

1 Sticking It to the Man

Early Neoliberalism in Korean Pop Music

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Open Competition

In cultural studies, as well as in many other disciplines, the use of the term “neoliberalism” has become increasingly prevalent. Outside the field of economics, to which it was once tied more closely, it has become a blanket term for capitalist measures that include deregulation, reductions in public expenditures, and an emphasis on individual entrepreneurship, competition, and free trade. Terry Flew notes that when interpreted as an approach to economic policy, it may be endorsed by left-leaning policy makers due to its inherent goal to reduce the cost of bureaucracy, but it is more frequently associated with ruthless approaches to capitalist gain.¹ Nick Couldry argues that neoliberal strategies pose a danger when they promote a worldview that regards markets as the ideal sociopolitical form of organization and allows its principles to drown out alternative criteria. While neoliberalism may, for example, appear to foreground the voices of individuals, including those of fan communities, he warns that “the notion of freedom underlying neoliberalism is abstracted from any understanding of the social processes that underpin ‘voice’ in its full sense as an embodied process of effective speech.”² In the workplace, the corporate identity does indeed risk obfuscating truly individual, personal experience and value, and while one might posit that the self-branding so common in popular culture is a triumph of individual expression, Couldry contends that it merely represents the “opportunity to compete as a commodity.”³ Since neoliberal values have become internalized and very much part of our culture, championing a more introspective and less performative account of the non-market-driven needs and emotions of individuals may prove quite challenging.

The business of Korean popular music is driven by neoliberalism in a range of different ways. According to Inkyu Kang, it is responsible for the hypercommodification and hyperrationalization of K-pop, as evidenced by the creation of “talents” through years of training, the wide range of spin-off products, and the frequent use of lip-synching. And it explains, he argues, the deindividuation of group members and their replaceability within idol formations.⁴ But neoliberalism can be identified in another equally important aspect of K-pop, namely the semantics of K-pop

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performances. In conformist and (from a Korean point of view) politically correct fashion,⁵ many idol formations passionately endorse the voices of their fans through messages of individuality, girl power, and self-love. The phenomenon of Seo Taiji and Boys demonstrated,⁶ however, that emphasis on personal empowerment and symbols of nonconformity can be used to promote major brands, including idol formations, luring fans into portraying themselves as critical consumers who happen to have developed a “bias.” There is one other realm where the connection between neoliberalism and today’s K-pop industry is predominant. It is where competition and public scrutiny allow individuals a chance to break out as rising stars through the reality talent show.

Over the past decade, reality talent shows have experienced a dramatic surge in popularity on South Korean TV networks. Examples include Mnet’s *Superstar K* (2009–2016), *The Voice of Korea* (2012–2013), *I Can See Your Voice* (*Neo-ui moksori-ga boyeo*, since 2017), and *Produce 101* (2016–2019); tvN’s *Korea’s Got Talent* (2011–2012); SBS’s *Survival Audition K-Pop Star* (2011–2017); KBS’s *Top Band* (2011–2015) and *Singing Battle* (*Norae ssaum*, 2016–2017); and MBC’s *Star Audition: The Great Birth* (*Seuta odisyeon widaehan tansaeng*, 2010–2013) and *I Am a Singer* (*Na-neun gasuda*, 2011–2015). Even Marvel’s comic book character Luna Snow, the K-pop idol turned superhero, was introduced in 2019 as a member of 4L1T, “winners of the idol origins contest.”⁷ Reality talent shows revolve around a small panel of noted individuals judging music performances by amateurs over the course of competitive elimination rounds. As they play into the general public’s distrust of the music industry’s manipulative power and gatekeeping, viewers are asked to cast their vote, either live or online. Meanwhile, the amateur status of contestants and the name of a show like *The Voice of Korea* fuel the sentiment that audiences are playing a role in curating true talent.

Hyeonu Han argues that the talent shows are more competitions than auditions. He believes an audition is a way of seeing how well you fit a particular role, while a competition focuses on how well a predetermined song is played: “The main concern is who sings the designated song better and who goes up to the higher pitch.”⁸ But although the element of competition is undeniable and will also play out among the fans, the shows equally encourage the audience to assess whether a candidate is “fit” to win. As important as their voices, backstories serve as evidence of contestants’ authenticity. Critics note that viewers are made to judge a limited range of renditions of well-established styles of music based on vague criteria.⁹ Indeed, for the television shows to be successful, and for the successful contestants to earn the lucrative rewards that will allow them to commit themselves fully to their artistic ambitions, the undefined criteria for

