Karaoke Americanism Gangnam Style

K-pop, Wonder Girls, and the Asian Unpopular

Jeroen de Kloet and Jaap Kooijman

The year: Unknown. The project W.G. is deemed a success as human genetics are combined with robotic enhancements. Yubin, Yennie, Sohee, Lim, Sum. Bionic women given the title of Wonder Girls. They are perfectly designed for complete domination. The future is now.


Motown meets K-pop. A promotional photograph of the 2012 TNT Christmas in Washington television special features the show’s two headliners Diana Ross and PSY, both dressed in campy sequined outfits and smiling broadly into the camera. The two stars performed in front of America’s First Family, Barack and Michelle Obama with their two daughters, the latter two visibly most enjoying PSY’s performance of ‘Christmas Gangnam Style’. As lead singer of the Supremes in the 1960s and solo superstar in the 1970s and early 1980s, Diana Ross signifies the traditional dominance of America in global pop culture, currently most explicitly embodied by her ‘successor’ Beyoncé (cf. Cashmore); PSY, in contrast, articulates the appropriation of American pop culture, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging America’s hegemonic presence, albeit for a short moment. That PSY is a one-hit wonder novelty act is significant, as it highlights the difficulty for non-Western pop acts to get accepted as ‘real’ pop music in the Western world.

In global commercial pop culture, Anglo-American pop continues to be perceived as ‘the original’ to be emulated, a perspective that is reinforced by popular global television formats such as Idol, X-Factor, and The Voice. Even though these formats originated outside of the US, they tend to present Anglo-American pop music as the standard to which non-Anglo-American pop music is compared (cf. Bochanty-Aguero; Kooijman). When non-Western pop acts aim to achieve worldwide stardom, they face the challenge of overcoming the comparison to their Anglo-American counterparts, particularly from a Western perspective. For example, in their discussions of the attempt of South Korean pop star Rain (Bī) and his producer Jin-Young Park (Pak Chin-Jŏng, also known as JYP) to become popular in the United States, both Hyunjoon Shin and Eun-Young Jung cite
the negative review of Rain’s sold-out Madison Square Garden concerts in *The New York Times* of 4 February 2006. In the review, Jon Pareles dismisses Rain as ‘sound[ing] like a nostalgia act’ by emphasizing his ‘unoriginality’ in comparison to Anglo-American stars such as Michael Jackson, Justin Timberlake, George Michael, and Usher. Watching Rain perform is ‘like watching old MTV videos dubbed into Korean’, Pareles argues, concluding that ‘by the time [Rain’s producer] Mr. Park has figured out how to imitate the latest English-speaking hit, American pop will have jumped ahead of him’. What stands out in this (rather condescending) review is the notion that K-pop not only deliberately imitates the Anglo-American original but also is lagging behind. Tellingly, the review’s title—‘Korean Superstar Who Smiles and Says, “I’m Lonely”’—does not even identify Rain by name. In *The New Yorker*, John Seabrook uses the same argument of K-pop as imitative and lagging behind, arguing that K-pop acts like SHINee, f(x), TVXQ!, and Girls’ Generation remind him of the 1980s music videos by Madonna, the 1980s New Jack Swing sound of Janet Jackson, and the girl group sound of the 1960s.

While these two white male American music critics explain the unpopularity of K-pop by arguing that K-pop is imitative and lagging behind, Youna Kim explains K-pop’s (cult) popularity among European audiences by suggesting that Western fans perceive K-pop as ‘a futuristic pastiche that sounds like a utopian blending of all contemporary musical genres’ (17). Whether considered unpopular or popular, ‘lagging behind’ or ‘futuristic’, K-pop does not differ from Anglo-American pop in its continual referencing and recycling of earlier pop styles, a practice that Simon Reynolds has called ‘retromania’. The only difference thus seems to be that Western music critics consider such a practice as ‘lagging behind’ when the referencing is done by a non-Anglo-American or non-Western pop act. Although K-pop is an exceptionally popular phenomenon, arguably the most popular part of the Korean Wave (cf. Choi and Maliangkay), the limited appeal of specific K-pop acts for Western audiences, and what we expect to be the one-hit global appeal of PSY, point at the unpopularity of pop-cultural forms from outside the West. Particularly those forms—sounds and images—that cannot be categorized as ‘exotic’ or ‘world music’ tend to be dismissed by Western critics as imitative and lagging behind to explain their unpopularity.

