Popular Music and Political Economy: South Korea and Japan in the 2010s, or Girls' Generation and AKB48

John Lie, University of California at Berkeley

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Abstract

Popular music may be ephemeral and superficial but its almost essential transience and insignificance serve as useful barometers of the here and the now, or knowledge of the present. The reviled reflection thesis – that popular-cultural products "reflect" larger society – has cast a long shadow on the social study of the arts and culture. However much social scientists seek to show the salience of production or the relative autonomy of art worlds, the causal primacy of the social or political economy remains robust. I suggest reversing the received perspective and procedure.

Introduction

Popular music may be ephemeral and superficial but its almost essential transience and insignificance serve as useful barometers of the here and the now, or knowledge of the present. The reviled reflection thesis – that popular-cultural products "reflect" larger society – has cast a long shadow on the social study of the arts and culture. However much social scientists seek to show the salience of production or the relative autonomy of art worlds, the causal primacy of the social or political economy remains robust. I suggest reversing the received perspective and procedure. That is, popular-cultural events and trends can illuminate larger society and political economy. Rather than being explained, they illuminate the time and the place.

AKB48 and Girls' Generation are doomed to be forgotten and to be consigned as answers to future trivial questions about the 2010s in Japan and South Korea. Yet there is no denying their

indelible footprints in everyday life of contemporary Japan and South Korea in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Future scholars will demand footnotes; today it is mere commonsense that each group is or was immensely popular within its respective country. What do they tell us about the two countries?

Comparisons

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Japan and South Korea are different countries. If nothing else, the mere existence of nominally distinct countries demands that they be differentiated and distinguished. It would indeed be facile to add yet another empirical example to the discourse of national distinction. After all, AKB48 and Girls' Generation are patently unlike each other (see *inter alia*; Aidoru 2011; Akimoto & Tahara 2013; Fukuya 2013; Miura 2012; Murayama 2011; Tanaka 2010). The girls of AKB48 are chosen by fans who purchase CDs: one bought CD, one vote. In contrast, the talent agency SM Entertainment assembled and trained Girls' Generation. The Japanese group seems to be structured from bottom up; the South Korean group appears to be shaped from top down. The sort of music that AKB48 peddles, such as "Heavy Rotation," is a subspecies of J-pop, a hint of 1980s light American pop music overlaid with Japanese jingles. In contrast, Girls' Generation, in hits such as "Mr. Taxi," features much more contemporary U.S.-influenced hip-hop and techno-pop beats and rhythms. Girls' Generation veers closely to the contemporary US norm, whether in the hint of backbeats or faster rhythm, in contradistinction to the slower beats of AKB48. A prototypical dancing routine of AKB48 is simple and amateurish in contrast to the professional sheen of Girls' Generation choreography. It is not an insult to say that AKB48 members are amateurish; they pride themselves on their less-than-stellar singing and dancing skills, which in turn prove their authenticity and sustain their popularity. AKB48 members are also shorter than Girls' Generation performers – almost five inches in the early 2010s – and they seem like races apart, for instance in the uniformly shoulder-length black hair of AKB48 in contrast to the varied hair colors and lengths of Girls' Generation. To be sure, even within the short span of girl idol groups' half-life, there have been significant changes, in terms of both music and appearance. Be that as it may, it does not take much familiarity, much less immersion, to identify and differentiate the two groups.

The discourse of national distinction lends itself to simple cultural reductionism. In this line of thinking, AKB48 somehow exemplifies something about Japanese culture, as does Girls' Generation about South Korean culture. I don't think that's necessarily the case. Both countries are complex hybrids, with numerous subcultures of taste and disposition and by the 1980s it was widely agreed that Japanese popular culture had diversified greatly. In contrast, popular-culture diversity came later and remains much less developed in South Korea. Even initial attempts to make sense of it remain less than cognizant of the full range of contemporary South Korean popular culture (see *inter alia*; Kim I. 2014; Kim & Choe 2014; Miyadai, Ōtsuka, & Ishihara 1993; Nakagawa 2002). Even in the realm of popular music, for every book on J-pop there are

probably several on jazz, classical music, and traditional music in contemporary Japan. Neither country is as homogeneous as some commentators claim. Popularity, in any case, does not denote representativeness; neither is AKB48 an essential expression of contemporary Japanese culture nor is Girls' Generation a symptom of South Korean cultural propensity. Rather, each represents a major stream of the cultural industry that caters predominantly to youths who are the primary consumers of popular music.

