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Gangnam Eth(n)ic: The Transnational Politics of YouTube Reperformances

Ali Na

"Mom, have you heard of Gangnam Style?"

"No. What is this Gangnam Style?"

"Here, watch it. It's the most viewed video in YouTube history."

"Oh, Gangnam Style. Yes, this is very popular in Korea. They show it on the TV."

"Yeah, but mom, it's popular everywhere."

"Ooh I know him. That one is a deejay in Korea."

Posted to YouTube on July 15, 2012, the music video "Gangnam Style"¹ by Korean pop (K-pop) artist, PSY, swept the world with its catchy melody, infectious rhythm, odd juxtaposition of images, and signature cheesy dance moves. The video was the first to reach one billion views and remained the most watched YouTube video in history until July 10, 2017. At nearly 3 billion views, it has surpassed former rivals for the number one viewing spot time and time again. "Gangnam Style's" recent dethroning came first by the music video "See You Again" by Wiz Khalifa featuring Charlie Puth. "See You Again" only maintained its spot for a few weeks, being passed by Luis Fonsi's "Despacito" featuring Daddy Yankee. The two usurpers hold a mild lead over "Gangnam Style," which held steady for years. This popularity deserves closer analysis. Even if every one of Korea's roughly 49 million citizens² (U.S. Department of State 2012) and the entirety of the Korean Diaspora watched the video, the sheer volume of traffic attributes this video's success to an international following. This is particularly interesting given the language divide. "Despacito" is in Spanish; however it is notable that Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the world, a high contrast to Korean. Many international

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¹ Watch: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0>

² US Department of State figures as of July 2011.

sensations have reached fame; however, it has predominantly been when the language of use is English or predominantly English with mild use of the non-English language. Contrastingly, “Gangnam Style” is predominantly in Korean with a few moments of loan words, used in Korean but originating in English (e.g. “style”) and one English phrase: “Hey sexy lady.” While incredibly popular amongst American viewers, demonstrated by countless uploads by American fans and Psy’s guest appearances on the Ellen DeGeneres Show, the American Music Awards, and other American programming, the video’s success is undoubtedly tied to its Asian (geographically and ethnic Diaspora) popularity. In part, this support is from Korean American youth, who tap into K-Pop and Korean media as a way of cultural belonging in diaspora (Park 2008). Notably, Psy’s popularity has struck a chord amongst Asian countries, in spite of linguistic and cultural divides. This essay focuses on this relation in the interAsia context as well as the U.S. reception of “Gangnam Style.” I argue that “Gangnam Style” on YouTube participates in an inherently political position through content, form, and reception. Psy is a force for inviting political performance response through the obliquely political content of his video as performed by his specific body marked through his ethnicity, gender, and shape. Within the video, Psy enacts a critical position that mobilizes mixed cultural influence towards mocking affluence. This content is thus mobilized in the video sharing but also in reperformances of the video. I examine three such performances that engage in forms of critique and which point to the political potential of digital media forms like YouTube.

Gangnam Style

It is important to frame YouTube as the international and yet U.S.-influenced medium by which Psy’s music video is consumed. “Gangnam Style” contradictorily enacts a specialized cultural viewership and manages a pervasive popularity. This quandary is at the heart of its political and popular nature in that it manages broad appeal and critique through humor. The video revolves around scenes in which Psy, upon first glance, appears to be doing something classy, underscored by his attire; however, as the screen opens up, it reveals that he is not in a high-class situation. For example, he lounges on what appears to be a luxury beach, but as the screen expands, he is revealed to be merely sitting near a playground sandbox. In another scene, he appears to be sitting in his best on a throne, but the zoom out is a shot of him sitting on a public toilet. In yet another, he appears to be in a private indoor swimming pool, which turns out to be a public bathhouse. Each scene depicts the general flavor of the video – look classy, be cheesy. Psy’s visual culture circulates as an absurd picture of class. Mocking the opulent behaviors of not only those who live and party in the Gangnam district, but also those who rack up debt to be perceived similarly to

the wealthy elite, this video pushes the absurd to its popular limits. The chorus line is “oppa Gangnam style,” meaning big brother is Gangnam style. Big brother in this sense refers to the familial terms used in Korean culture to indicate age/sex relation. Oppa is a term used predominantly by women to refer to men who are older than them but near in age. Gangnam is an affluent neighborhood in Seoul, Korea. Thus, to say that big brother is Gangnam style is to target a particular audience of somewhat younger women and to signal a type of affluent style. The Gangnam District has been compared to the United States area of Beverly Hills, but perhaps given Korea’s rapid rise to economic expansion in the last two to three decades, the comparison misses something about the swift upward mobility of many Koreans that has made craving for opulent wealth in areas such as Gangnam seemingly attainable.

