although these Koreans would maintain a legally Korean citizenship, a number of them are often skin to Korean American in cultural identity, and considered to be a part of Korean American community. Also, Korean American community often involves a considerable number of Korean students who attend a college or high school system in U.S. These students, called *yuhaksaeng* (trans. student studying abroad), whose purpose of stays is predominantly academic than migrational, would often end up getting residency or citizenship. The problem is, in many cases, the actual identity of these Korean Americans (or Korean living in the states) can be either ambiguous or concealed, or the distinction tends to be neglected by the public. Also, there can be an issue of self-identification. That is, Korean American musicians or entertainers would mostly introduce themselves as Koreans “from” America without an implication of hyphenated identity. Since my analysis concerns both American and Korean context in transnational sense, “Korean American” would be simply incomplete category to reveal the subtle differences and ironies in the dynamics between them. For these reasons, it might be useful to adopt an umbrella term in describing Korean American in both legal and cultural sense, and “*gyopo*” or “*dongpo*” could be a proper alternative in this particular research.

Gyopo (lit: countrymen; *Hangul*: 僑民; Chinese: 僑胞) is a term that broadly embraces people with Korean descent who lives abroad, with or without a foreign nationality of which they chose to live. It is also common to add a prefix indicating the actual nationality or location. For example, Korean term “*jaemi gyopo*” literally mean Korean people locating in the U.S, but often also includes Korean people who holds Korean citizenship and has a permanent residency in the U.S. at the same time. The English term, Korean American, thus roughly fall into this definition

⁵ Danico, 2004. University of Hawaii Press.

although *gyopo* is only meaningful when circulated among Korean community. On the other hand, the term *dongpo* (lit: people of the same ancestry, compatriot; *Hangul*: 동포; Chinese: 同胞) might be a more eclectic substitution that would prioritize ethnicity over nationality, emphasizing common ‘root.’ However, *dongpo* tends to have more nationalist sentiment undertone in the usage, while *gyopo* could be more widely used in variety of situations.⁶ I primarily use *gyopo* rather than *dongpo* in this particular paper because, regardless of contexts, *gyopo* is more commonly circulated term in contemporary Korean language. Also, through using this term, I attempt to complicate the ambiguity in the distinction between Korean American and Korean in order to uncover an ambivalent role of Korean Americans in the Korean pop music scene.

2. The presence of *gyopo* in pre-K-pop era

I first examine an earlier phase of K-pop, or what I consider a “pre- K-pop” era, extending from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, the period when the market dominance of domestic Korean pop music was tremendously increased. This phase is as significant as the following phase of K-pop in understanding how the role given to *gyopo* musicians and performers were formulated in certain conditions in Korean pop industry. I observe how *gyopo* musicians had been emerged as a signifier of modernity and an innovator by appropriating trendy African American pop music style into Korean pop scene. I pay attention, in particular, to the process that *gyopo* tries to claim their ‘authenticity’ of the western oriented musical genres to fulfill the expectation given to them, and at the same time, differentiate themselves from other ‘Korean’ artists.

Since the 1980s, Korean pop scene has been increasingly diverse in terms of cultural backgrounds of musicians, as *gyopo* performers were flowing into Korea to seize an opportunity as a recording career. Although they had occasionally appeared in the Korean entertainment industry throughout the modern period, the presence became much more visible through this period.⁷ Some of *gyopo* singers were noticeably popular in the 1980s and made some mainstream hits, including Bolivian Korean singer Byung-Soo Leem (Korean: 임병수), Bolivian: Hernan Im), who recorded multiple hit singles including “Ice Cream Love”⁸, and a female pop singer, Su-Sie Kang, probably the most noted female *gyopo* in 1990s’s Korean pop scene. Especially Kang, cited as one of the early example of Korean “girl” idol, maintained her success throughout the 1990s with perennial hit records, working with famous local composers and producers. Although these performers were commonly introduced as *gyopo* with a reference of their origins, the music they recorded was usually localized which do not have a considerable “*gyopo*” quality. As for Kang, in particular, her main styles were mellow pop/ballad music that were not significantly different from other female artists at the time, and her discography were largely in accordance with other Korean local contemporaries at the time in terms of her vocal styles, messages and arrangement. At this earlier stage of *gyopo* influx, it was strongly their images, rather than musical qualities, were much more critical attributes that differentiate themselves

⁶ Kim, 1999. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁷ During the earlier period, “mixed-blood” musicians were more visible than *gyopo* in evoking the images of novelty and foreignness in music. The three most popular figures at this period are Il-Joon Park and Soony Ihn, who were both African American / Korean mix, and Soo-Il Yoon, who was born to Caucasian American father and Korean mother. Their unique tone and powerful vocal presence were considered as strong racial marks.

⁸ The recording was a translated version of *Directo Al Corazon*, originally recorded by Latin American pop star Luis Miguel in 1982. However, a remade or an adaptation in pop music like Leem’s was not a peculiar practice in 60s, 70s and even 80s in South Korea.

from other domestic Korean musicians, and the substantial gap that would encourage Korean youth audiences to choose them over native Korean musicians was at least not musical.