The point I wish to stress is that the sort of popular music that girls' groups instantiates popular music as commodity or industry. That is, rather than expressing an aesthetic ideology, each group seeks after its fashion to sell its songs and associated products. If the influential modern European idea about art elevates it as an expression of autonomy – autochthonous and autotelic – that sought to express something deep about an artist for the sake of art itself, then popular music as part of the culture industry is anything but autonomous. Rather, in an almost anti-Romantic fashion, it seeks to cater to the demands of the marketplace: to give what the customers want. And what the youthful audience – at least a substantial element of the diverse market in music – in both countries wanted was some sort of idol music.

Business over Art

Why do I stress the anti-Romantic ideology of the culture industry, or of money over art? The answer is clear if we trace the masterminds behind the two girls' groups.

As Akimoto Yasushi, the inventor and producer of AKB48, famously said, he is "not a poet." Akimoto began as a lyricist for traditional-sounding *enka* music, whether in composing the final hit song of the queen of *enka*, Misora Hibari, or in promoting a curiosity like the African-American singer Jero. With *enka* clearly in decline, Akimoto moved to the new genre of folk pop, such as Alfie, in the 1980s. His initial great success came with his embrace of idol music, which was very much in the mainstream of Japanese popular music in the mid-1980s. He produced a sensation, Onyanko Kurabu, then and thereafter has promoted primarily idol pop music. The runaway popularity of Akimoto has made him into something of a corporate guru, dispensing advice on business management and strategy (Yasushi 2013).

The same aesthetically inconsistent trajectory can be seen in the case of Lee Soo Man, the producer of Girls' Generation (Lie & Oh 2014). Majoring in agricultural studies at the prestigious Seoul National University, he was very much in the mainstream as an anti-government activist and a folk singer. Fleeing the authoritarian regime, he ostensibly studied computer science in southern California but was smitten by the new wave of popular music in the United States, especially hip hop, and more importantly the nascent revolutionary medium: the music video. Initially he sought to import U.S.-style hip hop to South Korea but facing an unwilling public he switched to Japanese-style popular music and especially idol music. He proved to be remarkably

successful with the export of BoA and Tongbang Singi, in the 1990s, especially to Japan (Ōno 2015; Ueda 2015).

Thereafter, Lee has steadfastly promoted K-pop as a genre of idol music.

Akimoto and Lee did not converge on idol music because of aesthetic preferences or principles, they certainly canvassed distinct musical trajectories before they arrived at a successful genre and formula. To the extent that one can discern aesthetic consistency, it is that they embraced whatever was current and popular at the time and the place. Enka and folk are disparate genres, but each was in its own fashion extremely popular in Japan and South Korea, respectively, in the 1970s. With change in fashion, they both moved to the mainstream of youth-oriented popular music. The point is that they heeded less their musical origin and their youthful aesthetics but rather pursued popular audience and eager consumers. The destination was the same: idol music.