In this chapter, we will first analyze why K-pop remains globally unpopular and explain why we consider the notion of karaoke Americanism productive to help understand global cultural flows and disjunctures. We will then examine Wonder Girls—a pop act that is, like Rain, ‘manufactured’ by
producer Jin-Young Park—as a form of karaoke Americanism, which helps to explain their local and regional popularity. While Wonder Girls, like many K-pop acts, have been very popular in South Korea, China, and Japan, the group, similar to Rain, had only little success in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. The regional appropriation of Wonder Girls, for example by Wonder Gay in Thailand, attests to the political potential of karaoke Americanism. Yet, our final example of the song ‘Like Money’ by Wonder Girls—with which we opened this chapter—illustrates the continuous power of the United States when it comes to the production of popular culture, rendering forms that are produced outside the West as perpetually unpopular. In the final part, we pan away from such a gloomy conclusion by hinting at recent developments in terms of geopolitics, fragmentation, and the digitization of culture that may help to change this global geo-cultural predicament.

K-pop as Karaoke Americanism

Since the late 1990s, the South Korean state has strongly supported its creative industries, resulting in what has been termed ‘the Korean Wave’ (Hallyu). Initially propelled by popular television drama, the Korean Wave soon included pop music, so-called K-pop (cf. Chua and Iwabuchi; Kim). The Korean Wave challenged the hegemony of Japanese pop culture in the region and constituted an important cultural force, termed soft power by Nye that lasts till today (cf. Nye and Kim). In this way, popular culture rather than neo-Confucianism connects cultures in East and South-East Asia (cf, Chua), of which the Korean Wave serves as a prime example. The dialectics between cultural proximity (a shared sense of ‘Asianness’) and cultural difference—as reflected, for example, in the different seasons (which, for example, do not exist in Singapore) or the Korean language—help to explain the regional appeal of Korean pop culture. Yet, apart from cultural factors, governmental and corporate support remains crucial to the success of the Korean Wave. As Doobo Shim has pointed out, the state’s creative policies were initially developed to protect the cultural industries against ‘threats of foreign cultural domination’ (30). In terms of political economy, a localist and protective rationale underpinned the Korean Wave. That this would lead to regional success beyond national borders was unintended and took the Korean government by surprise. As Shim argues, ‘the vitality of East Asian popular culture is growing’, with Japan, Thailand, and South Korea inspiring each other instead
of ‘refer[ing] to the West for melodramatic imagination as well as for modernization’ (31).

For many K-pop acts, however, Anglo-American pop culture continues to function as one of its main inspirations. Moreover, although Asia remains the prime market for K-pop, becoming popular among Western audiences and conquering the Western market is an aim—and more and more a possibility—for many K-pop acts (cf. Glynn and Kim 2). As Eun-Young Jung has pointed out, ‘this drive for “commercial success” in the West, and particularly in the US, is driven not purely by financial aspirations, but by the postcolonial desire for recognition and acceptance by the nation at the absolute peak among world entertainment economies’ (109). In other words, as Anglo-American pop culture continues to be perceived as ‘the original’, being popular in the West not only facilitates economic success but additionally signifies the validation that K-pop is ‘real’ pop music.