2.1 “Inverse immigration” during the early 1990s: authenticity and *gyopo*

By the early 1990s, a series of new artists from America has made their debut and changed the landscape of Korean pop culture and industry to a considerable degree, largely initiated by a group of young dance pop musicians and producers. Accordingly, this new trend has also affected the way in which *gyopo* musicians perform as well as the way people expect toward those performers. Hyun-woo Lee, an 1.5 generation Korean American who moved to the United States when he was a teenager, was one of the earliest examples of a new generation *gyopo* pop singer. His approach was rather distinctive compared to the predecessors, in the predominant use of computer-generated slick dance sounds with an incorporation of rap, which was still a novelty factor at the time. The pioneering approach was only possible through co-working with another *gyopo* producer Danny Kim (Korean: 김홍순) who had studied music and worked with local musicians in the U.S. Unlike Susie Kang, whose style mostly borrowed Japanese-inspired pop/ballad style and grammar, Lee tried to incorporate more authentic American flavor, and express this sensibility using visible mark of ‘*gyopo*.’ Most prominently, he has conveyed his *gyopo* qualities with the genre he adopted and the language spoken: English lyrics and American house dance arrangement. His first hit single in Korea, for example, “Dream” is the best example that captures a refined ‘chic appeal’ of typical *gyopo* performance, embodied in English rap portion and the elaborate dance arrangement called ‘remix’, which Korean contemporary performers rarely provided in mainstream scene.⁹

I was down and out when you came into my life / Cause, Right from the start, I knew you were the one / who would stay around and fill my heart with joy / and happiness that I never ever felt before (The opening “rap” section of a song titled “Dream”: released in 1991)

As the song initially kicks in, Lee starts to rap over the synthesized funky rhythm track with sampled effects, a style of arrangement that instantly reminds the contemporary listeners of late 1980s’ American rap and house music. Although the section is relatively short (lasts less than 20 seconds), it has become a charm of the song that would allow audiences to remember it a unique and fashionable tune. Moreover, for young audiences who were familiar with American pop, it was one of the crucial practices to authenticate the trendiness of music and to confirm the Americanness of the performer.¹⁰ Given that rap was merely an initial stage in Korean pop music, Lee’s incomplete attempt to rap itself was sufficient enough to be considered ahead of time. Heavily borrowing most updated musical elements from American hip-hop and house music, his *gyopo* identity in the song was also much more immediate than that of Kang Su-sie. Not only his *gyopo* identity of him helped to propel his own popularity, Lee has also successfully proven the commercial potential of *gyopo* in the business.

The influx of *gyopo* performers were, to some extent, observed to be a unique cultural phenomenon, as the Korean media paid a particular attention to this unprecedented movement. Media described the surge of *gyopo* singers under the tiles “inverse immigration”, treating these performers as an individual category which was distinctive from local musicians, although the term “immigration” here was used rather in a figurative sense because the actual immigration status seemed not to be clear enough.

⁹ A singer-songwriter Shin Hae-Chul’s “*An-nyeong*” (trans. Good bye) has already exemplified this kind of formula in 1990, while the fluency in pronunciation is rather obvious.

¹⁰ While written rather in plain English, it is still doubtful that the actual messages were meaningful to average Korean audiences, given that English was not used for a casual conversation.

“Gyopo singers”, Korean descent singers who made return and domestic debut in Korea, are in the limelight recently. Although it used to be a more common situation that those who had a domestic fame advanced to foreign countries, now it is kind of a new fashion that these dongpo¹¹ singers were re-imported [into Korea]...they are all the second-generation gyopo and commonly in age of 20s. According to the [music] experts, ‘the musical taste they have learned at the home of pop music has allowed them to lead and set the domestic Korean youth’s sensitivity.’ (Kyunghyang Shinmun, July 24, 1992)

Although the article did not specified what “musical taste” they brought actually was, one of the most influential elements in the new *gyopo* practice was an incorporation of contemporary African American, or “black”, sound. African American musical genres such as jazz and soul had been incorporated in Korean pop music since the 1960s, the impact was yet partial until when new generation of Korean pop musicians, who mostly appeared during the late 1980s, has tried to claim their modernity through exploring varieties of African American traditions such as Disco (House), R&B and Hip-hop, both aesthetically and strategically. African American music, represented by House, R&B, and New Jack Swing, was the most ‘hot’ and current musical genre that had already surpassed the echelon of rock and pop in the early 1990s in American market, and *gyopo* performers has unitilzed the genre to establish themselves as a kind of ‘cultural originator’ in the domestic Korean pop market.

From Southern California: an advent of “authentic” American R&B

The most significant shift has been made around the early 1990s, pioneered by two different R&B/Hip-hop groups, Solid and Uptown. Primarily consisting of *gyopo* members (including both 1.5 and 2nd generation Korean Americans and *yuhaksaeng*), these two *gyopo* bands opened up a completely new phase of Korean popular music with a unique combination of music, image and language. They also changed the way in which *gyopo* performers utilized their talents and images in K-pop. Most importantly, the approach is primarily based on the idea of cultural authenticity in pop music culture.