Idol Music

Popular music has a curiously truncated history (Brackett 2013; Starr & Waterman 2014). It seems almost impossible to think of a past without popular music but much of human history survived without it. Music is probably a cultural universal and "folk music" seems ubiquitous but music as a relatively autonomous activity hardly existed in pre-industrial societies or among non-elites. There were no technological means of ready reproducibility until the very late nineteenth century, save for live performance. Few could summon or afford trained musicians to play for them, leaving almost everyone at the mercy of the talent and training of neighbors, friends, family members, or themselves. In any case, music was reserved largely for special rites and events. Popular music as something relatively ubiquitous depended critically on the technological advances in musical amplification and reproducibility as well as the social preconditions of leisure society (Katz 2010; Schmidt Horning 2013; Suisman 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that most historians trace the origin of popular music in Japan to 1914 – with a song performed entr'acte in theater – and in the Korean peninsula in 1926 (Lie 2014).

Popular music has always been something of idol music. Good looks have always sold well, whether in live theater or on broadcast television. Popular-music magazines, bromides, and posters disseminated seductive images of popular-music performers from the onset of popular music. As a culture industry geared toward profit making, the emphasis has always been seductive sheen rather than aesthetic finesse and prowess. Yet the stress shifted even more to the visual with the arrival of television. While popular music appreciation rested fundamentally on sound – transmitted by radio or record – before the advent of television, the small screen accentuated the visual element of performer and performance.

Underlying the technological transformation is an equally profound social change: the rise of not only mass leisure society but also of younger consumers or teenagers. Whatever one's notion of tradition, it is clear that tradition suggests a time when children or juniors were very much in the thrall of parents and seniors. More pressingly, young people had neither the autonomy to own nor choose means of musical production or reproduction. Even in the affluent United States in the 1950s – a country always at the forefront of popular music's advance – there would usually be only one television per household and the right to choose usually did not rest with children (Bodroghkozy 2001; Spigel 1992). The rise of teenagers – led by the post-World War II United States with legions of fans screaming at Elvis or the Beatles – turned out to be a truly transnational phenomenon (Horn 2009; Laughey 2006). We find the initial outpouring of young, good-looking singers around 1970 in Japan – the so-called "*Hana no Chu-san torio,*" or Yamaguchi Momoe, Mori Masako, and Sakurada Junko, along with their male counterparts (Kitagawa 2013; Lie 2014; Ōta 2011). The same sort of phenomenon emerged in the mid-1980s in the case of South Korea, with the rise of the Madonna of South Korea, Kim Wan-son, and the boy group *Sobangcha*. Needless to say, the particulars of the teenage infatuation differed across national cultures but in general the same sort of age group found their youthful longings in the visages and voices of popular music performers. Idol music is central to the global pop music industry (Masayoshi 2014).

Popular music, like music and culture in general, operates in a realm of change (Dannen 1990; Eyerman 1998; Rosenthal & Flacks 2012; Seabrook 2015). Romantic nationalists imagine folk songs – the music of the people, soul music, and other expressions of *völkisch* essentialism – to be coeval with the creation of the people but there is nothing sempiternal in human life. "*Haru no umi*" was long considered a quintessential Japanese song but it is a modern composition, and western-inspired to boot (Lie 2014). "*Arirang*" is widely regarded as the soul music of the Korean peninsula except for the rather inconvenient fact that it achieved the status only in the twentieth century (Lie 2014). Be that as it may, there is no denying that the onset of idol music truncated and accelerated generational transition. No longer were youths interested in their parents' music, and increasingly not even in their older siblings' music. It is symptomatic that there is such a rapid turnover of stars and hits in both Japan and South Korea in the twenty-first century. In this regard, idol music is a quintessential consumption good that seeks to appeal to a narrow slice of the youth market. It verges on the miraculous for an idol singer – usually derisively called teeny boppers, *jari tare*, and the like – to survive as a star for more than five years. As I suggested, idols and songs that dominate a particular place and time are virtually meaningless beyond that culture and period. Obsolescence is built into idol music in particular and popular music in general, which may accentuate the particularistic identification but vitiates any possibility of transposition or translation beyond the particular here and now.