The video in part relies on the viewer’s familiarity with Korean culture and language to grasp its meaning but also targets a particular (American) out-group as audience by deploying Western hip-hop imagery. This double move pushes Gangnam style into a particular niche group of understanding despite its mass appeal. The video requires both language competency and contemporary cultural competency in Korean, but it is also linked to a particular sense of being in the know of American iconic images and trends. In order to understand this double effect, I turn to Rey Chow’s analysis of Hong Kong Cartoonist Larry Feign to elaborate the implications of cultural mockery.

Building on one of Feign’s cartoons pictured above, Chow argues that Feign’s political sympathies are difficult to grasp outside of a double knowing:

This cartoon features the expression ‘Ying man’ (English). Citing Feign’s English text, which reads ‘English: once the living language of Shakespeare; now being bludgeoned to death by Japanese garment manufacturers,’ one critic’s argument was that such a derisive description at the expense of Asians could only have come from a *gwailo*, who (as is often the case in a place such as Hong Kong) is lamenting the destruction of a noble European language at the hands of yellow savages (Chow 2002, 90).

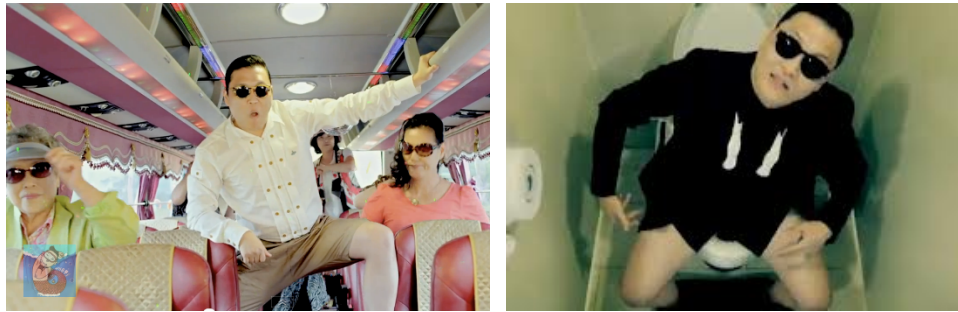
Chow elucidates here how a critic was scandalized by Feign’s work as praising the West and demonizing the East. However, as Chow points out, this Western critic who attempted to decry Feign’s work was unaware of the double move at play in the comic. She elaborates that the critic was at some level unwilling or unable to take in the images of mutual bewilderment in the cartoon, along with the Chinese “character” on the “middle-aged Westerner with a pot belly” who dons a t-shirt with a meaningless compilation of strokes assembled to represent a Chinese character (91). It is through understanding this double move that the humor of the cartoon is grasped (91). Chow indicates that the cartoon is intended for Hong Kong peoples who are often bilingual in Chinese (Cantonese) and English. The middle ground of humor in this comic is derived from mutual cultural misunderstanding and is framed by two perspectives that make

themselves mutually exclusive – the East/West dichotomy. From the perspective of the West (the side that understands only the English text without considering or being able to interpret the drawing) English is being made a mockery of by the East. From the East (the view point of only interpreting the Chinese), the cartoon reads as a scene in which Ying Man (English) is embodied in an overweight white man who is unable to understand Chinese and has made a mockery of it. Chow's analysis on print media in terms of form are apt for an examination of "Gangnam Style." Importantly, the medium of YouTube creates a mass proliferation that recasts audience in cycles of out-of-context repetition.