Solid, the first R&B act in K-pop era consisting of three *gyopo* (Jay Chung, John Lee, George Kim) formed in Los Angeles, has pioneered the genre through incorporating their unique *gyopo* identity in highly contemporary R&B arrangement and a singing style. Their first two albums, released in 1992 and 1994 respectively, have shown varieties of urban black sounds including Pop/R&B, New Jack Swing and Hip-hop packed with an arrangement of what was then perceived a highly “authentic” American or ‘black’ flavor. At a superficial level, the most distinctive feature of the music was the way it was presented than the actual music sounds. For example, the records provided an information of a specific sub-category of each song with English subtitles that are either a translation of Korean title or name of specific genres they represents.¹² The “genre labeling” strategy was getting even more elaborated as their career advanced, including more specific yet ambiguous juxtapositions such as “R&B Ballad”, “70s Ballad”, “P-Funk”, and “Latin House.” Although the musical details of these genres were not always properly justified in the actual arrangement, the department-store-like display of

¹¹ In this particular article, two smiliar words were used simultaneously. The term *dongpo* at the title and *gyopo* in the body were drawn respectively without any clear differentiation. It also roughly defined *gyopo* as “the 2nd generation immigrants” despite the fact that their actual immigration status is unknown. To be accurate, most of *gyopo* from this period was actually 1.5 generation or holds Korean citizenship.

¹² For example, a song called “kurisumasu iyagi (trans. Christmas Story)” has “acapella” as a subtitle, instead of English translation of the song, presumably implying that the term, or the name of the genre, “acapella” must have been considered to be unique, or more importantly “hip” practice.

genres/sub-categories was clearly intended to emphasize the specialty of the group for American music genres as well as their authenticity in those genres.



Another distinctive strategy was the way in which English and Korean are applied in lyrical contents. Primarily sung in Korean, most of album's promotional tracks that were sung by Korean were well matched with rather "toned-down" R&B ballad and hip-hop style. Also, they often introduced more "authentic" tracks that were heavily sung in English, served as a mark of their origin and capability of delivering messages in English. Along with musical factors, they provided their distinctive *gyopo* images with an emphasis of their cultural and even educational backgrounds as *gyopo*.¹³ By arranging these practices, they could provide fully comprehensible and still exotic experience to domestic Korean audiences while effectively displaying their skills and images aside.

The success of Solid further inspired Korean American communities in the U.S. and domestic Korean producers. Most importantly, from forming the band to the detailed production technique, Solid has suggested a new kind of role model for *gyopo* musicians who want to build a career in Korea, incorporating musical talent with smart image making, especially with an adoption of a "well-bred" *gyopo* youth images. To be sure, the most important reasons for their success was not only for the updated musical features, but also for the common belief that the techniques and sensibility of *gyopo* were distinctive and authentic, and to some extent superior to Korean-born local musicians. Explaining the nature of these differences, some attributes this sensibility and technique largely to the different "experience" and "environment" they have had.

Although they [Solid] have Korean descent, their music has hardly contained any "Korean" elements in it. Rather, Solid has African American "feel" deeply in their music as those who either born or raised in the United States. They are not simply imitating black music, but it seems like they perform the genre with an authentic black sensibility. Especially, Chung [Jay Chung] emphasized that he has learned the [African American] music rather naturally, than merely "studied" it.

In this particular article, the author repeatedly emphasized the fact that Solid is from "bon t'o", a Korean word meaning "the mainland", suggesting that the band was from the U.S., the home of American pop. The way a certain genre was associated with a country of origin and authenticity in Korean pop music is not a peculiar phenomenon in R&B and Hip-hop. Also, as described in the article, it has been emphasized that the authentic sensibility is not achieved from merely studying the culture, but from an unforced, natural experience. It was critical to define the sensibility of *gyopo* as something fundamentally different from local Koreans and to know that

¹³ The booklet of a debut album of Solid has some details such as the name of the college they attended, even including detailed majors, which might be needed to provide credibility and fantasy about Korean American's life. This, in part, resonated with the surge of college-educated musicians into Korean pop music scene at the time.

the quality could only be acquired from the experiences in ‘bon t’o.’ This awareness is also more strongly manifested in the advent of more strongly ‘black’ practice, hip-hop.

Uptown: Authenticity of Hip-hop and Korean American

The success of Solid and other predecessors such as Lee Hyun Woo clearly opened up a new phase for Korean American ‘would-be’ musicians located in the U.S. and also for the producers who would recruit these talents for replicating the success of Solid. One of the direct outcomes was four-piece hip-hop/R&B act, Uptown. The complex continuum in the nature of *gyopo* around modernity, authenticity, and blackness has been much more controversially witnessed in this case of this group. To be most distinctive, the band consisted of 3 *gyopo* performers coupled with Korean member, Jung Yeon-Jun (Chris Jung), the mastermind of the band. Jung had reportedly studied music in the U.S. before recruiting Korean American members to introduce “more authentic” black style without any attempt to compromise with Korean local taste.