Nevertheless, there is one trend worth stressing. It is a general rule that idol music in its inception partakes of heroization or even deification. That is, the initial stages of idol music, whether Elvis in the United States or Yamaguchi Momoe in Japan, generate admirers and

followers and stars become icons and fetishes. The semi-sacred character of early idols renders them as heroes and even divinities fit for worship: witness any number of teenagers' rooms strewn with posters and even shrines to their idol (Masaaki 2015). Over time, however, there is something akin to secularization and the beginnings of iconoclasm. Even as they attract legions of fans, the stars themselves become secular entities. The contrast is most striking when one compares the worshipful respect that Yamaguchi Momoe engendered – she was something of a bodhisattva – in striking contrast to AKB48 members who experience cynical reports and embarrassing scandals (Kōki 2013; Reiji 2011; Tomoshi 2012). Yet it is precisely secularization, or post modernization, that is at the forefront: the ordinariness that makes AKB48 so attractive to their fans. Superstars, at least in the case of AKB48, are the proverbial girls next door.

Innovation and Disruption

In the world of business management and strategy, the idea of disruptive innovation has become something of a secular religion (Lepore, 2014). Our globalized, entrepreneurial economy seems to require constant innovation to and occasional disruption of the status quo. Whatever the merits of the argument in the world of semiconductors or automobiles, it seems to characterize the world of idol music in Japan and South Korea. Both AKB48 and Girls' Generation exemplify major innovation in the national market of idol music.

What makes AKB48 innovative? As noted, the group's utter ordinariness and amateurism make it authentic and real. That is, precisely because they are not truly outstanding singers, dancers, or even beauties – any impressive attribute would "threaten" their fans, according to many admirers – they seem so eminently approachable and likable as the proverbial girls next door. As one ardent fan in his 50s expatiated after I asked him why the member who seemed most beautiful to me didn't do well in the annual election: "It's not good to be beautiful. It's disturbing to fans. That's not AKB48." As secularized idols, they must not only be approachable, but also authentic. Authenticity has been a key motif in popular music for some time – the rise of rock or folk music, for instance, valorized authenticity as part of generational conflict and rebellion – but it is also one of the key values of modernity *tout court* (Barker & Taylor 2007; Taylor 1990). As Charles Taylor (1990) has influentially argued, an inward turn of the self and the affirmation of ordinary life constitute the modern self. Although it may seem hyperbolic to equate the modern self with AKB48 fandom, it is not an accident that it is precisely in Japan – not only an affluent, leisure society but also a post-theistic one – should an amateurish and therefore authentic girls' group should serve as contemporary idols.

Secondly, AKB48 exemplifies participatory fandom. AKB48 members and would-be members are like garden-variety politicians engaged in grassroots campaigning. The sheer media saturation of annual AKB48 election makes it a much more discussed event than "real" political elections and although the principle of AKB48 elections is in fact capitalist – one CD, one vote –

its concrete practice is close to the Japanese political campaign norm of waving and handshaking (Henshūbu 2015; Sawayaka 2013). The non-threatening girls of AKB48 are not merely to be seen on television or in a large concert stage but up close and personal, whether performing in small venues or appearing in person for chitchats or handshaking. The demotic character of AKB48 is in part the secret of the democratic success. The democratic or demotic character of AKB48 goes hand in hand with its amateurishness and authenticity. As the wild popularity of "American Idol" or "America's Got Talent" demonstrates, democratic participation in idol selection is nothing new or unique to Japan. Yet Akimoto's inspiration was precisely to extend the insight of participatory popular culture into the very constitution of the pop-music idol group.

Finally, the ordinary performers and their demotic and democratic constitution transmogrify into a large-scale and ongoing reality television show. As I noted, it is not the vocal prowess or the dancing agility that captures the fans' imagination but rather their ordinariness, which includes their quotidian lives replete with seemingly insignificant details – what each member likes to eat for breakfast or her zodiac sign – and occasionally sordid scandals – such as how one member engaged in an "affair" (romantic relationships are proscribed for AKB48 members) or how another's family members were on welfare. These picayune details constitute endless gossip and sustain ongoing fascination, whether in discussions among fellow fans, in real life or in cyberspace, or in television shows and magazine articles. Put simply, AKB48 is the most successful reality television show in contemporary Japan, providing fodder for endless conversations and speculations. In modern, complex society with no obvious foci of discussion – such topics as religion and politics are widely considered inappropriate, if not "private" and therefore taboo, in contemporary Japanese society – AKB48 presents an anodyne, yet endlessly interesting, topic of everyday conversation.

