

The 27th Annual Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium
Consuming K-Pop: Soft Power, Marketization, and Cultural Appropriation

Saturday, November 2, 2019

Harry Harding Auditorium, Elliott School of International Affairs, Room 213
1957 E St., NW, Washington, DC 20052

Speakers Abstracts

Bora Kim, Columbia University

Boundaries of K-pop: EXP EDITION, A Non-Korean K-pop Idol Group

In 2014, a non-Korean K-pop idol group EXP EDITION was born in Bora Kim's Columbia University MFA studio in New York. The group has relocated to Seoul in 2016 and has been working in the K-pop industry to this day. Since its inception, EXP EDITION has received media attention and generated heated online debates around cultural authorship and appropriation in K-pop. In her talk, Kim will share why her team created the group and what the on-going questions are that she wants to raise through EXP EDITION: What are the imagined boundaries of K-pop that exists in the minds of K-pop consumers? How do we confront the self-centric communication and understanding created in the process of the "transnational" circulation of K-pop?

CedarBough T. Saeji, Indiana University, Bloomington

Parasitic or Symbiotic?: The Rise of the K-pop Adjacent Industries

Korean popular music (K-pop) is a musical industry centered on artistic products of idol stars, but the K-pop industry is now supporting and supported by a multitude of lime-light eschewing and lime-light seeking people who are making a living through various K-pop dependent activities--a secondary yet autonomous industry. They teach K-pop dance, manage reaction and commentary channels, and provide K-pop related education and experiences. Beyond the entertainment agencies and singers, in tandem with K-pop's success an entire industry has arisen that parasitically feeds off K-pop while also symbiotically amplifying it. The very public-ness of their activities gestures not at a subculture but at a side culture, spawning a fascinating and contradictory transcultural practice and dialogue. These new participants in these adjacent/dependent industry support K-pop fandom, and may become secondary stars nurtured by enthusiastic fandom. In this paper I explore the specific issue of the K-pop adjacent industries that are dependent on the same sources of finances—fans and the Korean government—that the industry relies on. I see them as primarily in two camps: performers and educators. Performers' desire to be noticed collectively encourages creativity—the chief weakness of the hegemonic K-pop insiders, while educators

deepen fan engagement with K-pop through dance classes, tourism experiences, and educational programs. In this paper I argue that the shadow cultures that spawned these industries have become an integral part of interacting with and understanding K-pop today, introducing and enabling personal encounters with K-pop even as the industry has grown.

Crystal Anderson, George Mason University

From Big Mama to Mamamoo: The Reverberation of R&B Vocals in K-pop Girl Groups

K-pop music represents a unique conduit for cultural flows between Korean and non-Korean communities and cultures. What does it mean when K-pop music draws from various music styles and traditions? Some describe the practice as negative cultural appropriation and theft, while others generalize it without giving attention to the long-standing traditions from which K-pop draws. K-pop should be seen as part of the legacy of the musical traditions from which it draws. In physics, reverberation represents the persistence of a sound caused by multiple reflections of the sound within a closed space. In a similar way, R&B vocals, particularly those popularized by black female vocal groups of the 1990s, reverberate in the vocal performance of K-pop girl groups. Due to its quality musical production, K-pop has always had its share of strong individual vocalists as well as entire groups with strong vocal talent. This presentation will show how female K-pop groups such as Big Mama, Red Velvet, and Mamamoo, reverberate R&B vocals through the use of multilayered vocals, a repertoire that includes both older and contemporary genres and the combination of singing and rap. Such reverberation of R&B vocals in K-pop expands perceptions of K-pop girl groups that go beyond image.

Imelda Ibarra (US BTS ARMY)

Method to the Madness: The Global Power of ARMY

Contrary to popular belief and media representation, K-Pop fans have a diverse demographic, which allows them to have an undisputed impact when it comes to promoting their “faves.” Social media helps erase the constructed boundaries of nations to the point where fans from across the world communicate and coordinate projects on a global scale, unheard of in the Western market. Whether it’s an attraction to food, music or history, millions of dedicated K-Pop fans are developing an interest in its country of origin. During this presentation, US BTS ARMY will discuss fan engagement, social media management, and the indirect exposure of the general public to Korean culture.

Robert Ku (Binghamton University - State University of New York (SUNY))

“Mother Said She Didn’t Like Jajangmyeon’: Ruminating on Korean Noodles During the Age of K-pop”

In 1999, the pioneering K-pop Idol group g.o.d released their debut single, “To Mother,” which chronicled the economic hardship of a single mother raising her teenage son in the face of poverty. At a pivotal point during the song’s narrative, the son complains to his mother that he is sick of eating instant ramyeon all the time, which prompts her to take money out of her emergency fund to buy him a bowl of jajangmyeon. While happily eating, the son asks his mother why she isn’t eating with him. Her answer would go on to become one of the most memorable lines in K-pop history: “Mother said that she didn’t like jajangmyeon.” In this early K-pop classic, jajangmyeon is characterized as a food of luxury and is put in direct opposition to ramyeon, which is depicted as a food of poverty. Thirteen years later, in 2012, another Kpop Idol group, T-ara, was signed by the Korean food company Nongshim to advertise its flagship product, Shin Ramyun, to consumers in Japan, the birthplace of instant noodles. In a series of short commercials, each member of T-ara, who at the time was hugely popular in Japan, were filmed cooking a different recipe using Shin Ramyun. In these clips, rather than evoking poverty and hardship, ramyeon is presented not only as a food of the young, hip, and beautiful, but also a food that is distinctively Korean. In his presentation, Robert Ji-Song Ku discusses the shifting status of two of Korea’s most iconic noodle dishes during what he calls the “Age of K-pop.” When and why did Koreans first start eating jajangmyeon and ramyeon? How have the values and meanings of the two dishes shifted or evolved over time? And more generally, some two decades after its beginning, what has been the gastronomic consequence of K-pop not only in Korea but across the Korean diaspora?

So-Rim Lee (University of Pennsylvania)

“Grow Stars with Z-POP DREAM”: Idols, Cryptocurrency, and Technologies of Embodiment

Z-POP DREAM is a business project inspired by K-pop’s global success, founded by a pan-Asian team of entrepreneurs and blockchain technology specialists. Treating K-pop as a business model, Z-POP DREAM takes transnationalism seriously; its “Z-pop” idols (two groups have so far come out of their effort, tentatively named “Z-boys” and “Z-girls”) hail from Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines; the fan consumer base it seeks to cater to are also pan-Asian, with the locus of its corporate presence spread out in the Southeast Asia. Z-POP DREAM boasts to have invented a new business ecosystem for creating, circulating and consuming global pop idols, bringing together the fan-voting system (made famous by M.net’s “Produce 101” television series) and cryptocurrency. The project also prides on transparency as its core technological innovation, arguing how its use of blockchain allows fans to “confirm whether their voting power has been exercised correctly and their votes indeed have had effect” (<http://z-popdream.io>). My talk explores this venture and its embedded rhetoric of utopian techno-transnationalism, democratic capitalism, and the political economy of the idol.