“Uptown never claims “Koreanization” of American pop music. Instead, as the leader Jung emphasized, they “focus on the original sensibility of American music, rather than attempt to incorporate a clumsy “soybean paste (doenjang)” flavor. Upon conceptualizing new band, he considered all but new generation Korean Americans who was born and raised in America. Yoon Mi-Rae, who moved to the United States with her parents when she was seven, insists, “Rhythm and Blues is an impossible genre to be digested in Korean style” and “Only those who have learned the feel and the instinct of African American vibe could sing the genre [right].” (Dong-A Ilbo, 11/26/1997)

While the basic formation of the group seemed not to be considerably different from their predecessor, especially Solid, the intent of Uptown was rather overtly manifested here. By deliberately contrasting the image of *doenjang* to an authentic American flavor, they clarified that this could only be achieved through an uncompromising effort. To be exact, it is clearly suggested that the authentic flavor is properly realized *through* them, that is, the sensibility of *gyopo* who have spent their most of lives and learned music in the ‘the mainland’, America. To some extent, the authenticity of his music on African American genres were still tied up to their origin and the sensibility they had acquired from experiences they had. Moreover, this aspect was reinforced again by the formation of the group, especially the racial identity that the members possessed. And they never hesitated to utilize the nature. Uptown had two “mixed-blood” Korean *gyopo* members from the onset. The female lead singer, Yoon Mi-rae (Tasha), was born in Fort Hood, Texas to a Korean mother and an African American father. And Carlos, one of the two male rappers, is a Korean-Spanish mix, as suggested in his first name. Tasha’s rather apparent racial traits, such as her ‘dark’ skin and rich ‘soulful’ timbre, directly contributed to provide the most direct sense of foreignness yet authentic appeal to Korean audiences. On the other hand, Carlos, along with other *gyopo* rapper Steve, attempted to introduce their American ‘feel’ in more musical manner, through fluent ‘street’ English rapping, which would confirm their regional – or often racial as well – identity and originality as American-born *gyopo* performers.¹⁴

¹⁴ Hip-hop has been associated with African American oral tradition, especially the way of life, language, and culture in black ghetto. (Campbell, 2005)



Uptown's first album: Represent [repre|zent] (1997)

As discussed in numerous articles on Hip-hop and authenticity, Hip-hop community highly values a cultural and racial authenticity, and the concept has been directly associated with race, local, ghetto, and region.¹⁵ In terms of racial and regional identity, Uptown was the first *gyopo* band that incorporated and openly claimed their hip hop authenticity in the origin of the group members as well as a racial diversity of the band. To be most ironic, while the idea of racial and cultural authenticity in hip-hop has traditionally marginalize other races and ethnic communities, especially Asian or Asian American musicians in the realm of American hip-hop, the same kind of perception was cited to claim a legitimacy of the genre to Korean local audiences who would highly respect their U.S. origins. In other words, Asian American 'black' musicians could become a legitimate center, not a peripheral agent, by using their 'in-between' racial and cultural backgrounds. This inversion of the perception toward marginality and race were often critical as much as actual musical talent. In other words, the association *gyopo* identity with an authenticity of music was both tangible and imaginable.

Korean American rappers and singers, such as Solid and Uptown, have shown how the talent and the identity of *gyopo* have been closely associated with ideas of "modern" and "black", and adopted as a kind of mediator to confirm that "Korean" could transplant American (or African-American) pop music modernity with transnational diasporic background and identity.

3. Korean Americans in K-pop production

In this section, I examine how the successful establishment of *gyopo* performers has been expanded to a mainstream pop music domain, especially as an integral component in the modernization of Korean popular music, and even the globalization of K-pop in the later period. In particular, I focus on how these performers are challenged to negotiate their liminal identities to achieve and maintain their success in Korean pop industry. After the great success of Solid and Uptown, the presence of *gyopo* in the mainstream field has never been more obvious. To be sure, it was still African American genres such as R&B and Hip-hop that would best appropriated their talents in the industry. Two major California-born *gyopo* musicians accomplished an unprecedented success in this context: Tiger JK and Yoo Seung Joon. However, as K-pop mainstream turns into more "idol" pop, more and more *gyopo* talents have been brought directly into the factory-forged pop idol system. The newly emerging "K-pop era" saw some considerable changes in utilizing and managing the talent of *gyopo*, which is deeply based on systemized and elaborate industry know-how. In this situation, *gyopo* came to face a different type of challenge and dilemma from their predecessors.

¹⁵ McLeod, 1999. Journal of Communication 49 (4)

3.1 New roles in the new era

One of the most fundamental practices in K-pop industry is a quality control to produce consistent level of music product through a kind of ‘spartan’ training.¹⁶ This new way of thinking has also brought profound changes in perception in terms of understanding the role of *gyopo* and the music they are associated with. The most distinctive transition is that *gyopo* musicians in this period started to be incorporated into a carefully designed entertainment system of K-pop idol, as a part of their fostering system under the philosophy of “cultural technology.”

Some of the most important value of *gyopo*, including the exotic images and authentic quality were not reconsidered. But the industry began to require them to be functioning as an integral *component* of the whole pop manufacturing system to perform more specific roles. In other words, they are considered to be a part to be assembled, not a complete unit. This is rather obvious in the way they are recruited and trained in the industry.