Girls' Generation presents a striking contrast to AKB48. In contradistinction to the avowed amateurism of the Japanese group, Girls' Generation exemplifies professionalism and perfectionism. Unlike AKB48 members, Girls' Generation received extensive training that lasted five to nine years: voice training, dance lessons, language classes, and other aspects of the entertainment business. The production company SM Entertainment outsources virtually every aspect of the extensive division of musical labor. So, for example, a song maybe composed by a Swede, its dance routine choreographed by a Japanese, and costume designed by an Italian. It is therefore not surprising that the polished sheen of a Girls' Generation music video stands in stark opposition to the "reality television" presentation of an AKB48 production. In short, Girls' Generation represents one terminus of manufactured popular music.

Secondly, as democratic politics remains perforce bound by national borders, AKB48 operates almost exclusively in the Japanese cultural sphere. In contrast, Girls' Generation consciously seeks to transcend South Korean national borders. Put simply, the South Korean group is intended to appeal beyond South Korea. SM Entertainment intentionally placed two members in the group who are fluent in English, Japanese, and Chinese, in order to gain fan support in these linguistic spheres. Indeed, many music videos are produced in four languages. In

contrast, AKB48 remains insistently monolingual, save for occasional English phrases that are part and parcel of global pop music lexicon. Girls' Generation therefore represents a new chapter in popular music. While earlier acts operated largely within the national-cultural sphere – and their transnational popularity was an unintended afterthought – Girls' Generation and K-pop embody a consciously transnational or global strategy (Horn 2014; Lie 2014).

Finally, if AKB48 embraces television – the representative medium of the last half of the twentieth century – Girls' Generation relies on the Internet and the social media. In general, K-pop has sought to participate in the post-thing economy. In part because of weak copyright protection within South Korea and the relatively small size of the South Korean market, Girls' Generation in particular, and K-pop in general, have marketed themselves actively via cyberspace. Whereas AKB48 relies on CD sales and television appearances, Girls' Generation has focused on digital downloads and music videos, and even more on non-musical sources, such as advertising, endorsement, and performance (Carah 2012). It is symptomatic in this regard that when AKB48's "Heavy Rotation" became the most downloaded Japanese YouTube video, the production company promptly took it down by claiming copyright infringement (Yūko 2010). In stark contrast, SM Entertainment and other K-pop agencies rely heavily on the free promotion afforded by YouTube and its ilk. Girls' Generation songs and videos are intended to generate profit, but their new digital business strategy makes them virtually free for many listeners and viewers (Taylor 2012; Witt 2015).

Stationary Society Japan

I have argued that both AKB48 and Girls' Generation seek commodification and consumption – put polemically, they don't exist to create art or express their self or soul but rather to achieve popularity and to make money – but they diverge in their modes of presentation and innovation. In summary, Akimoto looks inward and promotes AKB48 almost exclusively in Japan (and thereby adopt traditional practices), whereas Lee looks outward and produces Girls' Generation for external consumption (and thereby adopt new practices). These differences are symptomatic of larger Japanese and South Korean political economies, which have pursued divergent trajectories in the past two decades or so.