The global success of PSY clearly outperformed all previous Korean pop acts, including Rain, G-Dragon, and Wonder Girls. His celebrity status owes a great deal to the ‘riding an invisible horse’ dance style that was performed in the humorous video for the song. One may wonder whether the humor of PSY is inclusive (laughing with him) or exclusive (laughing at him), although many scholars have argued for the latter, observing in the music video and his image a gesturing towards orientalist stereotypes of Asian men as being funny, unattractive, and nerdy (cf. Glynn and Kim 3). Such critique underlines our point that cultural counterflows remain enmeshed in global cultural hierarchies. In their conclusion, Glynn and Kim observe that, within Britain, PSY ‘failed as an entrée to Korean culture because it was quarantined as a meme and/or a novelty record’ (13). Furthermore, the song’s initial criticism of the Gangnam lifestyle (Gangnam is a posh neighborhood in Seoul) got completely lost in translation, and instead was repackaged as a mere profitable celebration of the Gangnam lifestyle.

Hyunjoon Shih’s analysis of the globalizing aspiration of K-pop, in his analysis of Rain, helps to further question the global appeal of K-pop. In his article, Shih wonders: ‘What happens, and what will happen, when popular culture from the non-center (periphery) tries to intrude into the “center”?’ (508) He analyzes the Korean in-house system in which production, management, and all other functions for the making of a star are being integrated. Shih explains how, after the crisis of the record industry, Rain is typical of a new star persona, one that is not only a teenage idol and marketing artifact, ‘the new type of star had to be seen as more “real” or
“authentic” in his or her own way’ (511-12). One important site for Rain to construct his authenticity was his muscular body, reflective also of hard work, an important value in Asian pop culture (cf. Chow and de Kloet), in combination with his angelic face, a combination that has been hailed as a new Asian masculinity (cf. Sun).

This development of an Asian masculinity, one that is far more sexy than that of PSY, underlines the importance of sex and gender in the making of a star. Given a generally more prudent attitude towards sexuality in Asia, this makes Shih observe that for K-pop stars, ‘their images were more “American (Western)” and less “Asian (Korean)”’, to such an extent that ‘the border-crossing appeal of Rain at the regional level came from his “Asian” element, which is at best secondary’ (Shih 514). When going global, however, the importance of Asianness returned with a vengeance. In the West, Rain will be perceived an artist with an Asian background, to be measured against the hegemonic standards of global (read Western) pop: ‘ASIanness will only work if the artist does not care that his or her music is to be pigeonholed as only “world music” searching for a niche market. But that is another story, which is different from the world of pop music’ (Shih 516). Here, we would like to add that, indeed, Rain will be measured against the standards of global pop, but this measurement is bound to be filled with prejudice as artists from the non-West are de facto perceived to lag behind. As Jeroen de Kloet explains elsewhere: ‘Creativities that emerge outside the “West”, constantly carry the burden of geopolitical representation as authenticating proof. Whereas “the West” can claim to make universal rock music, in China, this has to be Chinese rock music. Idem ditto for contemporary art, literature or cinema’ (7). The same argument can be made about K-pop.

The erasure of Koreanness in K-pop acts like Rain and Wonder Girls can be seen as clear examples of ‘odorless culture’, using the concept by Koichi Iwabuchi. Their alleged lack of cultural characteristics aims to facilitate a smooth travel across national and cultural boundaries. In a similar vein, Kim argues that K-pop travels well globally, ‘precisely because there is not very much Korean in K-pop that it can become such an easy sell to consumers abroad’ (17). However, the lack of Koreanness in K-pop may also feed the Western perspective of K-pop as a blank imitation, lagging behind and lacking any local, exotic flavor. K-pop will, especially at a global level, continue to be haunted by Koreanness, a haunting that is inevitable given the bodily appearance of the performers. The odorless products Iwabuchi referred to are all products that do not involve ‘real’ people: they are consumer technologies, computer/video games, and comics and
cartoons—all animate objects that are more easily to be stripped off their Japaneseness than more ‘organic’ forms of popular culture. In the case of K-pop, the emphasis on the way K-pop stars are manufactured, thus artificial constructions, helps to perceive them as ‘odorless’ and ‘inauthentic’, while at the same time rendering the Anglo-American ‘original’ as ‘authentic’.