performance cannot completely shun stylistic conventions or be perceived as superimposed; the contestants must emulate existing conventions to win the maximum number of votes. The business of popular entertainment favors those with the greatest commercial promise, and despite the outcome arguably being predetermined, by seemingly defying the cultural hegemony the notion of raw talent promotes sales. As Jeremy Gilbert notes, the idea of the “innate talent” of individuals serves to “justify the obviously self-perpetuating nature of inequalitarian institutions and social relations.”¹⁰ Adorno’s idea of pseudo-individualism therefore applies to both the business model and the supposed talent of the contestants.¹¹ The considerable commercial importance of the shows – some have generated viewer ratings as high as 20 percent – can cast doubts upon the validity of the polls. After all, judges and producers may have a vested interest in selecting contestants who, for better or worse, appeal to a large percentage of the population. When in spite of the format’s popularity and reliance on viewer voting, Mnet’s producers feared that the 2019 installment of their *Produce* series would produce an unfavorable outcome, they rigged the voting process.¹²

John Fiske defines fandom as a minority’s act of appropriating “certain performers, narratives or genres” from mainstream pop. “It is,” he finds, “typically associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race.”¹³ The definition is helpful because it identifies the crucial factor of empowerment, which may take different forms and could be taken to comprise cultural, social, and economic involvement or recognition. Although K-pop and talent shows have come under increasing scrutiny by fans, the criticism does not immediately pose a challenge to the business model per se. Critics may genuinely oppose aspects of the industry’s hegemony and have a significant effect on sales but may ultimately be driven by a desire to find unity in a common purpose, promote their fandom and ability to scrutinize, or compete with fans of other idols. Since fandom presents an avenue for young people to distinguish themselves, even strong criticism of talent shows may be geared less toward generating systemic change than toward generating likes. Pop culture fandom is aspirational; it yields greater agency to the subordinated, even though the majority of critically engaged fans may not seek control over particular media to reverse their subordination, however loud their voices.

Selling Records

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, record companies’ primary source of revenue was the sale of physical copies. The wonders

of new media technologies and the foreign scenes and sounds they produced certainly drew in affluent consumers, but as soon as prices began to drop and the size of the middle class began to grow, the business became a dominant feature of daily life. In Korea, too, talent shows, radio broadcasts, and countless advertisements promoting the latest records could be found everywhere. While the elements of cost, sound quality, and uniqueness remained considerable selling points for some time, the growing phenomenon of celebrity stardom eventually turned fandom into a fourth major factor driving sales. Enjoying the accolades of connoisseurship and cosmopolitanism that their involvement awarded, many young urbanites kept up to date on the activities of their idols and emulated their style. They bought magazines and frequented record shops and popular music venues to follow the latest developments and share experiences and opinions.

Having steadily grown an interest in Korean talent among Korean and Japanese middle-class consumers, in the late 1920s the companies began to increasingly bring out modern, faster arrangements of traditional songs called “new folk songs” (*sin minyo*) and *yuhaengga* (*yuhaeng*, popular; *ga*, song). Because they followed Japan’s pentatonic *yonanuki* scale, they could become popular with both Koreans and Japanese domestically, opening up the possibility of a Japanese-language release. Even so, in 1928, F. H. Goldsmith, a recording engineer for Victor Japan, said that across north-east Asia people were primarily interested in their own music, with native pop genres generally holding little commercial promise overseas.¹⁴ Jazz was the last of the three primary pop song styles to emerge and thrive. Unlike the other two styles, which could be described as melancholic, jazz songs were mostly upbeat. Because many of them corresponded with passionate dance sequences admired on the silver screen, they felt decidedly more modern and, on account of their more playful character, may have symbolized conformity to the political status quo. Indeed, Yongwoo Lee finds that in Korea’s context, young people turned jazz music into a commodity that tied them to America’s utopic contemporaneity.¹⁵ Rather than merely emulating aspects of Western culture, however, Koreans sought to own it. To a Westerner, Korean jazz may have seemed flattering, but to Koreans it was defiantly progressive; its very existence denied foreign patency and allowed it to be embedded with Korean sensibilities. Despite having no control over any particular medium or genre, Koreans were able to create “glocalized” forms of entertainment that highlighted their own potential and expressed uniquely Korean sentiments. But while Korean successes overseas were important for their self-image, Korean jazz did not sell abroad and was not even popular with Korea’s own elite, who preferred Western classical music.¹⁶