“...we consider them[gyopo] a kind of raw material to be polished. No matter how much they are potential, we need them to be trained. The tone, timbre, manner, are the qualities that [native] Koreans rarely have. But we do need to forge them as K-pop stars. Language, speeches and manners and so forth...” (M. Kim, a former talent scout)¹⁷

The recruiting process also illustrates the idea of digging out the ‘potential’ talent and processing it. The agencies often dispatch scouts to the major cities in the U.S. via their local office to discover talented *gyopo* youth. It includes Korean American churches, gospel choirs, local talent shows, and music schools. In most cases, the agencies do not assume the genre that *gyopo* need to perform. Instead, they simply collect talents in diverse styles to build a large pool of talents by which they could place a member with the right style in the best position. They are not simply recruiting and packaging the talent, but fostering them to be used for a globalizing market as well as a domestic context. This is completely a new way of producing music, especially appropriating *gyopo* musicians. Korean American performers, just as in the case of Solid and Uptown, who once praised as a pioneer of the genres, are now treated as a strategic component of the system to serve potentially for a kind of predetermined role in K-pop formation. Moreover, as K-pop rises in the international market, the industry requires them to perform more specific roles, both musical and non-musical purpose, yet still in the ways they could display the uniqueness of Korean American-ness. Especially in the international venue, these *gyopo* members would be expected to perform more diverse role beyond singing and dancing, such as a representing interviewee or a translator.

In reference to the changes given to the status of *gyopo* in current K-pop scene, one of the most challenging circumstances to them is that the qualification of being a “proper” *gyopo* is highly unstable and potentially be endangered by their in-between identity. In the past, *gyopo* was either simply an agent of novelty, or a privileged pioneer with with the distinctive images and talents, who were rather easily acknowledged by the public. Now, there is also a great risk to maintain this privileges especially when they fail to show a proper respect to the scene or break a certain tacit terms of nationalism. The career-ending military draft scandal of Yoo Seung-Joon in the early 2000s, and the SNS scandal of Jay Park in 2009 were critical events that K-pop industry and fandoms started to be aware of how fragile and conditional the status of *gyopo* could be.¹⁸ On

¹⁶ Kim, 2013. Routledge

¹⁷ Personal interview, 08/27/2013

¹⁸ Yoo Seung-Jun, also known as Steve Yoo, is a Korean American pop singer and actor, often cited as one of the biggest selling K-pop artists in the Korean pop music history, by selling over 5 million records in the domestic market. Having 5 years of commercial success from 1997 to 2001, Yoo’s career in South Korea shockingly came to an end in 2002 due to the unprecedented controversies around a suspicion that he was

the other hand, this series of events also revealed how the consumption of K-pop and support to the *gyopo* star would be under the strong influence of the nationalistic ideas shared among the public. As implied in the interview, it has become a common practice that K-pop agencies are committed to further effort to teach *gyopo* a proper public manner as well as language to not only foster them to be a good mannered entertainer, but also prevent an unnecessary scandal, which had been never considered to be essential practice in the previous era.

3.2. Korean Americans in talent competition in Korea and the US

As an extension of the diversification and negotiation in the roles of Korean American previously discussed, I analyse an implication of frequent appearances of Korean American in the Korean TV talent show. The televised TV competition, primarily modeled on American TV audition program such as *American Idol* franchise, has become the most popular form of open audition for those who want to pursue a singing career. Moreover, I consider the shows from both countries themselves and the continuum are emblematic cases that uncover the complex dimension of negotiation and popularization of Korean American performers in the music industry, in terms of what kind of strategies they have to adopt to meet the variety of expectation that has been given to them for each different venues and markets, and in what context they opt for K-pop as a promising career.

Challenging Asian stereotypes

Before examining the presence of Korean Americans in the K-pop competition, I first examine the American Idol, which has been established the most popular vocal competition since 2001, to provide a broader perspective in understanding how racial and ethnic stereotypes are challenged, reinforced, and often utilized for different context and expectation. Since the first installation, the American Idol has been primarily dichotomized by Caucasian and African American performers, with only few Asian or other ethnic minorities in the final rounds. The racial threshold seemed to be obvious in the voting system itself, which would easily eliminate less-dominant ethnic or racial groups such as Asian and Latino even in the case where the talent of those participants was unquestionably superior. Among other Asian descent groups, Korean American (or *gyopo*) contestants have shown relatively noticeable presence. The first success was a Korean American Paul Kim from California, who made it to the top 24 in the 6th season. Praised for a smoky “black” voice, he was one of the favorites in the earlier stage of the competition yet eliminated from the semi-finals shortly afterward. John Park, from Illinois, was another Korean American singer appeared in the show. During the preliminary rounds in the 9th season, Park was discovered by the judges for his soulful lower register and unique timbre, which was what judges then regarded as a “pleasant surprise.” He had cruised through the preliminary rounds and the first round of the final until he’s eventually got voted off in the second week. The latest appearance of *gyopo* in American Idol was Heejun Han, who is a 1.5 generation *gyopo* and had been located in Flushing, New York, since he was 12 years old. He has reached a highest position ever among Asian male artists in the show, by finishing in the ninth place and drew his first record contract with American record company.

The recursive appearances and success of *gyopo* singers in the competition despite the obvious racial barrier could be seen in several different angles. The most important motivation for these performers was to challenge racial stereotypes that had been prevalent in American popular culture, most recently represented by William Hung’s comic performances in the show. Apparently, especially in Paul’s case, to participate in the competition is usually more than a

dodging his military draft. He was also famous for a diligent, well-mannered, upbeat yet humble personality, which might take for granted for *gyopo* performers.

personal achievement. Rather, it can be a kind of process of proving the existence of legitimate Asian singers with serious musicianship, rather than a corny entertainer. Paul Kim made a clear statement regarding this situation and openly declared that he would want to be the “anti-William Hung”, according to Paul’s first broadcasted interview with Fox network.