In the case of Psy, it is not so much bilingualism that is at play; the part of the song that is in English would be largely understood by most in Korea or the Korean speaking Diaspora. Instead, it is a biculturalism that is enacted. In reading "Gangnam Style" one needs to know the Korean language and also to be familiar with contemporary traits of Korean popular culture. For instance, the language barrier would prevent one from translating the lyrics that state he drinks coffee in one shot, whereas the contemporary cultural barrier would prevent one from knowing that the expensive cost of coffee in Seoul, especially the Gangnam area, would make it something to savor or linger on. To drink it in one shot is to mock the connection between coffee and affluence in Seoul, as Psy's lack of appreciation for the coffee's flavor exposes the coffee's role as nothing more than indicating cultural capital. Further, references are made to contemporary elements of Korean culture, particularly by way of featuring cameos of Korean celebrities. First, the move of celebrity cameo is common in K-pop, and it is further expected in Korean culture in a fashion that is distinct from the American/Hollywood cameo. Second, the need to be in the know figures each of the strangest elements of the cameo effect. Who is that little virtuoso dancing in front of Psy at the playground? Hwang Min Woo from *Korea's Got Talent*. Who is that woman Psy meets on the subway, and why is she featured so heavily? Because, she is Kim Hyuna or HyunA, formerly of one of the most known K-pop girl groups, Wonder Girls. The effect explains the seemingly bizarre (albeit still bizarre) appearances: one man in a yellow suit who shows up and has a dance off with Psy and another hip thrusting above Psy in an elevator.

On the other hand, the video is built more to American tastes than traditional K-pop. In part, this is because the video relies on knowledge of contemporary popular culture references out of mainstream American hip-hop. From the hip-hop style merged into k-pop to his choice of clothing and sunglasses, Psy draws on American culture; however, the most evident forms of parallel are found in his use of wind tunnel, grandeur, and the boat scene. While wind tunnel shots are used in many pop music videos, they are most iconic in hip-hop with Missy Elliot and Busta Rhymes being amongst some of the most notable users in music videos. In Psy's use of the wind tunnel he is walking arm-

in-arm with two slender women, and they are all being blown with fake snow and garbage to an absurd degree, their mouths filling with white fluff. Grandeur is specifically oriented throughout the video to Korean cultural nods, such as the party bus filled with *ajumas*. (*Ajuma*, transliteration, a Korean word to describe a middle-aged or slightly older woman, often associated with a particular style of frumpy care-freeness.)³ However, there are also hip-hop nods from American culture as well, such as the lead male figure framed by young women and the projection of power and wealth in sitting on a throne. Some press shots of the Notorious B.I.G, for instance, feature him sitting upon a throne, dressed luxuriously. In Psy's use of the throne, the scene elaborates into a farce when the zoom out makes it clear that the throne is a vulgar cultural reference to the toilet.



Gangnam Style music video screenshots: ajuma party bus, Psy on toilet throne

More elaborately, the use of the boat, while demonstrating the boating habits of Gangnam District residents, seems to undoubtedly reference Psy's hip-hop models from the U.S. The prominence of boats in hip-hop perhaps first emerges in the 1996 music video, "Hypnotize" with the Notorious B.I.G featuring Puff Daddy; the video is pure opulence on a boat with Cristal and money flowing into the water without care, a helicopter chase, and scantily-clad women. Since this video, the use of boats and yachts in hip-hop and rap music videos has become a trope of wealth and status. Some notable additional instances include Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" video (2000) and the hit parody of hip-hop opulence "I'm on a Boat" from Lonely Island featuring T-Pain (2009),

³ The nuance of the relational term is difficult to describe in full within this context. However, it should also be noted that *ajumas* are simultaneously associated with a certain sense of what in America, we might consider bingo grandmas, but the age range lacks a direct comparison. In this way the women are simultaneously cool and uncool in their disregard or unawareness of youth trends and utter confidence and willingness, in at least popular culture, to have a good time. In both, these women, as codified in figurations, often don visors.

which is a song that describes the trope in its most obvious form—“I’m on a boat,” – you fill in the blank. The visual parallels deepen in terms of the dancing—Jay-Z places his fists side-by-side and in a rocking motion imitates driving a luxury car; whereas, Psy crosses his wrists, leaving his loosened fists to hang side-by-side to imitate riding a horse, a different kind of luxury-transportation for leisure. They both seem to say, “I could be engaging in another form of indulgent transportation that doesn’t need to take me anywhere because I have time to burn, but right now, I’m on a boat.” Of course, in line with the Lonely Island parody, Psy is on a boat as mockery, making absurd his presentation with elements such as giant swan rides in the background and his fitted lifejacket – not to mention what appears to be a rental ride on a speedboat. This shift from celebrating wealth to self-aware parody also parallels a shift in media practices from the television to YouTube, in which the latter has largely eclipsed the former as a vehicle for the promotion and consumption of music videos.⁴ Additionally, music videos have come to dominate YouTube itself, seen in the fact that the most viewed videos on YouTube are music videos.⁵ This interplay between music video and the form of delivery markedly demonstrates the prominence of Psy’s popularity as an outsider to predominantly Western markets.