By the early 1930s, the primary companies competing for a slice of the Korean music market were Columbia and Victor, closely followed in terms of market share by Chieron, Polydor, Okeh, and Taepyeong (Taihei in Japanese). I estimate their total annual income to have hovered around 35 million won around the mid-1930s, equivalent to approximately US\$350 million today. In a discussion with noted pop singers and record company representatives in January 1936, *Samcheolli* (Our land) magazine editor Donghwan Kim claimed that sales of traditional Korean music (“Joseon soripan”) accounted for a third of the total volume of 1.5 million records sold,¹⁷ which suggests that until the early 1940s, when the production of records collapsed, the Korean market was dominated by “new folk songs” and *yuhaengga*, jazz songs, and Western classical music. Korean pop music accounted for more than half of record sales, and some pop songs, whether foreign or Korean, sold thousands of copies almost overnight. But like today, due to the high cost of production, record companies rarely took chances; although nudity had long proven to sell live acts regardless of artistic talent, gramophone recordings had to ideally be sold before they ended up on the shelves.

Music fandom grew considerably in the 1930s, but few contemporary publications discussed the phenomenon in detail. The first use of the English term “fan” (*paen*) in regard to admirers of pop culture in Korea may be in the Japanese-language paper *Pusan nippō* from June 1925, which reported that fans in Busan, presumably all Japanese, were excited about the arrival of actress Makino Teruko.¹⁸ Another, from December 1926, referred to Korean followers of Hollywood star Rudolph Valentino.¹⁹ The term “fan” retained its association with things foreign for some time and was still placed between quotation marks in an editorial on popular music a decade later.²⁰ While it was used to refer to sports fans, too, when it was applied to popular music, not a realm dominated by men, it appears to have carried negative connotations. The many complaints by Koreans about the ill effects of modern urban culture in the early 1930s show that some believed pop music was having a druglike effect on Korean youth, with gramophone technology often receiving partial blame. In an editorial from January 1930, for example, an impression of an evening at Café Baron in Seoul reads: “When the sound of jazz belches from a gramophone player, waitresses twitch their shoulders and wriggle their bums. These unsightly mechanical rhythms are springing up everywhere.”²¹ In a piece on the effect of pop music on children published four years later, a critic wrote: “When I walk down an alley, I often hear a phonograph playing. The lyrics are usually quite meaningless and messy.”²² And in 1935, folklorist Seokha Song lamented that records with “empty pop songs” (*pyetoehan yuhaengga*) were now playing virtually everywhere around

the country.²³ It is ironic that criticism of the medium took decades to come to the fore, and that when it finally did, due of course in part to the emergence of print media – in the 1920s and 1930s important platforms for the discussion of popular culture included the magazines *Samcheolli*, *Byeolgeongon* (Another world), and *Jogwang* (Dawn) – Koreans were playing a greater role in the record industry than ever before. Not only were they increasingly involved in the production of records both behind the scenes and in front of the microphone, but even the voice of Korean fans had become difficult to ignore: Many wrote letters to their idols, followed them around after performances, sent gifts like cosmetics or chocolate, and they sometimes demanded that the radio play their favorite music.²⁴ Indeed, in January 1940, pop singer Song Geumnyeong acknowledged that “today’s fans of popular songs (*yuhaengga*) have certainly become more knowledgeable and better at their hobby.”²⁵ What is more, despite growing criticism of the involvement of *gisaeng* (young hostesses or courtesans) in popular culture, which extended even to their use of fashion accessories,²⁶ record companies and the radio provided talented ones with better career opportunities than they had ever had.

Recognizing Talent

Newspapers and the radio played a significant role in the promotion of the new repertoires, while fandom and conformity did their part to urge consumers to keep up to date. To be at the forefront of new developments in popular culture, or at the very least aware of them, has always been a major driver of fandom. In May 1933, when portraits of individual artists were regularly featured in ads and on records and lyric sheets, the music label Chieron debuted an anonymous singer simply called Ms. Chieron. It challenged fans to show themselves to be true connoisseurs by identifying the hidden identity of the vocalist. Columbia Records followed suit in September 1934 with a Ms. Korea, whose face on lyric sheets was made unrecognizable by a black banner across her eyes. A Ms. Regal and Mr. Columbia debuted in 1934 and 1935, respectively.²⁷ An ad in the *Maeil sinbo* (Daily report) again a year later also played into the pressure to be in the know. Using small profile pictures of two women, a record shop challenged readers to work out the identity of the popular singers based on a few small hints.²⁸ In these and other ways record companies promoted their products widely and aggressively; shoppers, movie audiences, and journal subscribers were all subjected to countless advertisements and promotions. While shop owners did their part distributing flyers and lyric sheets for a new record or gramophone player, record companies and the

radio advertised live radio shows and public events where audiences could witness the latest or future stars performing live.