Willim Hung, American Idol, 2004

"It kind of bothers me that when people think about 'Asian singer,' they think William Hung. And I'm not hating on William Hung, but I mean, come on... There are many talented Asian people out there. You just don't see them. They don't get an opportunity in the entertainment industry... at all." (American Idol TV interview)¹⁹

While he was initially positioning himself as an “anti-Hung” character, Paul’s intent was not to criticize Hung himself, but to underscore the lack of understanding about Asian singers in the mainstream media and to criticize the way in which the media treats Asian participants by not allowing the “proper” Asian talents to be exposed on the screen. Therefore, his attempt to win the next American idol was not only for completing his individual mission to prove his musical talent, but also for proving that the racial stereotypes of Asian singers are only a promotional media gimmick. What exactly is the William Hung stereotype in the media after all? Some points out the fact that Hung was able to largely reproduce and exaggerate the pre-existing archetype and stereotypes of Asian people projected in the American media for his own commercial motivation. He was portrayed as an odd, carefree, absurd, asexual and untalented person, yet highly smart enough pursuing an engineering major at the UC Berkeley. He was able to achieve an unprecedented success including a few minor record contracts, and it has been believed that his level of performances caused serious damage to the images of Asian pop music performers in general.

In order to overcome Hung stereotypes and display the competency as a legitimate musicianship, Korean performers came up with a strikingly similar musical choice each other in participating the contest. Most prominently, they tried out the audition presenting them to be a R&B (soul) singer. First of all, unlike other pop genres such as rock or electronic, African American contemporary musical genres have been exclusively associated with the particularity of African American history, social context, and regional identity. Moreover, contemporary African American musical genres such as Hip-hop and R&B primarily reflected the young, hip, and masculine images in black America.²⁰ In part, their song selections and musical styles adopted based on contemporary black sound seemed to be an antidote to the Hung stereotype. Paul’s most acclaimed audition song selection was 90s’ R&B tune, “If I Ever Fall In Love” by Shai, which made a sharp contrast to Hung’s deliberately comic rendition of Ricky Martin’s “She Bang.” John Park, while never mentioning Hung, seemed to attempt to show a similar type of serious quality

¹⁹ Meizel, 2011. Indiana University Press

²⁰ Archer, 2003. Open University Press

through incorporating black music in every round. For instance, he first chose to sing “I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know,” which was originally recorded by 1960s’ rock band Blood, Sweat and Tears, but he instead picked soulful rendition of Donny Hathaway. In the following round, he chose to sing another soul/jazz tunes, Billie Holiday’s Jazz standard “God Bless the Child.” Heejun Han made it clear that he was pursuing R&B and soul since the first appearance at the show, and chose a series of pop/R&B repertoires from “How Am I Supposed To Live Without You”(Michael Bolton) to even more oldies soul music like “Song For You” (Donny Hathaway), which also might be a clever choice to showcase his ability to sing and more “masculine” charm that Hung’s corny performance had never shown.

These performers, to some extent, were successful to replace the stereotypes of Asian pop singers with their talent-oriented approach and the wide variety of black repertoires, but still they draw from certain aspects of Asian stereotypes for securing their positions and accommodate audiences’ expectation. The “model minority” is probably the most frequently witnessed stereotypical images in the practice of *gyopo*. This concept was first introduced by American media during 1960s, in describing the successful acculturation of Japanese people in American mainstream, and later evolved to be associated with other Asian American groups including Korean. According to the notion, Asians tends to have certain traits and personalities, including docile and submissive attitude, hard working and smart, and often highly spiritual. These images are reflected, and often negotiated in the journey of Korean participants in the show. Paul Kim, for example, introduced himself to be a humble “pool” guy, and John Park maintained his reserved personalities and family oriented character throughout the whole rounds. Heejun Han was portrayed by the show as a devoted, sincere, and even weirdly modest young Asian. Some of the common ‘model’ features were also found in their manners: They never talked too much, nor attempted to make excuses and argue with the judges for negative comments on them. Unlike the majority of typical American participants, who are often over-confident and self-indulgent about their talent, their performances were generally reserved and never crossed a certain line, which was rather different from their real life personalities. Heejun Han somewhat tried to opted out of this typical Asian characters by establishing himself as more humorous and carefree Asian male, nevertheless maintaining his serious vocal quality and passionate personality. However, his rather aggressive personality, which does not correspond with more popular Asian stereotype, was often a target of criticism from both public and judges. It is no wonder that he had to finish his last performance with much more serious repertorie in rather conservative manner, which ended up receiving critical acclaim from judges and media and considered to be his best effort on the show.