Music video screenshots: Gangnam Style (2012), Big Pimpin' (2000), e3 I'm on a Boat (2009)

What these borrowing tactics demonstrate is not a strict homage to American culture as some critics have suggested. For instance one critic, Oh Young-Jin, argues that Psy is far too vulgar for Korean taste. Additionally, Oh has pointed to Americanized elements such as the prevalence of horsey riding in the video as nods to the American cowboy, not Korean culture, which may now be falsely associated with Asian confluence in the form of Genghis Khan (Oh

⁴ See for instance, Edmond, Maura. “Here We Go Again: Music Videos after YouTube” *Television & New Media* 2014, Vol. 15(4) 305–320.

⁵ In the top twenty most viewed videos only three are not music videos, and they are on the low end of views in the top twenty. Two are children’s programming (one in English and one in Russian), and the other is a more traditionally viral home video of two little boys interacting to comic effect, “Charlie Bit Me”

2012).⁶ To the extent that the video is American, it is not in the dominance of American over Korean cultural reference, but in the cultural exportation leveraged by American images of celebrity on a global scale.

However, it is important to keep this tension of cultures in hand in order to not fall prey to reading the piece as either/or. Instead, the double move, as with the Feign cartoons, requires both lenses to understand the cultural jabbing that is happening internally to Korean lavishness and externally towards hip-hop celebrity opulence. In my analogy, it is problematic to conflate American hip-hop culture with the West, given that the racial makeup of many in hip-hop is of black African descent, placing them outside the specter of Western power regimes as such. As many scholars have pointed out, the lifestyle promoted in mainstream hip-hop is often one that celebrates fame and wealth, having come from a poor or difficult upbringing. This parodic move on Psy's part is critique that is largely uncontested in terms of the sheer extravagance promoted in some hip-hop music videos; however, there is a racialized history between Korean/Americans (both in the Diaspora and in Korea) and African Americans that is important to acknowledge—the L.A. riots, the trade of human hair for Black Diaspora consumption in the US, and the discrimination against biracial children of African American servicemen in Korea. What I would like to suggest in this critique is that the humor poked at popular American hip-hop culture is entangled in admiration, capitalist critique, and a racialized legacy.⁷ None of these things are easily disassociated, even as I attempt to draw out the cross-cultural parody from East to West. Both the critic who sees the video from an “Eastern” perspective as an American-gearred phenomenon and the one who sees it from a “Western” perspective as entirely other – a product of the unintelligible “Asia” – miss the cultural bilingualism needed to decipher the humor of a double critique.⁸ In both reference to American hip-hop and Gangnam (and Gangnam wannabe) culture, Psy leverages “Gangnam Style” to critique the modes of opulence that are glamorized in a striving-towards model of life-direction. He instead inserts the absurd as a way to mock the glamorous aspirations in Korea through humor; this mockery is imbued with frivolity, making the mode of subversion pleasurable to a greater degree than the object of critique: consumer culture *par excellence*.

Outside the fold of the Larry Feign example, Psy also exists in a limbo of

⁶ Oh also indicates that some of the references are historically inaccurate portrayals of a country in part defined by its divide to North Korea. In this instance, the critic is concerned by the airplane that drags a banner of Psy's name, which would likely not happen in Korea due to strict airspace regulations.

⁷ In part, the angle of admiration might be drawn from Psy's collaboration with Snoop Dog in one of the follow-ups to “Gangnam Style,” “Hangover.” Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkMNOIYcpHg>

⁸ Psy has also engaged in more explicit but still farcical critiques of US imperialism.