Post-World War II economic growth in both Japan and South Korea is usually characterized as export-oriented (Lie 1998). Export reliance made Toyota and Sony household names in much of the world, just as Samsung and Hyundai are well known around the globe. Given their entangled relationship that culminated in colonial domination, it is not altogether surprising that the two countries' political-economic models closely resembled each other in the second half of the twentieth century. Certainly, Park Chung-hee – the chief engineer of export-oriented South Korean economy – sought to emulate prewar Japanese political economy of militarized economy and society, heavy and chemical industrialization, and repressive population

control. The regional division of labor under the U.S.-led capitalist world economy – in which South Korea inherited much of Japanese production technology and its markets in the 1960s and beyond – also facilitated a close convergence of the two economies and the two political-economic models.

Nevertheless, a major divergence can be seen in the past quarter century. The proximate source of Japanese turn is the puncture of the property bubble in the early 1990s (Yukio 2015). The resulting period of stagflation and stationary economy led not only to an introversion of economic activities but also of cultural orientation. Although exports perforce continued, the general orientation of the economy shifted from foreign markets to the domestic. It used to be a common refrain among Japanese politicians and business people that Japan is a small country with inadequate domestic demand, but the new commonsense was that Japan is remarkable for having a large and homogeneous consumer base. The consequence is the Galapagos Syndrome. Like the eponymous island associated with unique flora and fauna, the Japanese archipelago became a land of products that could not be found anywhere else in the world, whether ultra-portable laptops or super-sophisticated toilet seats (Tomohiko 2008). The rapidly aging society and the corresponding diminution of young people merely accentuate the relative stability and immobility, as well as the inward orientation, of the Japanese economy.

The involution of Japanese political economy manifests itself most clearly in the dominant cultural orientation. The period of rapid economic growth, associated with the *dankai* generation (akin to baby boomers in the United States), was broadly an era of external orientation and vaunted ambition. People dreamed of traveling abroad, climbing Mount Everest or wining and dining in Paris, and seeking unvarnished success, whether in the baseball field or in scientific laboratories. "Japan as number one" was at once a fulfillment of a post-World War II fantasy and the beginning of a decade-long irrational exuberance. When the property bubble burst – at its height, hyperbolic claims, such as that the property value of the Imperial Palace was greater than that of the total real estate value of the United States, proliferated – so did the exorbitant hubris and fantasies of Japanese greatness. In its stead emerged a culture of contentment based on stability and simplicity. Instead of exaggerated ambitions people rediscovered virtues in small things: no longer the desire to conquer the world but to enjoy the quotidian and the ordinary. In an ambivalent mode, many Japanese are wont to call it a "world of lukewarm bath": comfortable enough so as not to want to get out into the cold, competitive world, but somehow not entirely satisfying. Stationary society is one terminus of modernity with its stress on the authentic and the ordinary. We see its manifestation in everything from the decline in study abroad to the desire to export products.

The stationary society Japan is not born merely of a reconfigured cultural orientation but also from creeping conservatism in production and distribution. Consider in this regard the competition between Sony and Samsung (Chang 2008). In 1985 when I was conducting research in Tokyo, Sony reigned supreme as an innovative, high-quality brand, probably nonpareil in the global electronics industry. When I interviewed several Sony executives about the inception of

Samsung Electronics that year, their reactions ranged from condescending smile to outright derision. Needless to say, the decades since have not been kind to Sony. Thirty years later, one would have to search far and wide to find people who would confidently declaim the superiority of Sony over Samsung; indeed, the exact opposite is the conventional wisdom. One critical element in Samsung superseding Sony was the latter's slow adaptation to the coming digital revolution. Samsung, in contrast, embraced it wholeheartedly. With the introduction of mp3 players and the dominance of the Internet, including YouTube, it was clear that the two decades between 1985 and 2005 showed clearly which side was triumphant. The story of Samsung vs. Sony is repeated not only in electronics but also in other industries in which Japan previously was the acknowledged world leader.