On the one hand, it looks evident that *gyopo* performers in the show always wanted to challenge the notion that Asian can’t sing R&B, or more technically driven musical repertoires. At the same time, however, they had to rely on some of the pre-existing stereotypes of Asian people to meet the expectation so that they could *survive* through the competition. However, no matter what kind of strategy they would adopt, the overall circumstances of mainstream pop music scene is not always favorable to Asian talents. Regardless of actual talent, even successful participants come to face high barriers of race and ethnicity, which is necessarily connected to their commercial value and marketability in American music market. In this situation, they are compelled to seek for favorable condition for managing their music careers, and the rapid growth of Asian local music market started to provide a different kind of breakthrough for these Asian American performers.²¹

It’s better than American Idol: the journeys of three “idols” in K-pop

As Korean pop music industry grows as a substantial market for foreign-born Korean talents throughout 1990s, these *gyopo* musicians has been trying to seize an opportunity to

²¹ Wang, 2007.

pursue a musical career in Korea. However, the overall circumstances around the industry has been changed to some degrees from the previous decades. These performers were increasingly expected to meet much higher standard of talent and images, as we have discussed throughout the previous sections. The TV auditions and competition process shows these dilemmas and challenges they should face to qualify proper *gyopo* model required by public and the industry, in the form of a condensed reality drama.

By the first decade of 21st century, the most influential reality TV singing competition in South Korea is arguably *Superstar K*. As clearly modeled on the American Idol, the main concept of the show is to recruit and train new recording artists where the viewers ‘vote as well as judges’ scores determine the winner in each rounds. *Superstar K* highly resembles the concepts and details of the American Idol franchise except the differences in the local setting. For example, Superstar K features a similar type of expert panels of 3-4 judges consisting of musicians and record executives who audition and critique (or “mentor”) the contestants' performances. After the initial audition round, qualified contestants would gather at the boot camp round (coined “super week”) and practice songs and dances helped by broadcaster’s own teams of producers and trainers, to be competing at the preliminary rounds. The most important procedure is, to be sure, a live-aired stage performance with an eliminating system that was predominantly determined with votes from live viewers including SNS and text messages, which often influenced by the critics given by judges. The process of shows begins with local auditioning held across some biggest cities in Korea, which is now expanding to the international venues including North American, under the catchphrase of “global K-pop audition.” After the huge commercial success of multiple seasons of Superstar K franchise, several other broadcasters started to emulate the format to launch their own franchises. The two other famous shows in the recent years include “Star Audition: The Great Birth (Korean: “위대한 탄생”)” and “The survival audition, K-pop Star (Korean: “스타오디션 케이팝스타”)”, which was on air through MBC and SBS respectively. The latter, launched most recently, has enjoyed greater success than other competitors since the onset, partially due to the unique system of judging and mentoring which allow contestants to experience the in-house training system of some of the famous K-pop agencies whose CEO serves as main judges for the program. The first two season of the show, broadcasted between 2001 and 2002, features all the so called “big 3” companies in K-pop idol music industry, SM Entertainment, YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment.



Since the earlier establishment, these reality TV auditions have helped to build singing careers for many would-be amateurs from the U.S. Many of them achieved a great success throughout the shows, and substantial amount of singers have earned record contracts with Korean labels after each seasons. Each season of these programs have made at least multiple numbers of *gyopo* singers in the final rounds. Most prominently, the winner and runner up of the latest installment of “K-pop Star” (SBS) were all American *gyopo*. These participants usually use American name, instead of Korean, to reveal the dual identity and showcase their American

images.²² Among these increasing *gyopo* participants, all three former American Idol finalists were included. The trajectory of these different participants in Korean auditioning programs illustrates some similar yet fundamentally different status and approaches they draw for securing their success in Korea. First off, John Park, a Korean American singer from Chicago, Illinois, is arguably the earliest, and by far the most successful Korean American solo artist whom any audition program has ever discovered. Recognized as rare success as East Asian male performers in American Idol at the time, he instead decided to leave the school and pursue his career in Korea and made appearance at the audition with much surprise from both countries, for the second season of *Superstar K*. Although he struggled during the preliminary rounds due to the less familiar repertoire and language adjustment issue, but eventually ended up as a runner up of the season. Paul Kim was, to large extent, another Korean American who was trying to recapture the scenario of John's success in Korea. He even made it clear when he first tried out for the preliminary round of "Great Birth" in 2010. Being asked about his thoughts on John Park's success at Superstar K, he addressed that he himself would do the same thing [as John Park] for this different franchise. Unfortunately, he failed to get through the preliminary round because his (vocal) style was considered to be as old as his own song selection. Hee-jun Han, who appeared on the latest season of *K-pop Star* in 2013, passed the audition and reached final Top 6.