As Shih explains in his analysis of the regional and (mostly failed) global stardom of Rain, K-pop is just one new component of an already existing Inter-Asia crisscross flow of pop culture. Chua Beng Huat analyzed this emerging East and South East Asian cultural sphere and the related distribution of labor that turns some sites (e.g. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) into cultural producer and others (e.g. China and Singapore) into cultural consumers. ‘The group of Korean cultural industries as its agencies, is just a new player in this complex and multi-directional traffic’ (Shih 507). Can the perpetually unpopular—Asian pop music is notoriously absent at a global level, with only a few exceptions that are often instrumental (such as ELO) or merely comical (such as PSY)—enter the domain of the popular? As we have argued above, the chances are small, as the denial of coevalness continues to haunt possible counterflows of cultural globalization. Non-popular, non-Western pop products are generally perceived as mere copies, based on originals that are already outdated. Only the sounds, images, and styles that are geographically marked, and thus come to represent the specific sound of a region, may cross the heavily policed boundaries of Anglo-American pop culture.

To avoid perceiving K-pop—and Wonder Girls in particular—as merely imitations of an Anglo-American original, we will use the concept of karaoke Americanism—a term we borrow from film scholar Thomas Elsaesser, who defines it as ‘that doubly coded space of identity as overlap and deferral, as compliment and camouflage’ (317). Karaoke, not as actual practice but as theoretical concept, is quite productive for two reasons: first, karaoke is an active form of cultural appropriation, which enables to move beyond the question whether or not the imitation is a successful imitation of the original (as white male American music critics Jon Pareles and John Seabrook assessed K-pop), as the focus shifts to how the copy transforms the original in the new context; second, karaoke openly and consciously uses the generic character of the original, thereby recognizing rather than mystifying its construction. It is important to note that our aim is not to ‘prove’ whether or not a pop-cultural object is a form of karaoke Americanism, but rather to make the cultural appropriation visible by perceiving the object as such (cf. Kooijman).
MTV Wonder Girls

The girl group Wonder Girls was launched in 2007 with the South Korean reality television show *MTV Wonder Girls*, broadcast by MTV Korea, part of the international yet US-based media conglomerate Viacom. Throughout its four seasons, the show provided viewers with a backstage glimpse of how pop stars are created, thereby not only following the group members on their journey to stardom, but also functioning as a tool to promote the group to its local and regional audience. In this way, the show both reveals and is part of the construction of stardom. From the start, Wonder Girls have been explicitly shaped by American pop culture. *MTV Wonder Girls* is a Korean adaptation of the American MTV show *Making The Band*, and, throughout the show, Wonder Girls perform songs by American artists, such as Janet Jackson and the American girl groups Destiny's Child and the Pussycat Dolls. In the show’s third season, Wonder Girls travel to New York City to film the music video to their song ‘Wishing On A Star’, thereby literally occupying the space of ‘real’ Anglo-American pop stardom. Also the group name is an explicit reference to American pop culture, referring to *Dreamgirls*, the 2006 movie starring Beyoncé, which in turn is based on the 1981 Broadway that presented a fictional account of the 1960s girl group Diana Ross and the Supremes. The connection is made explicit by the Wonder Girls, as the song ‘We Are The Dreamgirls’ from the musical is often included in their live performances. Moreover, the music video of their biggest hit single ‘Nobody’ also refers to *Dreamgirls*.

‘Nobody’ is a ‘typical idol K-pop, bubblegum pop song’ (Jung 110), which was released first in Korea in 2008 and became a major hit in South-East Asia. In addition to the version sung in South Korean, ‘Nobody’ was also released in American English (2009), Chinese (2010), and Japanese (2012). In each version, the choruses are sung in English, with the verses in the respective language. The *Dreamgirls*-inspired music video was used for the first three versions (resulting in some lip-synching inconsistencies), while a new music video was shot for the Japanese version. In *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, Andrew Goodwin makes a distinction between the visual narrative—the fictional short story told by the music video—and the metanarrative of stardom of its performer. He uses Madonna’s ‘Material Girl’ as an example of a music video in which the performer’s star text is most significant, as the main narrative function of the music video was ‘shifting Madonna’s image from that of disco-bimbo to “authentic” star’ (100). The music video of ‘Nobody’ has a similar function, as the fictional story of their discovery is used to present Wonder Girls as global ‘authentic’ pop stars to
both Asian and Western audiences. The ‘Nobody’ music video was used as a main promotional tool to introduce the group in the America in 2009, when Wonder Girls were the opening act on the US tour of the popular American boy band the Jonas Brothers. Not surprisingly then, ‘Nobody’ became their biggest hit single in the US.