The same sort of story can be told about distribution and marketing. Although Japan was quick to adopt some online marketing platforms, its post-World War II system of marketing and distribution was slow to change. The complex system has its virtues, but it can only survive against global competition via outright or informal protectionism. To give one example, a typically popular CD album in Japan costs three or four times the going rate in the United States (for the same exact physical product). The flip side is that Japanese producers and managers don't have much incentive to export their products abroad. As some of them told me, they find the process riddled with difficulties – including the necessity of speaking English or another foreign language and dealing with cumbersome export and import regulations – and they would prefer simply to make money in the profitable domestic market. Confident of the received system of copyright protection and product distribution (including elaborate packaging and exceptional service), Japanese popular-music industries continue to reproduce the post-World War II system of records and CDs, but they have been very slow to adapt to the new commercial cyberspace. As I noted, AKB48's most popular music video was yanked off YouTube in the name of copyright infringement. Japanese popular music, in other words, is resistant to the early twenty-first century world of YouTube and other digital media.

The nature of marketing in Japan requires additional commentary. Given the extreme complexity and sophistication of marketing in Japan, almost all would-be exporters must hew closely to the regnant Japanese norm about marketing and distribution. This is no less true for popular music than for electronic goods or beauty products. Indigenization is very much the norm, whether in having songs translated into Japanese or producing elaborate packaging, with gifts, for consumers. Japan was about the only OECD country in which "Gangnam Style" failed to become a mega hit (Lie 2013). The truth is that Psy's producers were ready to release "Roppongi Style" – a Japanese adaptation of "Gangnam Style" – when other forces, including the runaway hit of "Gangnam Style" around the world, stymied its launch.

There is a truism that popular music experiences a major innovation every time a new, or revolutionary, technological medium is introduced. In the case of Japan, the last such innovation occurred with CDs and the genesis of J-pop as a distinct genre. From Anzen Chitai to Southern All Stars, from Itsuwa Ayumi to Amuro Namie, numerous creative acts and songs ringed

throughout the Japanese archipelago and well beyond it to across East Asia (Ugaya 2005). Yet it would not be exaggerated to conclude that J-pop has ceased to be an innovative force. J-pop superstars of the past decade, whether Utada Hikaru or Arashi, do not sound all that different from their counterparts a decade or even two decades ago (Makitasupōtsu 2014). In turn, their staid sound and slow rhythm mark them as off the dominant global trends that incorporate hip hop, techno pop, and other influences. It is not just once or twice that young Japanese students were left speechless when I told them that virtually no one in the United States or Europe has heard of Utada or Arashi.

In summary, Japan has become a stationary society that is profoundly involuted. Its cultural conservatism and inward orientation make Japan a mature society, somewhat akin to the conventional western European national imaginaries of themselves. In this context, J-pop has become aesthetically ill-adapted to the U.S.-dominated global pop music trends and norms.

Post-IMF Crisis South Korea

South Korea also experienced a major economic crisis in the 1990s. In the wake of the Asian currency crisis, the South Korean economy was embroiled in a full-fledged financial crisis in 1997. The resulting IMF rescue package generated what in South Korea came to be known as the IMF Crisis. In brief, the myth of continuing economic growth was shattered and for the first time since the late 1960s South Koreans faced mass lay-offs and faced a future clouded with uncertainty (Kirk 2000; Lie 2014).

The modal South Korean response to the IMF Crisis was to intensify its faith and reliance on export-oriented economic growth. Although the developmental state was far from eclipsed, state economic policy was geared to heighten competition and to promote entrepreneurship. The new Kim Dae-jung regime proposed a series of anti-monopolistic and pro-competition legislation. Just as significantly, the state sought to invest heavily in the new digital economy and other potentially leading edges of economic innovation. In short, South Korea became more competitive and even more export oriented after the 1997 IMF Crisis.