traditional K-pop insofar as he is not your typical K-pop artist. *Hallyu* or the Korean Wave is a term for marking the strong force of Korean soft power across Asia and other regions. This wave of culture is almost entirely through media,⁹ and one of the strongest manifestations of this wave is in K-pop (Korean dramas are particularly notable as well). And, it is important to underscore that generally this manifests in polished girl and boy bands with impeccably choreographed numbers and sexy-yet-wholesome appeal. Sexuality and physical appeal are carefully formed and marketed, and in this way, Psy hardly exemplifies of the force of *Hallyu*. Thinking of this atypical nature in relation to a potentially Western reading of him in the video, I want to draw out the importance of Psy's body in catalyzing the effects of social critique that I argue has, in part, prompted the nature of the reperformances I will analyze herein. Within this reading, I want to focus on three elements of Psy's body, whose confluence serve as a reminder of the importance of distinct markers of the body: (1) his ethnicized body, (2) his sexed and gendered body, (3) his body as soft. As Karen Shimakawa analyzes in her reading of the Asian American body onstage as in a process of abjection – an internalization through assimilation, rooted in an exclusion as forever foreign and other – there is a history of yellowface in American stage culture that has come to establish a disembodied aesthetic spectacle in reference to the Asian/American body in performance (Shimakawa 2002, 46). What is useful about this understanding in relation to Psy is that his body is always already caught up in this mode of reception from the West. For me, as a someday-scholar writing in a uniquely Western conception of Korean culture, as even my “direct” experiences with Korean culture living in Korea Towns in the US are always mediated through the Western lens of being, Shimakawa's analysis should be extended in how the Asian body is perceived in the US, much like the internalized other embodied in the Asian American as perpetual foreigner. Further, this perhaps contextualizes one of the ways in which Psy's YouTube fame, which is in part an American reception of K-pop as mediated through how some may think him to be Asian, is a disembodied spectacle, meaning that Psy is not read as an Asian body in particular, much less a Korean one. Instead, his body is abstractable to its Asian markers, making it replaceable, which allows for any non-Asian body to deploy markers of the generalized Asian body in a performance of yellowface. In this way, Psy's bodily markers as ethnicized are deeply embedded in how he comes to represent what I want to call a flamboyant masculinity.

⁹ See Kim, Youna, Ed.. *The Korean Wave: Korean Media Go Global*. Routledge, 2013.



Girls Generation press shot, screenshot from “Gangnam Style” with Psy center, JYJ press shot

As Shimakawa further notes, there is a history of equating the Asian body with the feminine other that comes to stand in for the Asian American body onstage (27). In this way, there is perhaps a sentiment of receiving Psy’s body as gendered feminine, despite his masculinity displayed throughout the video, which is arguably misogynist in certain scenes. For example, in one scene Psy dances into an outdoor yoga session filled with fit young women on all fours, back sunk-in, tailbone pointed to the sky. He then proceeds to, somewhat inexplicably, scream at one woman’s sky-tilted behind. Beautiful young women who – with the exception of Hyuna – seem interchangeable, also almost always accompany Psy throughout the video. In this way, he undeniably presents a sense of male masculinity; however, other moves of embodiment serve to make him less legible as masculine from a normative Western point of view. First, he displays a sense of flamboyant idiosyncrasy throughout the video, excessive in his dress, his mannerisms, and particularly in his absurdist dance moves. The excess of his body serves to underscore the mockery of the excesses of wealth culture; however, they also have a function in reading his gendered body. This flamboyant trend is accompanied by one scene that borders on drag performance (pictured above). In a sauna, Psy dons a blue and pink towel, worn around his body under his arms, covering his torso down to his upper thigh, featuring a peek-a-boo effect even further up his thighs by way of crossed legs. Moreover, he sits close to a large, tough-looking man whose shoulder he rests his head on as he casts a look across the room at a young slender tattoo-clad man.¹⁰ This scene is perhaps readable as a sort of homosociality that makes drag by assertively straight men the punch line of a heteronormative joke at the expense of the non-safe regions of drag elsewhere and transvestism at large. I want to suggest that the image is entangled in this lens of homosociality; however, it is also entwined with a particular differentiation through Psy’s ethnicized, soft body. This is in stark contrast to the bodies of the most traditional versions of K-pop as encapsulated in Girls Generation and JYJ (pictured above).

