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IASPM's 13th Biennial Conference: a review from the periphery

'Making Music, Making Meaning', Rome, 25–30 July 2005

Hyunjoon Shin (Sungkonghoe University) and
Pil Ho Kim (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Some ten years ago, a group of graduate students in South Korea started reading 'canons' of popular music studies, such as those by Simon Frith, Iain Chambers, Keith Negus, Tony Mitchell, and Roy Shuker, among others. No formal discipline, be it music, communication, sociology or economics, embraced the group with open arms. Its members did not even know of the existence of IASPM until a few years later. Being 'local' without global connection, at the margins of academia in the periphery of Anglo-American cultural/intellectual centres, was an uneasy position to say the least.

A decade later, IASPM's 13th Biennial Conference featured a panel organised by the same group from Korea, which now has its own national association as a new branch of the IASPM. Some of us in the group had gone to the US or the UK for various academic careers, yet our popular music studies remained at the margins of the local for the most part. Therefore, our very first attempt to 'globalise' at the IASPM conference gave us an eerie feeling of becoming those 'Leningrad Cowboys' who went to America.

A self-mockery it is not, for the IASPM chair's message on the Web reads: '[C]an you notice the beads of sweat on my forehead, provoked by the efforts to express properly enough thoughts in a language which would never be ''mine''? Then, can you imagine the way many non-native English speakers feel about their imperfect English while presenting their thoughts at IASPM international conferences?' (Levy 2003).

We dare not speak for other non-Anglophone participants, but it seems that the farther one is away from the West (more specifically, Europe and North America), the higher the language and cultural barriers are. Especially if the person, like one of us, has never stayed in the West long enough to get over them.

But there were encouraging signs, such as the following message from IASPM: 'The coming 2005 conference in Italy promises to be more radical in terms of involving perspectives in popular music studies which were, if not neglected, marginalised because of the dominant anglocentrism'. Hoping to contribute to this effort with our panel, we even sent personal invitations to some of those who had written the aforementioned 'canons' of popular music studies. It was not unlike writing 'fan letters' to famous rock stars with a sort of boyish enthusiasm, since their work inspired us to take up popular music as a serious academic subject.

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Call us ethnocentric or Asia-centric, but for us it was hard not to focus primarily on our own panel, and then other musics from adjacent locales. The Korean panel on Tuesday late afternoon was attended by ten or so, many of whom, we suppose, originated from or have been studying East Asia. Relatively low attendance was not surprising since Korean music has yet to familiarise itself to the Western audiences. Therefore we had to assume the unlikely role of cultural emissaries, representing Korean pop in the world of national musics. It came as an irony to us, since we are often blamed for criticising the Korean 'idol system' of pop star-making despite the nationalistic pride vested in K-pop's recent popularity throughout East and Southeast Asia.

Being called 'traitors to the national culture' at home, and 'proud Asians' (as one of the Western colleagues in our panel joked at us) abroad sums up the contradictory situation we are in. Our intention was to reveal trans-Asian and trans-Pacific dimensions in the past and present forms of Korean pop, which cannot be properly understood in the confines of national popular music. Due to the limited time, however, we had to settle for giving out historical and factual information along with snippets of musical samples. Rich theoretical discussions about post-coloniality and cultural hegemony in Korean (furthermore, Asian) pop were probably wishful thinking on our part given the constraints of time and unfamiliarity of the subject matter to the audiences. We took consolation from the fact that throughout the conference we came to know many stellar colleagues who study Japanese, Chinese (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), Filipino, Indonesian, and other Asian pop music. It may not be wishful thinking anymore to have a genuine, border-crossing Asian pop panel at the next IASPM conference.

Having said that, we would like to make some observations on some other presentations on Asian pop. Shelley Brunt's paper on Japan's 'Red and White Song Contest' was well researched work overall, emphasising the contest's role in shaping Japanese cultural identity, which has been negotiated by the national broadcaster. But the contrasting images of Cyndi Lauper and Tendou Yoshimi that she showed using photographs and audiovisual footage gave us the impression of 'otherness' between the East and the West, although we understood that her viewpoint stood largely *against* the dichotomy between the East and the West. Meanwhile Jeroen de Kloet's characterisation of Chinese hip-hop as 'pollution' is, apart from his original intention, prone to misinterpretation especially if the audiences are not so familiar with the contexts of Chinese society that begot the music.

