PART II

The Affective Consumption of K-Pop Idols and Places

Part 2 focuses on the K-pop–driven Second Korean Wave (after 2011) and cases of K-pop–mediated urban place promotion. Like part 1, part 2 explores industrial and urban practices combined: chapter 3 examines the production and consumption of K-pop idols; chapters 4 and 5 discuss cases of place branding associated with K-pop. The chapters are linked by an endeavor to show how K-pop–themed urban place branding harnesses the same image-oriented and consumer-driven mechanisms that characterize the ways K-pop is produced and consumed. K-pop idols are a metacommodity created to sell secondary products, including celebrity merchandise and K-pop places. Through their visual allure and intimacy-building skills, idols forge affective relations with their fans/audiences, prompting the latter to consume products and visit places that feature them. Korean municipalities wish to use this affective power to turn sites associated with idols into memorable experiences for fans. There is no reciprocal production of K-pop and place of the kind discussed in part 1, but municipalities employ the established images of idols to brand their areas, capitalizing on the idols’ seductive power.
to attract K-pop tourists. For K-pop agencies, the ambassador role for municipalities is one of the revenue sources driven by the created idol images.

During my undergraduate course Globalizing East Asian Popular Culture, the students and I have had meaningful discussions about the definition of K-pop. The students’ keen interest in, and in-depth knowledge of, K-pop surprised me, because most of them do not have an East Asian background. This was a situation in which I was actually able to see the broad penetration of K-pop beyond Asia. One of the questions we tackled was, Can K-pop be equated with idol music? For foreign audiences who have encountered Korean music only recently and do not know its past history, K-pop is usually represented by recent idol-focused music—what is usually defined as “strategically produced and commercially tailored music” (Shin and Kim 2013, 256). From the late 1990s, music performed by pop idols began to dominate the popular market in Korea; in the age of the globalization of K-pop, the idol-focused music reigns supreme. As chapter 3 will show, K-pop production is primarily concerned with cultivating desirable images for idols that will assist in selling secondary products, the critical part of revenue streaming. Admiring and worshipping idols is the predominant feature of the consumption of K-pop by both domestic and international fans. Since both production and consumption revolve around idols, in dealing with K-pop, this book will focus more on K-pop idols than music content.

Part 1 highlighted the association between marginal drama producers and marginal regional cities in the production and consumption of television dramas and drama sites. Part 2 shifts the geographical focus to two affluent districts in Seoul: Gangnam and Myeong-dong. Regional cities were peripheralized as a result of the country’s uneven development, so their underdeveloped environments were adopted by television dramas as exotic landscapes. The two powerful districts in Seoul, on the other hand, were beneficiaries of the same uneven distribution of national resources. Chapter 4 discusses how the promotion of Gangnam has been sustained through the suppression of other areas since the 1980s, so that eventually the area built up a rich cultural infrastructure, including a cluster of entertainment agencies. Chapter 5 examines how Myeong-dong has maintained its status as a symbolic place throughout its history, enabling its current reconfiguration as a destination for global tourists.

The privileged status of Gangnam and Myeong-dong, reflected in their economic, cultural, and symbolic prowess, contrasts with regional cities’ eco-
economic stagnancy and low visibility. Both parties, however, have a strong desire to promote themselves, so they engage in the same place marketing practices associated with popular culture. Even so, the different conditions in regional cities, on the one hand, and high-end districts of Seoul, on the other, push them to employ different promotional media. The fiscally weak regional cities resort to inexpensive, one-off sponsorship of drama productions in hopes of achieving a short-term boost; Gangnam and Myeong-dong simply make use the rich cultural and commercial infrastructure already established within their municipal boundaries. Gangnam and Myeong-dong capitalize on the clustering of entertainment agencies and retail stores in their areas, and conveniently promote K-pop images to bring in global K-pop fans. Thanks to the already established abundant cultural and symbolic capital, they have lesser danger to risk the uncertain popularity of a single program. Because Gangnam and Myeong-dong have the status of fantasy places for international fans, where the chances of encountering their adored idols are far higher than elsewhere, then so long as the global hype surrounding K-pop continues, those districts are likely to thrive on K-pop tourism. Nevertheless, they are as speculative as regional cities in simply harnessing K-pop images and capitalizing on fans’ affective attachment to the images in place promotion without significant place marketers’ investment. Despite the disparity in mobilizable resources, both regional cities and districts in Seoul rely on speculative practices in seeking immediate returns without long-term investment.

The data presented in part 2 come from a both virtual and physical ethnography of K-pop fan communities and K-pop places. Although I do not belong to any specific fan clubs, I have accumulated K-pop knowledge through long-term observation of fans’ activities in various online communities such as Bestiz (www.bestiz.net) and DC Inside (www.dcinside.com). These two websites operate on an anonymity-based system and are open and accessible to anybody. Anonymity plays a critical role in enabling the affective consumption of K-pop idols: if it is guaranteed, people do not hesitate to reveal their very private emotions publicly and share them with others. Reading or listening to narratives and discourses relating to people’s affective engagement with K-pop idols helped me to identify not only the consumption practices but also the operational logic of the K-pop industry. Chapter 3 will show how fans emotionally engage with the visual qualities of K-pop idols; chapters 4 and 5 will discuss how such affective commitment by fans is
eventually utilized in place marketing. I collected data relating to international K-pop fans and their consumption patterns by reading numerous postings on Allkpop.com, YouTube, Tumblr, and many other websites. The virtual ethnography method is closely interrelated to my argument: chapter 3 will examine how the very functionality of social media sites—its graphic-oriented nature, virality, and spreadability—interplays with the visually focused operation of K-pop.

The physical ethnography took place in multiple venues. During May through July 2014 and June through July 2016, I visited several K-pop sites in Gangnam, including K-Star Road, the Gangnam Tourism Information Center, SM Artium, the Cube Café, and Klive (which is actually in Dongdaemun). The majority of my field research consisted of observation of fans’ behaviors and on-site interviews with them, inquiring about why they were motivated to consume places associated with K-pop. Thanks to my broad knowledge of K-pop idols, the short on-site interviews with K-pop fans went well. I conducted field research in Myeong-dong in March 2011 and May and June 2014. Staying in Myeong-dong almost every day from early morning to late at night during the fieldwork periods, I observed what was happening on the streets and inside stores among store clerks and customers. My observations were supplemented by casual talks with store managers, assistants, and customers; I sometimes jumped into conversations between customers and store assistants. The on-site interviews contributed more to useful data collection than sedentary interviews detached from the context would have done. The dialogues with informants were mainly about cosmetics, beauty, Korean popular culture, tourism to Korea, retail rents, and Myeong-dong. I also engaged with the landscape of Myeong-dong, analyzing streetscapes and store facades and floor layouts. Archival sources, including existing scholarly works, news articles, magazines, government statistics, and reports by the Korean Tourism Organization complemented the ethnographic data. My collection of information on the subject of Myeong-dong’s history benefited greatly from existing scholarly work, magazines, and news articles. Similar to the ethnography of the Korean drama industry, I cumulated immense knowledge about the K-pop industry from news articles because of the difficulties in actually meeting with entertainment agency operators, particularly those in the big three agencies. Because of the news-buying and sharing traditions, as in part 1, I credit individual newspapers rather than individual reporters for news article sources.