

The East-Asianization of Hip Hop Music

“Drop the beat!”

A charismatic rapper swaggering across the stage started rapping in Korean to an instrumental version of “Deep Cover” by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Gasps, “whoas” and general excitement ensued among the judges and other contestants at once. The twenty-three-year-old amateur rapper, who goes by the name, “BeWhy,” was performing on South Korea’s hip hop competition show, “Show Me the Money.” BeWhy went on to become the winner of the show and one of the most popular artists of the Korean music industry in 2016.

About five hundred miles away, Japanese rapper, “KOHH” saw his album, “Dirt” rise to nineteenth on Oricon’s Album Chart, one of the most widely cited music charts in Japan. Meanwhile in Shenzhen, where the 2016 Top Chinese Music Awards took place, famous Chinese hip hop artist Han Geng took home the Best Male Artist award.

The successes of BeWhy, KOHH and Han Geng were not unprecedented. Hip hop is already a highly popular music genre in South Korea, Japan and China. What was special about hip hop’s rise to fame in these places is the nationalization of the genre. Hip hop, traditionally an African American music, has been reshaped to fit each country’s culture and language. These three rappers and other well known artists in the region are examples of nationalized hip hop artists. This does not mean that the popularity of American hip hop— namely hip hop songs and artists from the United States in East Asia is declining. Together with American hip hop, the birth and growth of nationalized hip hop is driving the popularity of the hip hop genre in Korea, Japan and China to new heights. Unfortunately, government censorship of rap songs due to their profanity and reference to taboo subjects is threatening the genre’s future development in East Asia. One of the most important founding ideals of hip hop is the right to exercise freedom of speech, and the Japanese, Chinese and Korean government should preserve, not neglect, this value.

In the late 1970s, the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway displaced 6,000 residents, many of whom were African-Americans. These people had, according to Tricia Rose, “few city resources, fragmented leadership and limited political power.” In this seemingly powerless situation, a group of young African-American teenagers looked for a means to release their anger over their relocation— and hip hop was born. During hip hop’s nascent stage, artists rapped about their struggles as African-American youth and criticized authority figures such as the government and the police.

But in 1989, when MTV debuted, “Yo! MTV Raps,” a hip hop television program, hip hop underwent a drastic transformation. On one hand, this popular show became the first national outlet for rap music and hip hop artists gained visibility in the American mainstream music market as a result. However, many of these rappers began conveying messages different from those of hip hop’s pioneers. For instance, displays of power and wealth became prevalent in many of their music videos. Major record labels and corporations preferred these themes to anti-government, anti-police lyrics because they were less controversial and thus more promotable. While these changes were taking place, hip hop was starting to reach countries in East Asia.

In 1983, breakdancing, a type of street dance often dated to hip hop music, first gained exposure in Japanese mass media through live performances and films. Three years later, Disc Jockeys opened the first hip hop club in Shibuya. According to associate professor of Japanese at Spellman College Xuexin Liu, the socioeconomic struggles of Japanese youth helped sustain and develop Japanese interest in hip hop. They faced high unemployment in the early 1990s due to an economic recession, and lack of communication with their parents, who in those days spent more than 90 percent of their time working. To Japanese youth, hip hop, a mode of free expression, became a means for them to release their frustration and feeling of neglect. For instance, in 1995, Japanese hip hop group King Giddira released a song called, “Shinjitsu no Dangan,” which means in English, “Bullet of Truth.” This song’s lyrics contain the words, when translated, “This year’s survey of col grads employment says that almost a quarter of them have no job, seriously, that makes it nothing more than empty talk.” Many other rappers slammed the Japanese government, education and history.

However, music censorship in Japan has prevented the proliferation of the forthright Japanese rap music. Every music recording is strictly inspected by the Record Industry Association of Japan, which prohibits artists from criticizing and calling out any person or organization. As a result, it has become more difficult for Japanese rappers to voice their thoughts on their country’s political and social climate. During an interview between William Bridges, author of *Traveling Texts and the Work of Afro-Japanese Cultural Production*, and Japanese rapper K Dub Shine, Shine said that wide suppression of controversial lyrics have deterred Japanese artists from even writing about their political views in their songs in the first place.

Although hip hop is still comparatively a new phenomenon in China, the reasons that propelled the genre’s development in the country are similar to those of Japan. Following the Chinese government’s social and economic reforms in 1978, the Chinese government became more receptive to Western culture and ideologies. In hip hop, Chinese people saw a mode of free expression—a means to express their dissatisfaction with the country’s socioeconomic issues such as wealth inequality. In one of his freestyle raps, Wang Li says, “Don’t you know China is only a heaven for rich old men/ You know this world is full of corruption/ Babies die from drinking milk.”

Unfortunately, it is rare to hear such outspoken lyrics in the Chinese mass media. The Chinese Communist Party blacklists artists that rap about controversial themes such as violence and sexuality even if they might not be directly related to the government. In 2015, the Chinese government banned 120 songs, fifty of which were in the hip hop genre, because it “trumpeted obscenity, violence, crime or harmed social morality.” China’s censorship of hip hop songs have not been limited to Chinese songs. In 2006, American rapper Jay Z’s concert in Shanghai was cancelled by the Chinese Ministry of Culture because according to the state-run newspaper China Daily, the government “decided to protect the city’s hip hop fans from nasty lyrics about pimps, guns and drugs.”

In Korea, the expansion of hip hop is largely attributed to the the end of the country’s authoritarian rule in the 1980s as well as the 1988 Seoul Olympics. During this period of time, Korea became more open to Western music styles like hip hop. As the Internet and popular hip

hop clubs in Seoul accelerated the exposure of rap music to Korean youth, many artists began integrating rap into Korean pop. For instance, many songs by Bigbang, one of the most popular and financially successful Korean pop acts, consist of both vocal lines and rap. Many of their songs convey un-hip hop like themes such as love and happiness. For instance, the lyrics, “Fading away like a small dot/ I feel dull as time passes/ Thinking of the old times/ Thinking of you” are included in Bigbang’s hit single, “If You.”

Yet, rap songs in Korea have not been free of government censorship. In 2011, Korean underground rapper MC Meta’s song “Yes Yes Y’all” was banned from major television networks because its Korean lyrics sounded Japanese. Although Japanese culture has always been a sensitive issue to Koreans due to Korea’s long colonial history with Japan, this decision still aroused controversy.

In recent months, the relations among South Korea, Japan and China have progressively deteriorated. Korea’s deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), which China sees as a security threat, has led to the Chinese government’s banning of many Korean pop imports. On the other hand, Korea’s decision to reinstate the comfort women statue— which the Japanese government claimed was against the Japan-South Korea agreement in 2015, soured relations between the two countries. Last but not least, Japan’s greater recognition of Taiwan drew severe criticism from the Chinese government and put Sino-Japanese relations at great risk. In this antagonistic climate, it is especially important for governments to facilitate the development of something that can be enjoyed regardless of people’s nationalities. Just as American hip hop quickly expanded beyond the borders of New York to non-English speaking regions, nationalized hip hops in the three East Asian countries have the potential to be shared and cherished by people from all over the world in the future.