After the non-diegetic text ‘JYP Entertainment: Leader in entertainment’, the music video opens with a performance of ‘Honey’ by JYP (the artist name of producer Jin-Young Park, who had a minor hit with the song in 1998) with the five Wonder Girls in white dresses performing the backing vocals. The setting is the 1960s and clearly inspired by Dreamgirls, with JYP in the role of soul singer Jimmy Early (played by Eddie Murphy in the movie) and the Wonder Girls as the Dreamettes. The performance by ‘Honey’ is followed by a flash forward to rehearsal time, during which two producers approach JYP with the sheet music of a ‘hot new song’ named ‘Nobody’, which JYP tries to sing in a high-pitched voice, with Wonder Girls dancing in the background. This backstory establishes JYP as the song’s lead vocalist, and Wonder Girls as the backing vocals, while also illustrating the production of pop culture: producers in black suits bring the music score to the vocalist, who becomes more like a laborer, the one performing the song, without any involvement in its creation. Moreover, the backstage rehearsal of the song implicates the audience in the production of pop culture and helps to authenticate the song. The leading role of the producers in the creation of the song is rendered even more self-reflexive given that JYP is the ‘real’ manager of Wonder Girls.

The subsequent flash forward shows Wonder Girls on stage, dressed in gold, ready to perform, intercut with images of JYP stuck in the toilet, as there is no toilet paper left. While JYP fails to come to the stage, Wonder Girls pick up their microphones and move them front stage to perform the song instead. They become instant stars. Here the music video’s visual narrative closely resembles the story of Dreamgirls, as similar to the Dreamettes who become the Dreams when they move from the background to the front of the stage, Wonder Girls become the main stars of the show.

In reinterpreting the discovery of the ‘Dreamgirls’, the music video evokes the success myth of stardom, which, as Richard Dyer has argued, mystifies the construction of the star image by emphasizing the accidental discovery of the talented star—stars are born, not made (cf. Dyer 42). The conventional narrative of the soda-fountain girl becoming the hottest Hollywood film star, or, in this case, the background singers becoming stars because the main act is stuck in the toilet, adds to the myth of stardom. The backstory takes up the first two minutes of the music video, followed by another two minutes of the 1960s Wonder Girls performing ‘Nobody’ on stage. The
performance is interrupted by a standing ovation of the diegetic audience, leading into a montage sequence portraying the group’s rise to success, still set in the fictional 1960s. Flashbulbs of paparazzi, black-and-white television performances, and several magazine covers featuring Wonder Girls, including the ‘Lilloard starlist’ (an obvious reference to *Billboard* magazine and its Hot 100 chart) on which they rank number 1 emphasize the fame of the group. However, the montage sequence also functions to move Wonder Girls from the fictional 1960s to the actual present. As Wonder Girls become more and more successful, ‘they wear skimpier and flashier dresses’ (Jung 111), which not only makes them more ‘sexy’ but also more contemporary. The final performance shown in the music video is set in the present, emphasized by Wonder Girls rapping the lyrics.