Unlike *gisaeng*, who could rely on their management to provide introductions, talented singers with no ties to the music industry could make a name for themselves by winning a prize in a contest. The idea may not have been adopted from abroad, but if it was, it certainly shows that Korea's entertainment industry followed developments elsewhere. The 1935 Hollywood production *Every Night at Eight*, about a singing trio trying to break through using an amateur radio hour, was the first to piggyback on the popularity of the amateur hour concept in the United States.²⁹ In the United Kingdom; in Japan, where *Every Night at Eight* opened in April 1936; and in China, too, talent shows were becoming a regular feature on the radio.³⁰ In Hong Kong in January 1932, the chairman of the Broadcasting Committee issued an invitation to local talent for a singing contest.³¹ And in Shanghai in November 1935, an amateur contest was organized with the help of several local radio stations under the auspices of the RCA-Victor record company. Running over the course of a week and decided by the listeners based on "popular vote," it sought to support talented contestants and in the process "point to all the stars who began at the bottom."³²

In Korea, from October 1933, for approximately six months, Columbia Records staged a pop music singing contest in ten cities across the country with a record contract on the line, as well as the possibility of an acting gig with the Japanese film studio Shōchiku Kinema. Hye Eun Choi writes that in the 1930s record companies regularly held contests like these "as a means to recruit new artists as well as raise their revenues."³³ Indeed, the events promoted the companies' brand names and their association with talent, and sometimes sales of a particular hit song or recital. Sponsoring Columbia Records's contest was the *Joseon ilbo* (Korea daily), which sought to increase sales through regular updates on the proceedings and presented the contestants to readers with a photo in its first major announcement.³⁴ The events were held in the evening, and each week time allowed for only three contestants to sing one designated song and one of their own choosing.³⁵ Yujeong Jang notes that, because popular music still lacked the reputation of Western classical music, only noted specialists of the latter genre were asked to serve as judges. On this occasion they were Prof. Mary Young of Ewha College, Prof. Jemyeong Hyeon of Yeonheui College, and pianist and soprano Seongdeok Yun.³⁶ At the finals, held on February 17, 1934, emerging stars Jeong Ilgyeong and Go Boksu came in first and second place, respectively (see Figure 1.1).

The success of the scheme prompted other record companies to follow suit. After similar contests had been held by Okeh in 1935–1936 and

本社
懸賞

當選歌表音樂大會

發

四月廿二日(日曜)午後八時於公會堂

入場料 八十錢 (東亞日報讀者는參拾錢)

主催 東亞日報社學藝部

【寫眞은 當夜出演할 콜럼비아歌手들】



右起上列
鄭日敬、趙錫子、石金庚、全玉、金仙草、姜弘植、高福壽

Figure 1.1 Advertisement for a concert by Columbia singers includes photos of Jeong Ilgyeong, in the top right corner, and Go Boku, at the bottom (*Donga ilbo*, April 19, 1934, 6).

Victor in early 1939,³⁷ on July 29, 1939, Taepyeong Records announced another nationwide contest, again in collaboration with the *Joseon ilbo*.³⁸ This time, however, judges were chosen from among notable figures from the popular music scene, namely composer Jeon Gihyeon and lyricist

Cheon Ato. Finalists had to sing Chae Gyuyeop's hit song "Bukkuk ocheon kiro" (The northern country's 5,000 kilometers, Taihei8600), which the company had released in January that year, and one song of their own choosing.³⁹ A few months later, it was Polydor Japan's turn to organize a nationwide "New Singer Contest" (Sinin gasu seonbal daehoe), with support from the *Donga ilbo* (East Asia daily). The contest also played out over six months, but the repertoire was fully predetermined and comprised songs released by Polydor in the year prior: three particular songs for male contestants and three for female ones. Judging was once more done by well-established insiders of the popular music scene: actor and lyricist Pyeong Wang, Polydor's local head of A&R, and composers Mun Howol and Jeon Gihyeon.⁴⁰ In 1942, Taepyeong Records announced what would be the last national pop music singing contest to be held before the end of colonial rule.⁴¹