¹⁰ a Korean popular culture recurrence

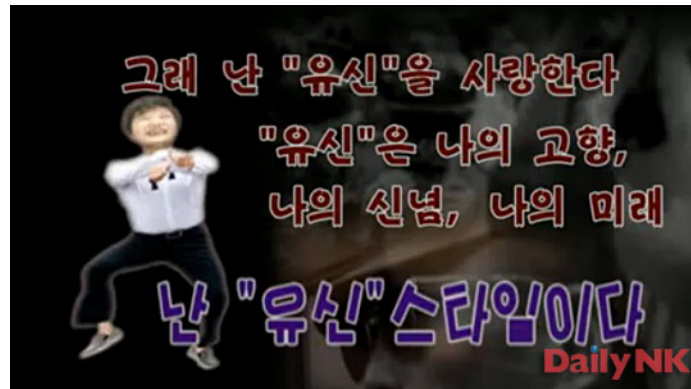
Extending Shimakawa's analysis, I want to think of Psy as more of a diva than hip-hop artist. This is part of his labeling as K-pop, even as his music is more accurately defined within a genre of K-hip-hop. More than this, his flamboyant masculinity and soft body read through the perspective of thinking the history of representational readings of the performing Asian body in the US, place Psy as a sort of kindred diva. Masculinity is often manufactured as a selling point of K-pop,¹¹ and the packaging of Psy's body does not replicate that image. Not as an analogous example, but as a starting point for thinking, I want to turn to Eve Sedgwick's analysis of the large woman's body and its relation to the gay man in her collaboration with Michael Moon concerning *Divine*. Sedgwick describes the fat female body as associated with the large dangerous bodies in Malthus representing "both the efflorescence and the damaging incoherence of a social order, its function sharpened by representational recastings and by the gender specification, class complication, and racial bifurcation that accompanied shifts from nineteenth-century European to twentieth-century US models" (Moon and Sedgwick 1991, 15). What Sedgwick offers is a thinking that makes the fat female body dangerous in its largeness, but I want to suggest that Psy's body as large is made innocuous through its representation; I read it as soft because it is not fat, but soft like a woman's body, which is to say he presents himself as feminine amongst the masculinity that is pervasive in his music video. And, further this innocuous body is made non-threatening, non masculine, in this gender specification as the feminine other locked into the Asian body, complicated by his vulgar place in relation to the celebration of wealth and glamour in contemporary Seoul culture, and ultimately bifurcated from whiteness as the perpetual foreigner.

Mediated Reperformances

Thinking of the Gangnam Style video as politically engaged with a comic critique of high capitalism along with Psy's body in particular as marked by his ethnicity and his body as soft, I want to survey three of the mediated reperformances/interpretations of the video. The YouTube form is herein vital to the replication and repetition of the reperformances. In each of the sections, I address the content, relation, and implications of the YouTube reperformance and then attend to political implications. First, I take on the propaganda video that plays on the theme of "Gangnam Style" with a caricature of Psy published by the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), more commonly referred to as North Korea. Second, I want to think the prison industrial complex and reperformance in relation to the YouTube video of the

¹¹ See also Jung, Sun. *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idol*. Hong Kong University Press, 2011.

Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center's (CPDRC) take on the phenomenon. Finally, I turn to the political mobilization embodied in the performances of Chinese dissident Ai Wei Wei and the following endorsement by British artist Anish Kapoor.



Screenshot from I'm Yushin Style!

While the original music video of “Gangnam Style” engages politically in a connotative function embedded in absurdity as method, the video posted by the DPRK¹² functions more in line with traditional propaganda, demonstrated in its flickering of old political film reels overlaid by text to direct the interpretation of the message. There is no ambiguity or room for interpretation. However, in a break from the physical encapsulation and public showing of a propaganda film, the DPRK is able to transmit the message through the Internet, creating sharing and reposting as a mechanism for spreading the intended audience and reach. This change in form allows for the political shift in ideological critique to present itself as entertainment. The digital video is a critique rooted in former Republic of Korea (ROK) leader Park Chung-hee and his daughter, current Korean president Park Geun-hye.¹³ The elder Park’s rule during the sixties and into the seventies, which ended with a *coup d’état* assassination, is generally regarded positively as the turning point in South Korea’s economic rise, despite his authoritarian tactics. His daughter Park Geun-hye was at the time of the video’s release in an election bid for the ruling party of the ROK; she is now the president. The DPRK video draws out the rule of the late authoritarian leader and his daughter’s politics as caught up in that legacy. The only elements of the original “Gangnam Style” video it retains are a cartoon icon of Psy (redrawn)

¹² Watch: http://www.uriminzokkiri.com/itv/php_tmp/flvplayer.php?no=11566

¹³ See also K.J. Kwon and Jethro Mullen, “North Korean video evokes ‘Gangnam Style’ to taunt South Korean candidate,” *CNN*, September 20, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/20/world/asia/north-korea-gangnam-video/>

and the idea of the title, turning it instead to read “I’m Yushin Style,” in reference to the Yushin Constitution established in the elder Park’s rule. The message seems to be critiquing the ROK for their hypocrisy in criticizing the DPRK’s ruling tactics and perhaps also an attempt to desituate Park Geun-hye’s legitimacy. Also through the cartoon of Psy’s body, the video attempts to leverage a criticism of the celebration of absurdity in “Gangnam Style” while also mobilizing the popularity for political ends. In both critiques, the origins of economic wealth are questioned with political inquiry. Psy questions class expression while the propaganda video points to economic growth as an outcome of authoritarian politics. What is important to draw out in this digitized collage is that the political nature of the video resonates with but does not replicate a critique of Korean opulence; YouTube thus becomes a site for political engagement between estranged interlocutors. It engages in a similar mode of critique but instead of being targeted at capitalism, it flips the labeling of authoritarian regimes from North to South. Whereas the DPRK’s video rendition of I’m Yushin Style! functions in an explicitly political fashion, the next performance of imprisoned bodies in the Philippines realigns with the original in making an explicitly political message obliquely.