Instead of just imitating Anglo-American pop culture, with the ‘Nobody’ music video, Wonder Girls mimic the story of *Dreamgirls*, and in extension the traditional narrative of the success myth of a pop music meritocracy that is rooted in the American Dream (cf. Dyer 42). In this way, the imitation becomes explicit and deliberate, with a ‘light comical tone [that] fits well with Wonder Girls’ bubblegum pop style and their playful girlish image’ (Jung 111). More importantly, the overt appropriation of conventional Anglo-American stardom not only shows how stardom is a construction, but also places the Anglo-American ‘original’ in the past, the fictional 1960s, enabling Wonder Girls to emerge as a contemporary pop act, rather than an imitation that is lagging behind. The 2012 Japanese version of the ‘Nobody’ music video takes the Wonder Girls metanarrative further by presenting them as established superstars, no longer an imitation but a full-fledged and contemporary—thus ‘real’—pop act.

**Thai Wonder Gay**

The processes of cultural appropriation, as we have discussed with Wonder Girls, do not stop there but instead inspire subsequent rhizomic flows towards other parts of Asia. In other words, what started as an example of karaoke Americanism in South Korea is multiplying itself towards other localities in east and South-East Asia. Rather than referring to this as cases of karaoke Koreanism, a term we consider not appropriate given the continuous strong presence of Americanness as well as the ‘odorlessness’ of the generic conventions appropriated in these products, it may make more sense to see karaoke Americanism as a process that bleeds on, that does not involve two localities, but instead many more, and in this
bleeding, new appropriations occur, producing new and different meanings. These further appropriations instigate, as usual, debates over copyright, for example, entertainers in China, Thailand and Cambodia are accused by the management JYP Entertainment of ‘recklessly copying’ the Wonder Girls’ songs, dances, and even costumes. Still, more interesting than such debates over rights are the actual cultural appropriations taking place. Here we like to zoom in on one particular case, Wonder Gay in Thailand, for which we draw from an analysis by Dredge Byung’chu Käng.

In a video that became an instant hit on YouTube, five boys mimic the Wonder Girls’ ‘Nobody’ music video. Naming themselves Wonder Gay (a name in itself already charged with sexual politics), they perform in green school uniforms with black shorts, making gayish movements around a flagpole. Both the school uniform and the flagpole are signifiers for the Thai nation state, charging the music video with a strong political meaning. The music video consequently caused heated debates in Thailand, questioning whether or not Wonder Gay was ‘inappropriately representing Thai-ness’ as well as causing concern about the group’s popularity ‘encourage[ing] other boys to become effeminate/homosexual like them’—a topic which is particularly sensitive in Thailand considering the country’s global image of being ‘too gay’. As Käng concludes, the debate about Wonder Gay ‘exemplifies the limited acceptability of male effeminacy in popular Thai discourse and how Thai national identity is articulated through discourses of gender and sexuality’ (178–79).

Even though the YouTube music video receives a good rating (and Wonder Gay quickly gained popularity, even being contracted by a record label), Käng shows how, in the end, the negative framing predominates. Wonder Gay ‘become a source of national shame’ as they are perceived as reaffirming global stereotypes about Thailand as a gay country and lacking in true masculinity, and as such ‘come to represent a nation that is already overly queered, and one that can only mimic others without producing anything original (Käng 181). The ‘Nobody’ music video thus not only became another site for the policing of Thai masculinity but also triggered anxiety over losing Thainess due to uncritical copying, echoing wider debates on the loss of authenticity because of intensified cultural globalization.

Here, then, we see the politics of karaoke Americanism at work. In their appropriation of the Wonder Girls’ ‘Nobody’ song and music video, Wonder Gay present a slippage of meaning. The song remains the same, but not quite, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha. In this slippage of meaning we can locate the politics of the song: it queers a country, stirs up public debate, and challenges both the heteronormative framing of the nation and its related claims on
Thainess. Karaoke is doing just that: it is copying with a twist, it allows for slippages of meaning that hold the potential for a renewed politics, a politics that was not that much at play in the original reception of the song. But, as Käng observes, these politics in the end resulted in a growing critique on the music video, suggesting that the securing of heteronormativity in the end prevailed, as did the critique on imitation and copying. Yet, Wonder Gay also speaks back to the ‘original’, re-infecting it with a sense of queerness as well. After all, after seeing Wonder Gay, Wonder Girls are also queered. As such, cultural karaoke inspires us to focus our attention not only on cultural appropriations and slippages of meaning that take place in processes of cultural globalization, but also vice versa, it may help us to rethink the original itself.