Noted vocalists who were "discovered" through talent shows include Ilgyeong Jeong, Boksu Go, Sejeong Jang, Geumja Jo, Bangnam Jin, Nana Baek, and Yeongchun Kim.⁴² Hye Eun Choi finds that successful singers like Boksu Go would generally enjoy a greater reputation than their female counterparts.⁴³ Although the neoliberal nature of the contest, the idea that anyone could be a star, was intriguing, the negative perception of *gisaeng* persisted, and not because the young women's music training gave them an unfair advantage. Despite the prevalence of *gisaeng* in everyday life and the high salaries of some former *gisaeng*-turned-pop stars, the association of *gisaeng* with popular music long tainted the latter. The negative association may have led to the term *yeoryu myeongchang* being introduced. Used to refer to acclaimed *gisaeng* performers of traditional music, the first part of the term (*yeoryu*), Choi argues, indicates that the women were educated and "socially successful."⁴⁴ But although the *gisaeng* past of female stars was thus rarely celebrated, despite the rigorous training they had undergone, women's working-class backgrounds could work in their favor as long as they did not call their virtue into question. That the talent of contestant Jang Sejeong was discovered while she was "working as a salesgirl at Hwasin Department Store in Pyongyang," for example, may have boosted her appeal, especially since department store saleswomen were known to be selected on the basis of their looks.⁴⁵

Similar to the popular *Korea's Got Talent*-like TV shows of today, the contests entailed the public auditioning of contestants performing a limited range of music in popular styles in front of a panel of people working for the record company and a collaborating entertainment agency.⁴⁶ The range of well-established pop songs was much more limited at the time, so in order to promote their own productions and have them regarded as the standard, contestants were required to cover the record companies' own hit songs. From a marketing point of view, little could go

wrong, but the commercial importance of the talent shows still cast doubts upon the selection criteria applied. Despite its own involvement in the formula from the start, on April 25, 1940, the *Joseon ilbo* published an editorial that criticized the commercialism of talent shows, arguing that it was wrong of record companies to ask contestants to buy two records and pay a participation fee.⁴⁷ Since it did not mention which company it had in mind, the critique is likely to have been aimed at Taepyeong Records and Polydor, which had both charged an application fee of 3 won the previous year. Amounting to the cost of a record, it was a relatively high fee that may have been partly intended as a form of preselection due to the high number of applications.⁴⁸ A month later, the paper published another critique of the shows, this time focused on the absence of proper criteria and bias toward pretty female contestants and those with *aegyo* (winsomeness).⁴⁹ Criticism of the alleged bias was likely fueled by the looks of female contestants frequently coming up in public discourse, as well as by the faces of both male and female entertainers having been customarily printed on flyers, newspaper advertisements, and posters since the mid-1920s. Since the emphasis on the looks of female entertainers was not limited to the shows or the record industry, a critique like this could not have much effect. A newspaper report on Taepyeong Records's second contest in early 1942 lists the songs – all Taihei hits – on which the contestants would be judged, but again omits any discussion of criteria.⁵⁰

Critics of the talent shows and the social hierarchies they upheld could not overturn their own role as consumers, let alone their status as colonized subjects. They were reminded of this on May 22, 1933, when the government promulgated the Gramophone Record Regulations (*Chugeumgi rekodeu chwiche gyuchik*), which banned many albums for being disturbing or immoral.⁵¹ But the shared recognition of raw talent, that subjective social standard that had been cultivated over years, may have felt no less magical than finding the perfect partner.⁵² Although the format invited the opinions of privileged citizens too, the audiences' efforts to serve cultural justice by giving recognition to amateur music talents brought the colonized together over matters of taste.⁵³ The shows were premised, after all, on individuals' mastery in *their* popular culture. Especially when living under colonial rule, finding commonalities in defiance of the political hegemony, the formula's cultivation of shared norms, would have been gratifying. Apart from the element of public scrutiny, the talent shows' native embedding of authenticity was crucial. Annette Hill posits that "The more emphasis is placed on spectacle and style, the more audiences look for authenticity in people's behavior, emotions and the settings for representations of reality."⁵⁴ Although the record industry had not yet been hit by major controversies or scandals, the decades-long

seeming absence of the general public's immediate participation led some to question the notion of "popular" (*yuhaeng*) entertainment regardless of the involvement of Koreans in the creative production process.⁵⁵