Screenshot from CPDRC reperformance of Gangnam Style

Resonating with the conditioning of the fugitive body, performance as rehabilitation in the CPDRC gives altered meaning to YouTube reperformance in terms of political critique/reform as bodily movement. The dance moves of the CPDRC, a maximum-security prison located in the Philippines, gained fame in 2007 for their posting of their performance interpretation of Michael Jackson’s

music video Thriller. And in this reperformance of “Gangnam Style,”¹⁴ they sport prison jumpsuits, with a few select performers wearing t-shirts with a “P” on the back and one dressed in a flashy but sleekly black look as Psy. The video is filmed to the song and interprets the choreography of the full dance sequences in the music video. Psy’s body here is figured in the body of a prisoner, which is itself the politicality of this and all of CPDRC’s performances. Moreover, Byron Garcia is a security consultant for the facility and initiated the dance as a way to decrease recidivism and reward good behavior, which has been successful; however, before the videos hit YouTube this had no recognition, which is why Garcia says that he wanted to bring attention to the performances (Seno 2008). In this way, YouTube is a political platform that lends credence to practices of political critique through alignment with popular entertainment. Garcia says that the dancing is just the icing on the cake; I want to suggest it is not. Rather, it is the embodied movement, now available for the world to view, which makes this a political statement against the conditioning of the prisoner’s body. It is of course tempting to only read this as a new apparatus of power in controlling the fugitive body; after all, “[t]he perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (Foucault 1995, 183). Clearly, this training of the body to dance for extra snacks and extra time outdoors is an example of the supervising and differentiating power of the prison; however, it is not necessarily a move that normalizes. It is rather an opportunity to rethink the function of the imprisoned body – to leverage a critique of the system. The YouTube activism that is at play in Cebu’s prisoner dances puts genuine force on whether or not visibility is only a trap. Their visibility gives surveilling powers an increased discipline over the body while also enacting prison reform. While the limits of freedom are clear, the edges of political critique serve to muddy the image of disciplining the body. It is not simply that the discipline might be pleasurable but that it might be effective in countering disciplinary practices. But where Cebu’s prison may offer rehabilitation, Ai Wei Wei’s reperformance seems to indicate something else about the (formerly) imprisoned body.

¹⁴ Watch: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1AGTGLL_wg



Screenshots from Ai Wei Wei reperformance and Anish Kapoor reperformance

Ai Wei Wei is a Chinese dissident who was jailed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and has since been released. His video reperformance is a very jovial sketch of friends dancing to the music of "Gangnam Style" employing some of the signature moves, spliced with images from the original music video.¹⁵ In some of the scenes Ai Wei Wei holds handcuffs and lassos them above his head, which led to the video being scrubbed by censors from several Chinese websites the day after posting (Beijing AP 2012). His reperformance then led to British activist artist, Anish Kapoor, to create a video homage to Ai Wei Wei's reperformance, making explicit political statements and directing viewers to letter writing campaigns to demand the release of imprisoned Chinese dissidents as well as promote freedom of expression and voice to those in the Americas.

The reception of Ai Wei Wei under Western mobilization through groups such as Amnesty International presents a potentially problematic representation of the Chinese dissident as disembodied from agencies. Kapoor's response to Ai's performance seems to mitigate what is humorous in the poorly crafted video of friends laughing together while dancing like a horse, despite the presence of handcuffs. The first video is a critique of the government that borders on entertainment, the political implications hiding in plain sight, whereas Kapoor's sleek response with endorsements seems to engage in one of the many "cross-cultural transactions, [in which] the Chinese are, by logic, people who must continue to act as victims—to protest and struggle continually for what has been stolen from them—for the entire world to see" (Chow 2002, 47-48). Poking fun at the government, in Ai Wei Wei's video, or a culture of excess, in Psy's, relies on mobilizing popularity through Internet video sharing. The political protest is submitted through the medium as entertainment whereas Kapoor's rendition is a

¹⁵ Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n281GWfT1E8>

much more traditional use of awareness campaign.¹⁶ The distinction does not discount Kapoor's position in bringing attention to the issues; however, it does beg the question of audience in political critique. YouTube and similar sites can be ways in which traditional politics rally support and make political progress;¹⁷ however, the form of YouTube finds its largest viewership in music video work. This emphasis on entertainment thus recasts the ways in which pre-selected viewership might be necessary for more explicitly or traditionally political videos.