Translate to English

In 2012, Wonder Girls released the music video ‘Like Money’, featuring the African-American R&B singer Akon. The song was part of the television movie The Wonder Girls, made for the US American TeenNick channel, like MTV owned by Viacom. The movie, which also starred producer JYP as ‘himself’, tells the story of how the ‘international pop sensation [Wonder Girls] are coming to America to make it big’. The opening of the video is telling for their global aspirations. A screen flickers, and in Korean 전송시작 (jeonsongsijag) appears, after which a robotic voice commands ‘Translate. Translate to English’. Then, the translation appears on the screen: ‘Transmission Begin’. What this opening suggests is that in order to make it globally, a translation into the lingua franca of global pop, English, is pivotal. As such, the opening reads as a surrender to the hegemony of Anglo-American pop. The robot as well as the technologized visuals gesture towards a techno-orientalism, a conventional trope in which East Asia is constructed as the technological other of the West (cf. Morley and Robins). The robot voice continues by speaking the words with which we opened this chapter, ending with: ‘[Wonder Girls] are perfectly designed. Perfectly designed for complete domination. The future is now’.

Meanwhile, the music video shows x-rays of the spines of each of the Wonder Girls, overseen by a Frankenstein doctor (played by producer Jin-Young Park). When they are introduced one by one, they appear as robot-like Korean girls, and are turned around as if they are transported from or towards another dimension. Here, the laboratory that produces pop stars is not even taken as a metaphor but presented as the real thing.
The manufacturing of the pop star aims at complete domination, the future is now, and the future comes from Korea. Only not quite, as the texts are spoken and sung in English, and the African-American singer Akon is inserted as if to further Americanize the song. Who dominates who in this music video, or better, in this manufactured commodity? The song’s title is ambivalent: are Wonder Girls a purely commercial product, and thus like money, or do they like money themselves? Again, like ‘Nobody’ the music video is highly self-reflexive, literally showing the production of stardom, this time not by accidental discovery conform to the star myth, but by the forces of genetic and robotic technology.

Wonder Girls may be designed for complete domination, but in the end, they fail to dominate, again raising the question of who dominates who. As Eun-Young Jung argues, ‘Wonder Girls’ “Like Money” is mostly an American team production—reflecting the American racial and sexual views on Asian women and the Korean (at least JYP’s) desire to be accepted by the mainstream US pop market even if they have to greatly compromise themselves to be racially, sexually, and musically acceptable’ (112). Moreover, as we have argued in this chapter, despite their attempts to become ‘American’, to produce an odorless image and sound, Wonder Girls continue to be haunted by Koreanness. The politics of karaoke Americanism may play out more interestingly both nationally, in South Korea, and regionally, in East and South-East Asia, as the case of Wonder Gay has illustrated, but when it comes to the desire to enter the US-based center of global pop the cards are quite differently played out. Then and there, Wonder Girls are bound to be framed as lagging behind, as being pop, but not quite, as becomes clear in some comments about ‘Like Money’ on YouTube:

Seriously, why?! take K-pop, add an American rapper and take away all the Korean and there’s no way to differentiate it from all that Mainstream shit that comes out nowadays. I don’t want this to be considered part of the K-pop scene... I think it’s embarrassing...
I’m glad for their American debut though... at least they made it this far...
(AliceWWND)

Honestly, whoever chose the concept for this debut was insane; who in their right mind would use robots and technology as a concept for a music video in America, lol. Let alone the fact that the girls look so weird with those hairstyles, outfits and make-up, Be My Baby would’ve been a better debut to be honest. Besides, Akon sings/raps like 50% of the song, so... (JessicaSadlibs)
The first quote puts the group back in their Korean cage, claiming that Wonder Girls have lost it as they betray their cultural background, whereas the second quote is illustrative of the assertion that they in any case lag behind and need the input of an American star to make it work. And it did not really work, in the end. Karaoke Americanism may thus help us to understand and indeed appreciate the multiple cultural translations and appropriations that are happening between Anglo-American pop culture and its countless cultural ‘others’ around the globe. It sets in motion subsequent cultural translations that hold the potential to ignite political debate and controversy. But when it comes to speak back to that imagined origin, the United States, we are confronted with mere silence, in the end, global hegemonic fault lines in the production of culture remain in place, positioning time and again the West as the best, only to be followed by the rest.