Despite Koreans having no control over any particular medium or genre and the judging catering to a Korean audience, the talent shows were a platform for uniquely Korean sentiments and highlighted the potential of the subordinated. That finalists would have a chance of success with Japanese and Japanese colonial subjects overseas was important for Koreans' self-image. But although an article in the *Maeil sinbo* from June 1925 boasted that "Korean [traditional] vocal music will reverberate in foreign ears,"⁵⁶ the reality was that outside Korea, few people were interested in Korean renditions of Western music. Only a handful of Korean stars enjoyed success in Japan, where in 1940, Korean music made up less than 2–3 percent of all records produced.⁵⁷ Records released under a Japanese pseudonym were either Japanese translations of Korean songs or songs specifically written for the Japanese market. While a few Korean virtuosos were able to briefly escape their colonial subjectivity in Japan by working under a pseudonym, Western audiences would not look beyond their ethnicity. Korea's foremost celebrity, dancer Choe Seung-hui, for example, found that foreign audiences did not care much for Asians performing Western dance, in original or adapted forms. In spite of her wide range of styles, they preferred an "oriental" musical accompaniment to one involving Western instruments, which forced her to find Korean Americans to accompany her on Korean traditional instruments during her tour in the United States.⁵⁸

Conclusion

As the above examples demonstrate, fandom in colonial Korea comprised a very complex range of emotions and aspirations that deserves much more careful attention than is paid here. Apart from infatuation with a celebrity or the social distinction that music could provide, from early on pop music fandom was driven by the beauty of the melodies and lyrics and the music's association with a modern, Western view on life. Fandom was liberating, as it appealed to modern sensibilities around class, gender, and community. By lending them a voice and highlighting their economic and cultural capital, it gave fans a sense of empowerment. Although foreign companies seldom acknowledged either the talent of a Korean pop star or the importance of their Korean fans, they allowed fans to imagine a connection to peers outside their social circle and provided opportunities to collect experiences and items that quickly grew in prestige. The careers

of some female singers were launched by the neoliberal “stick it to the man” formula that proved popular with many Koreans, but misogyny prevailed. Some Koreans were concerned about the degrading effect of *gisaeng*’s prominence on the sanctity of Korean pop entertainment, but not equally concerned about traditional forms of entertainment. This may be in part because the latter did not invite comparison with Japanese or Western entertainment and in part because of the notion that women trained as courtesans ought not to represent modern Korea. It is ironic, because eroticism helped promote Korean popular culture among both Koreans and Japanese, and it frequently relied on association with the *gisaeng* institution.

Although opportunities to become a professional entertainer with one of the largely Japanese-owned businesses were relatively small in number, already in the 1920s aspiring artists managed to cultivate their unique performing skills and to land contracts by way of private auditions, public talent shows, and radio gigs. The small- to medium-sized events groomed talents to serve both Korean and foreign audiences, singing songs in Korean and Japanese, with communication skills and looks undoubtedly playing a significant role. Once they secured a record contract, their lives could change dramatically. When Columbia chose to organize its own show nationwide, it did not announce any judging criteria. It wanted the audience to become involved and intended to use the momentum the shows built to sell records. The judges were mostly industry insiders, or at least part of an elite circle of music experts, and well aware of the commercial risk involved in voting against the unwritten criteria. By collaborating with major newspapers, the companies involved had nigh full control over the selection process and outcome. Audience members would have had their share of criticism but no public outlet for their voice. Since the few critical editorials that made it to print targeted no record company by name, they may have served to promote rather than discredit the shows that were still running.

After Liberation, music talent shows did not disappear, but those that ran did so without the involvement of any major record company or media outlet. Record sales were small, and the only radio station to frequently play pop music was that of the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN). Rather than using amateur radio shows as a springboard, aspiring artists would audition privately with the entertainment division of the Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK), where good movement and showmanship outweighed musical skill. Successful entertainers could land a gig headlining the prestigious Walker Hill Shows (1962–2002) or appear on TBC’s highly popular TV program *Show Show Show* (1964–1983). That the latter often featured talents from the military circuit was due to their

ability to move well on stage and thus on camera.⁵⁹ Rather than good musicianship, therefore, from the 1960s Korean pop music began to prioritize good movement and showmanship, fostered partly by the expressiveness of the Western music genres popular on the military circuit. The cultural and political importance of the military entertainment circuit is exemplified by Korean pop idols the Kim Sisters migrating to the United States in the early 1960s in pursuit of the American Dream. It signaled an embrace of American culture and of a neoliberal, capitalist model of economic development that foregrounds individualism rather than defiance of any hegemonic superstructure. But Koreans would eventually develop a major, global entertainment industry of their own. And it is its hegemony that the industry's own talent shows are now meant to thwart.