The most important motivation for them to choose Korean over American market appears to build a successful career in the market which their American-ness is directly appealing and easily embraced.²³ Although it is a challenging task to participate another audition in considerably different cultural environment, they willingly accept the process of re-verification of their talent, which was believed to be proven already by American media and audiences through presumably "bigger" stage. Since an initial appearance of the audition round, their decorated career as former "American Idols" played an ambivalent role to construct the images and quality as a qualified performer. As much as their former career in U.S. was respected to many Korean viewers even including judges, they were consistently challenged by whether they, certified talent, could live up to the expectation at even more 'foreign' territory to *gyopo*, that is K-pop business. The language adjustment, for instance, has been the most notoriously challenging task for most of them, especially the second-generation youth. A failure of learning and memorizing the lyrics is often leads to a disqualification at any round regardless of the talents they would show.²⁴ The Americanized accents and pronunciation of Korean, which had often considered to be a distinctive mark of *gyopo* performers, especially in African American genres, becomes a decisive shortcoming to remedy for becoming a competent K-pop performer, especially at the live-performing show. Secondly, they are highly expected to deliver the exotic talent that should be distinctive from domestic Korean performers, which could also cancel out any disadvantages in language issue. Although the current K-pop scene does not produce any foreign language version for the domestic market, American pop music repertoires tends to be highly encouraged for these performers. It often features '[American] pop music' round which is usually designed to showcase their vocal quality and style, which, in many cases, advantageous for *gyopo* participants who are fluent in English and familiar with repertoires. For instance, John Park was able to make a breakthrough performance with his rendition of "Man in the Mirror" (Michael Jackson) and "If I Ain't Got You" (Alicia Keys), which were considered by both judges and audiences the kind of

²² Even in the case of using American given names, their Korean surname is mostly pronounced in Korean way.

²³ The motivations were described in somewhat diverse manner such as "to find my true identity" or "to learn more about my root [Korea]."

²⁴ An exotic "accent" or mis-pronunciation is one of the most common charge for disqualifying *gyopo* or even foreign participants in this kind of auditioning program. This, to some extent, resonate with the fact that the actual K-pop training system has been operating a language training course as a part of in-house idol training program.

performances that successfully revealed his exceptional skills and, to be most ironic, his fluent articulation of English lyrics. At the same time, they also need to satisfy what contemporary Korean audiences need to hear from them. Paul Kim and Heejun Han had to face criticism on their lack of a contemporary edge prominent in Korean songs, especially in their vocal style. It is noteworthy that Paul Kim, who were well recognized by American judges for his 'deep soul voice' that appeared rather exceptional for Asian singers, eventually failed to pass the qualification round even with his thoughtful choice of famous Korean R&B song to show his "Korean" quality, which also revealed how competitive the current K-pop industry has transformed into. Also, Han's dramatic, rather evolutionary change of style in singing throughout the rounds also illustrates how elaborate and complicated the level of requirement for the quality of *gyopo* could be. The televised audition process itself, therefore, assumes a form of drama that the identity of *gyopo* has been presented, tested and negotiated. The programs would have a certain recursive pattern accordingly throughout each round: at an audition level, the show tends to depict the technical superiority and unique sensibility of *gyopo* musicians. But as the audition progresses, people would start to witness that these participants struggle to prove their talent yet forge the custom fit style to appeal to local Korean audiences, which is constantly encouraged and directed by the judging and mentoring process. The broadcasters want to portray the show as a series of drama, typically including verges of elimination and overcoming the challenges, which is carefully designed as a kind of ritual that proves a potential quality as next commercial pop star, and *gyopo* seems to perform a proper role for his kind of setup. Against the backdrop of all those struggles and opportunities given to *gyopo*, it might also be implied that while the career of *gyopo* in America Idol might illustrates about the level of talent, the status should no longer be absolute as in the previous decade when their authority as a cultural bearer was almost impossible to be contested. Thus, by challenging, or sometimes re-acknowledging the authority that was seemingly 'pre-certified' by American music experts, K-pop industry wants to claim its leverage and convince the audiences of how much K-pop has grown as a diverse, transnational, and eventually *contemporary* scene.

Korean Americans, or *gyopo*, in K-pop audition program illustrates the way in which the talent and images of *gyopo* consistently performs in the current system of Korean pop culture. It also shows a considerable transition that has been made in last few decades, in terms of how requirements of the industry toward Korean Americans has been diversified reflecting the elaborate system of K-pop. Most of all, these *gyopo* singers are willing to endure this kind of musical and cultural challenge not because the task is easier than as in American scene. Rather, they understand that K-pop has appeared as more promising venue they could demonstrate their talent and pursue a future recording career, through appropriating their American-ness to be a powerful commercial value. To maximize the opportunity, however, they not only devise a way to forge themselves to be foreign, update, yet compatible, but also put their every effort to negotiate their talent, identity, and desire, in emerging and globalizing K-pop scene.

Conclusion

The modern history of Korean popular music has always been a kind of compulsive journey to attain its long-cherished desire toward western modernity and globalization. And a substantial part of this mission has been accomplished through the long-term influx of *gyopo* and the transnational dynamics and negotiation between the mainland Korean and Korean American communities. In the earlier phase of K-pop, *gyopo* performed a decisive role to modernize the genre, especially African American style contemporary pop music, possessing and displaying a cultural authenticity in music. The rise of K-pop in the international market provided a new phase to this phenomenon. The unprecedented global presence of K-pop would show that Korean

modernity itself is no longer a mere reproduction of western/american modernity nor a regionally confined movement. The talent and the image of Korean Americans have become integral ingredients for Korean popular music, which helps to modernize and globalize the genre with pan-“Korean” identity. *Gyopo* is an integral entity in which the desire of modernization was resided. At the same time, *gyopo* keep existing as a liminal space where the Korean desire toward western modernity and marginal identity of Asianness were loosely entwined with each other. Through *gyopo*, Korean music accept a bitter reality of the dominance of western aesthetics, yet could claim to become a global agent appropriating these “in-between” Koreans.