Our observation may sound like an oversensitive, knee-jerk reaction to the Western perspective. We know that some Western scholars have studied Asian pop and some of them, like Shelley Brunt and Jeroen de Kloet, have been doing much better than the 'owners' of the music. So now we have to say that our psychological states were ambivalent, because pop music researchers in Korea (and East Asia) are usually regarded as the most 'westernised cultural elites' within their own societies. So we are not completely sure that we were not trapped in the dichotomy between the West and the East.

Anyway, our own difficulties of introducing lesser-known music led us to seek out other musics from the periphery, whether they were from Asia or other continents. And the conference had a wonderful abundance of such musics, stretching over the world from Papua New Guinea to Slovenia. So we can agree with the view of other participants that the IASPM conference was really 'international' and not too dominated by Anglo-American topics. For an example, in an unexpected place like Calcutta, India, we discovered a rock movement concurrent with the global trend of

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the 1960–1970s (which also happened in Korea) thanks to Stéphane Dorin's excellent paper. It was regrettable that he was unable to play musical samples due to some technical problems.

Speaking of technical problems, the same computer multimedia technology that brings about a huge improvement in presentation also gives headaches of unreliability. Even though the conference organisers provided top-notch equipment and attentive service, a few glitches were inevitable. For instance, Jose Semblante Buenconsejo had to drop a couple of video clips from his interesting work on 'altered native' music in the Philippines. Perhaps the most telling episode in this regard is that Dave Hesmondhalgh, who gave a talk about 'digitalisation' of the music industry, relied on a low-tech overhead transparency projector instead of high-tech digital LCD.

The conference was organised into five 'streams' that merged into the common theme of making musical meaning: mapping, reading, voicing, visualising, and mediating meaning. For reasons stated above, we followed the mapping stream most of the time. But sometimes diversion to the other streams was more than helpful for broadening our research interests. Paolo Prato's cleverly entitled paper, 'New adventures in lo-fi: ringtones and other directions in portable music' immediately grabbed our attention because, after all, we came from a technological la-la-land inundated with cellular phones, 'ubiquitous' Internet connections, ever-smaller mp3 players, etc.

The panel on 'Censorship' and the 'History and Politics' session reminded us that pop music is still located at the epicentre of acute political conflicts in many regions, Africa in particular. In the case of Tanzania, as shown in Kelly Askew's paper, the music is deeply involved in the life-and-death matter of AIDS policies. According to Christopher Ballantine, South African rap sends out a powerful message of the hopes and disappointments of the post-Apartheid democracy. Disillusionment at democratisation proved to be a common theme of pop music in many countries including our own. The Romanian band Taxi, introduced by Marin Marian-Balasa, offered one of the best political satires in the form of music video.

We have many good things to say about the preparation and organisation of the conference beside the exquisite Italian lunch provided every day (risotto and fruit cocktail were our favourites). It must have been tremendously hard work to sort through the piles of submitted paper abstracts and make coherent sessions out of them. Certainly there is no perfect scheduling that would satisfy everyone. However, had the tentative schedule been announced earlier than it actually was, it would have been much more convenient for people like us to plan ahead a long intercontinental trip to Rome. During the conference, sometimes we had to miss interesting sessions due to overcrowding (e.g. 'Perspectives in Theory' in which Robert Walser and Keith Negus took part), or schedule conflicts ('Music and War' in which Reebee Garofalo took part). If the organisers can predict which sessions/papers are going to be popular ones, it may be wise to put them into 'plenary sessions' that accommodate a large audience on the later days of the conference. Yes, we know – these things are always easier said than done.

The five streams of making musical meaning happen to resemble Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of 'global culture': ethnoscape, ideoscape, technoscape, mediascape, and finanscape (Appadurai 1990). By deliberately focusing on ethnoscapes (mapping) of popular music, we probably missed out much of what went on in terms of ideoscapes (reading/voicing) and media/finanscapes (mediating). But when it comes to globalisation, deterritorialised ideas, capital flows and technology fly by while the people and their culture are still tied to geographic locations. In our

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own session as well as in others, we have found it a difficult task to make under-represented peripheral musics not only heard but also analysed and discussed in depth, to give them a comparable, if not equal, treatment to those from the Anglo-American centres. The IASPM conference was a great opportunity for us to see a vision of solidarity among the scholars who struggle on dual fronts: at the margin of local academia and on the periphery of global popular culture. In Mexico City two years from now, we hope that further expansion of ethnoscapes can puncture holes on the centre-periphery barrier that still stands tall in the realm of pop music research.

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