Final Notes on the Asian Unpopular

At this moment, K-pop acts such as Wonder Girls find themselves positioned in between the two poles embodied by Diana Ross and PSY, as presented at the beginning of this chapter, as they are deemed to be either an outdated copy of an American original (the girl group image represented by Ross and Beyoncé) or an exotic, Korean novelty act. However, at the end of the day, the new sounds of K-pop, these original copies, these absolute fabrications, are not likely to become popular beyond their cultural comfort zone. While Wonder Girls sing ‘I want nobody nobody but you’, we can imagine their American counterparts singing back, ‘We want nobody nobody but us’. After all, despite decades of intense globalization and significant geopolitical shifts, we are bound to conclude that Anglo-American pop culture remains hegemonic on the global scale. When taking the US as the yardstick of success, the rest, and especially the non-West, remains unpopular, with the exception of a few one hit wonders like PSY that make us dance Gangnam Style.

But this might well be too gloomy a conclusion. We would like to close this chapter with three brief observations that may open up avenues for future research. First, as Jeroen de Kloet’s research into Chinese popular culture suggests, a significant change has taken place over the past two decades. Whereas Chinese rock bands during the 1990s were still very much engaged with making rock with Chinese characteristics, involving articulations of ancient as well as communist China, today it seems they
care much less. They sing in English, adopt a clearly cosmopolitan style, and
d parody the predicament that they will always be seen as copycats. The ‘rise
of Asia’ comes with an increased dose of cultural self-confidence. Today,
Asian artists seem to care less about what others think of them, nor are they
so much concerned with making it in the West, or more precisely, in the
United States. Their primary market is the local and the regional market.
To reach that market, creative practices of karaoke Americanism, as we
have analyzed in this chapter, continue to be a productive aesthetics tactic.

Second, in a context of an increased fragmentation of cultural production
and consumption, numerous niche cultures proliferate globally, including,
for example, around Japanese anime culture, around the Japanese musical
genre of Visual Kei, around Chinese art house movies, and around K-pop.
These subcultures may not be massively popular, but they do result in
vibrant cultural practices, Facebook pages have emerged globally where
K-pop fans gather, just as German Visual Kei bands attract substantial
attention. Such subcultural, rather than mainstream popular, counterflows
may indicate a slow and gradual redrawing of cultural hegemonies, in which
the popular and the West do not conflate as strong anymore as they do now.

Third, Japanese hologram star Hatsune Miku has performed in Los Ange-
les as well as Amsterdam, aside from her fan base in East Asia. The star does
not exist; she is just a visual illusion projected on stage, together with a live
band. Through specific software applications, audiences have co-written
her songs that she now plays. The star as a personal being is not needed
any more; what matters is the audience that co-produces the star, together
with cloud technologies developed by the cultural industries. While we do
want to steer away from either a technological utopianism or determinism
here, what Hatsune Miku does tell us is how new technologies may open up
possibilities for a global participation in the making and branding of a star
and a star product. This alludes to the democratic potential Walter Benjamin
already traced in the mechanical reproduction of culture, a potential that
may well be globalized in the case of digital reproduction. Hatsune Miku
illustrates that audiences may in the near future play a more decisive role
in what constitutes the popular, and in this process, the location of the
audience, or that of the star, may become less important, thus also allowing
for a redrawing of global geocultural boundaries.

Note

1. All taken from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quE6Cq4Q2bs
Works Cited