South Korean culture, in contrast to Japanese, became more oriented to global and external trends. In part it is the intended consequence of a series of internationalization and globalization policy of successive South Korean regimes (Lie 2016). Conversely to Japan, there is very little sense that South Korea has "arrived"; rather, dissatisfaction with the status quo was manifest and widely aired in the post-IMF Crisis South Korea. One visible upshot is the continuing desire to emigrate abroad, whether for relatively short spell as students or missionaries or for long-term or even permanent diasporic peregrination. Japan, too, had its moments of mass migration but in South Korea it became something of a boom in the 1960s and 1970s when Japanese had ceased to dream of mass migration. Even after political democratization and economic growth, the diasporic desire has hardly been sated in South Korea, fueled in turn by transnational networks of

South Koreans abroad. While young Japanese people are reluctant to venture abroad, their South Korean counterparts strive seemingly ceaselessly to do so.

South Korean manufacturers remain committed to export-oriented industrialization. In part the South Korean market is smaller than that of Japan: fewer people and less disposable income. Yet the maniacal stress on export is a cultural reflex and a hegemonic economic belief, as if to say export or die. In this regard, the export orientation is not a matter just of giant conglomerates such as Samsung and Hyundai but also of entertainment agencies, such as SM Entertainment. Here Kim Dae-jung's anti-monopolistic measures made possible the inception and growth of entrepreneurial firms in the late 1990s (Lie 2014). It is not an accident that the three giants of K-pop – SM, JYP, and YG – were all established in a few years of each other in the 1990s. These entertainment entrepreneurs take advantage of state policy – still powerful, with bountiful incentives – that promote export via subsidies, tax breaks, and other measures.

Marketing and distribution depart from the Japanese norm. As noted, South Korean economic institutions are hardly reified and recalcitrant; the principle of creative destruction is deeply entrenched in policymakers and business people. The advantage of backwardness showed itself in the South Korean embrace of the digital revolution. As I suggested, state policy promoted the cyberspace economy, but the darker side of the South Korean economic legislation is the relatively weak enforcement of copyright protection (befitting an emerging economy, which in most South Koreans' mind it remains). Hence, SM Entertainment and their competitors were some of the first popular-music companies to seek profit not in CD sales but via others means. They aggressively marketed their products using the social media. That is, they were something of pioneers in navigating the brave new world of social media and post-thing economy.

In striking contrast to J-pop, K-pop is a relatively recent phenomenon that grew up with the new technological media of the Internet and the social media. The global reach of K-pop is inextricably intertwined with the global presence of the Internet. Whereas J-pop aficionados will have to search long and hard to gain access to J-pop music videos, K-pop fans are saturated by them. Here, too, South Korean state policy of soft power has sought to facilitate worldwide popularity of South Korean popular culture. In Japan, "cool Japan" remains a grassroots affair and culturally conservative bureaucrats very much remain resistant to what are truly popular about Japanese culture in the world, such as manga and anime.

In summary, the dominant forces of the twenty-first century – whether old, such as the state, or new, such as the Internet – work to accentuate South Korea's export and external orientation. The contrast to Japan is clear and striking.

Conclusion

By considering two popular girls' groups, I have sought to illuminate some of the recent divergences in the culture and political economy of Japan and South Korea. They are trends, however, and hardly inevitable or irreversible. In addition, there are other factors that are salient, such as the regnant gender relations and romantic ideals in the two countries (Cite 2017). It is also worth remarking that there is nothing inherently terrible about Japan as a stationary society, as in a world of environmental constraints and economic stability, it is well-nigh impossible to reproduce the rapid economic growth of the immediate post-World War II decades. Indeed, it may even be possible to see a prototype of a sustainable society of the future in contemporary Japan. The paper is an exercise in cultural and social analysis; it would be remiss to dismiss pop music as just pop music, separated from the serious world of political economy.

Notes

1. Presented at the World Hallyu Association annual meetings, November 2018. This is a revised version of a paper published in Kyushu University's Annual Report, Research Center for Korean Studies, vol.16 (2016).

John Lie is Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley with research and teaching interests in social theory, East Asian society, political economy, race and gender relations, culture, and migration. His recent books include Dream of East Asia *(AAS) and* K-pop *(Berkeley).*

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