Today's talent shows retain many of the elements of control: the lack of clear criteria, the record contract on the line, the momentum built over months of auditions, the involvement of major media outlets, and neoliberalist self-promotion by the artists. Among some of the new elements are the primacy of backstories and the selection of judges based on their ability to give strong, theatrical performances in supporting or critiquing performances.⁶⁰ While the sociopolitical conditions of today's shows are vastly different from those in the past, the notion of talent remains largely unquestioned. Despite criticism of commercial products and schemes being commonplace, the talent shows are supported by the backstories' evidence of authenticity and continue to compel viewers to participate in the voting process in the interest of preserving merit-based selection. However, the notion of "talent" still adheres merely to a skill set that "fits" a set of long-cultivated standards. While the desire to generate greater control over one's popular culture may be less than it was under colonial rule, deciding with many others on presumed authenticity and quality may allow voters to find unity in a common purpose, promote their fandom and ability for scrutiny, or compete with fans of other idols. It may be a neoliberalist trap, but the format does represent the voices and aesthetics of a majority and provide genuine business opportunities to individual artists. I suspect, therefore, that we may all be stuck to this man for some time yet.

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- 2 Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010), 11–12.
- 3 Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 13; see also 32, 34–35.
- 4 Inkyu Kang, “The Political Economy of Idols: South Korea’s Neoliberal Restructuring and Its Impact on the Entertainment Labour Force,” in Choi JungBong and Roald Maliangkay (eds.), *K-Pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 57, 59, 63.
- 5 See Stephen Epstein, “Fly the Flag (at Your Own Risk): Netizens, Nationalism and Celebrities between South Korea, Japan and Beyond,” in Rumi Sakamoto and Stephen Epstein (eds.), *Popular Culture and Transformation of Japan-Korea Relations* (Routledge, 2020), 167–181.
- 6 Roald Maliangkay, “The Popularity of Individualism: The Seo Taiji Phenomenon in the 1990s,” in Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (eds.), *The Korean Popular Culture Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 296–313.

- 7 Alyssa Wong, *Luna Snow*, issue 1 (Marvel, 2019), 8.
- 8 Hyeonu Han, "Odiseyon-gwa keompeotiseyon-ui chai" (The difference between an audition and a competition), *Joseon ilbo* (Korea daily), April 18, 2013, A33.
- 9 See, for example, Jeremy Gilbert, "What Does Democracy Feel Like? Form, Function, Affect, and the Materiality of the Sign," in Lincoln Dahlberg and Sean Phelan (eds.), *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92–93, 99; Sung Sik Kim (Seongsik Kim) and Seung Mook Kang (Seungmuk Kang), "Odiseyon rieolliti syo 'Seuta odiseyon widaehan tansaeng'-gwa 'Syupeo seuta K2'-ui paendeom hyeonsang" (A study of the fandom of "Star Audition: The Great Birth" and "Superstar K2"), *Eollon gwahak yeon'gu* (Studies in Media Science) 12/3 (2012): 6, 9. See also Roald Maliangkay, "Koreans Got Talent: Auditioning for U.S. Army Gigs in Korea," *Situations: Cultural Studies in the Asian Context* 11/1 (2018): 59–79.
- 10 Gilbert, "What Does Democracy Feel Like?," 94.
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- 12 *The Straits Times*, June 1, 2020, C8.
- 13 John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in Lisa A. Lewis (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 30.
- 14 *The Japan Times & Mail*, May 5, 1928, 1.
- 15 Yongwoo Lee, "Embedded Voices in between Empires: The Cultural Formation of Korean Popular Music in Modern Times" (doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2010), 77, 236.
- 16 Hye Eun Choi, "The Making of the Recording Industry in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018), 147.
- 17 Donghwan Kim, "In'gi gasu jwadamhoe" (A discussion of noted singers), *Samcheolli* (Our land) 8 (January 1936): 130; Choi, "The Making of the Recording Industry," 163.
- 18 *Busan nippō* (Busan daily), June 10, 1925, 7.
- 19 *Donga ilbo*, December 9, 1926, 5.
- 20 *Donga ilbo*, June 11, 1937, 2.
- 21 *Byeolgeongon* (Another world) (January 1930): 143.
- 22 *Donga ilbo*, April 25, 1934, 6.
- 23 *Donga ilbo*, June 22, 1935, 4.
- 24 Ikjo An, "Yuhaeng gasu jwadamhoe" (A discussion with popular singers), *Sinin munhak* 3 (December 1934), 94–95; Choi, "The Making of the Recording Industry," 124; Yujeong Jang, *Oppa-neun p'unggakchaengi-ya* (My brother is a street singer) (Seoul: Hwanggeumgajji, 2006), 202.
- 25 Geumnyeong Song, "Geori-ui kanaria" (Street canary), *Joseon ilbo*, January 13, 1940, 4.
- 26 Kyeongmi Joo, "Gendered Differences in Modern Korea toward Western Luxuries," in K. Pyun and Y. Wong (eds.), *Fashion, Identity, and Power in Modern Asia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 159.
- 27 Roald Maliangkay, "New Symbolism and Retail Therapy: Advertising Novelties in Korea's Colonial Period," *East Asian History* 36 (2008): 47–48.
- 28 *Maeil sinbo* (Daily report), September 19, 1936, 7.
- 29 *Japan Times & Advertiser*, April 24, 1936, 3. According to a report in the *Japan Chronicle* from May 1936, the radio amateur hour "craze" traveled from the United States to London. *The Japan Chronicle*, May 13, 1936, 2.
- 30 *Japan Times & Advertiser*, April 24, 1936, 3; *Japan Times & Advertiser*, March 4, 1941, 5; August 5, 1941, 3.
- 31 *South China Morning Post*, January 8, 1932, 10.
- 32 *The China Press*, November 12, 1935, 9.
- 33 Choi, "The Making of the Recording Industry," 162.
- 34 *Joseon ilbo*, February 15, 1934, 3; see also Choi, "The Making of the Recording Industry," 71–72.
- 35 Jang, *Oppa-neun p'unggakchaengi-ya*, 71; *Joseon ilbo*, February 10, 1934, 2.
- 36 Yujeong Jang, *Norae punggyeong: Jang Yujeong-ui eumak sanmunjip* (A scenery of songs: Essays on music by Jang Yujeong) (Seoul: Alma, 2013), 237–243.
- 37 *Joseon jungang ilbo* (Korea central daily), August 29, 1935, 3; *Donga ilbo*, May 29, 1936, 4; *Maeil sinbo*, February 23, 1939, 3.
- 38 *Joseon ilbo*, February 20, 1940, 3.
- 39 Chanho Pak, *Han'guk gayosa* (A history of Korean popular songs), vol. 1 (Seoul: Mizi Books, 2009), 239–240, 479.
- 40 *Joseon ilbo*, February 9, 1940, 3; *Donga ilbo*, May 1, 1940, 5; *Maeil sinbo*, October 2, 1940, 3.

- 41 *Maeil sinbo*, February 25, 1942, 4.
- 42 *Samcheolli* (Our land) 9/7 (October 1, 1935): 99; Jang, *Norae punggyeong*, 237–243; Dongsun Yi, *Beonji eomneun jumak* (The tavern without a number) (Seoul: Seon, 2007), 305.
- 43 Choi, “The Making of the Recording Industry,” 122–123.
- 44 Choi, “The Making of the Recording Industry,” 122–123.
- 45 *Samcheolli* 8/10 (August 1, 1938): 152; Jinseok Oh and Howard Kahm, “Selling Smiles: Emotional Labor and Labor-Management Relations in 1930s Colonial Korean Department Stores,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 23/1 (2018): 11; see also Chanho Pak, *Han’guk gayosa*, 433.
- 46 *Joseon ilbo*, February 15, 1934, 3; *Maeil sinbo*, February 23, 1939, 3. The songs were sometimes preselected. See, for example, *Joseon ilbo*, February 9, 1940, 3.
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- 53 Philippe Coulangeon, “Social Mobility and Musical Tastes: A Reappraisal of the Social Meaning of Taste Eclecticism,” *Poetics* 15 (2015): 56.
- 54 Annette Hill, *Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres* (London: Routledge, 2007), 15–16.
- 55 See also Choi, “The Making of the Recording Industry,” 110–111.
- 56 *Maeil sinbo*, June 4, 1925, 2.
- 57 The percentage is relatively small compared to that of Chinese and Western music, which accounted for 10 and 12 percent, respectively. *The Japan Times & Mail*, February 5, 1940, 4.
- 58 *The Japan Times and Advertiser*, December 6, 1940, 3.
- 59 Roald Maliangkay, “Not a Habitus for the Have Nots: The Walker Hill Shows, 1962–2012,” in Keith Howard and Catherine Ingram (eds.), *Presence through Sound: Music and Place in East Asia* (London: Routledge SOAS Studies in Music Series, 2020), 150, 153; Yong-Gyu Park, “Han’guk tellebijeon eumak beoraieotisyo-ui seongsoe: TBC-TV-ui ‘syosyosyo’-reul jungsim-euro” (The rise and fall of television musical variety shows in Korea: Focusing on TBC-TV’s “Show Show Show”), *Han’guk kontencheu hakhoe nonmunji* (Journal of the Korea Contents Association) 14/10 (2014): 52, 56; Maliangkay, “Koreans Got Talent,” 67.
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