A Gangnam Ethic?

Max Weber's familiar argument that there was a particular Protestant Ethic that could be credited for the success of capitalism in the West is echoed in Chow's reformulation in the *Protestant Ethnic: the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which she argues that the "entrance of the ethnic on the late capitalist global stage is hence a rather dramatic affair. Often appearing in captivity and longing for emancipation, the ethnic-as-commodity cannot simply be understood within the parameters of an older humanism with its existentialist logic, the roots of which, as Max Weber argues, can be traced back to religion—to the tradition of Protestantism" (Chow 2002, 24). These mediated reperformances are inherently political and tied to a sort of "Gangnam Ethic." This ethic is located in a spirit of capitalist critique through the body of Psy as marked by a complicated ethnic identity, which produces this Gangnam Ethic as wrapped up in ethnicity—a Gangnam Eth(n)ic. I have chosen only a few of the thousands of reperformances of the music video; however, these are also the ones that have been most politicized, produced by bodies marked by another kind of ethnicization process¹⁸ that is at times at odds with how Psy's body has been produced as Korean. This is not to insinuate that there are some sort of Asian values at play in this East and South East Asian spattering; instead, I argue that there is something resonant for bodies that have also been ethnicized in particular ways, as different as they may be from Psy's body. Moreover, it is Psy's method that is tied to his body that mobilizes other bodies to literally perform. This method relies on a particular critical humor that is engaged in

¹⁶ Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UNXevv4noA>

¹⁷ See Trottier, Daniel and Christian Fuchs, Eds. *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*. Routledge, 2014.

¹⁸ Due to length constraints, I did not engage with Psy's photo shoot with Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki Moon or the political protest interpretation posted by Students For a Free Tibet filmed in Dharamshala, an Indian city home to Tibet's government-in-exile. Watch: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/11/09/video-gangnam-style-plus-tibetan-independence-plus-bobblehead-xi-jinping/>

multiple avenues of cross-cultural indictment as it plays into acts of opulence, demonstrated in Psy's doubling of critique towards American hip-hop tropes of wealth and leisure and Korean trends towards desiring lives of extravagance located in the Gangnam district. Moreover, it is his body that aids in this global reception of strangeness; as his body is made strange, it becomes attached to the oddities of the video that seem inexplicable in a normative Western context. Chow argues that the history of mimeticism in cross-cultural situations is complicated in that it throws reality and reproduction into question. In this case, the reperformances of Psy and "Gangnam Style's" own double move of cross cultural critique throw reality into question through parodic foundation-shifts that work to reconfigure and disfigure the politics of the status quo.

YouTube and similar video sharing sites are associated with a mass-appeal reading of popular culture, and I position this as a mechanism for political critique. This popularity undermines and allows itself to perform the subversive tactics of questioning what Chow describes as the "explosive ramifications" of mimeticism that touch on "precisely mutually implicated questions such as: what/who is there first, and what/who is second? What/who is the more authentic? What/who is the copy, the 'mere' reproduction?" (Chow 2002, 103). This configuration throws politicality into question. As Richard Grusin argues "YouTube provides perhaps the paradigmatic instance of this new media formation, insofar as its popularity is less a result of having provided users with new and better forms of media than of making available more mediation events, more easily shared and distributed through e-mail, texting, social networks, blogs or news sites" (Grusin 2010). Television's music video and the home video converge in the YouTube site, not as improved form but as easily proliferated forms of currency. Currency made more valuable through its entertainment qualities. The political force of YouTube therefore is imbricated in the popular content of its videos.

In the case of the DPRK's video, it calls into question the power of South Korea's legitimacy in determining the right kind of governance by showing the legacy of the ROK as stained by authoritarianism. In imitating the Gangnam Ethic, this video throws into question what constitutes an allowable regime. Is it the one that is under the US nuclear umbrella? This is not to say that I am advocating for DPRK policies, but rather to illustrate how even the propaganda of an authoritarian government, internationally regarded as unethical, can put into question the terms of evaluation. In the case of performing bodies in the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center, the dancing itself becomes the way to question discipline. It is the bodies in motion, the performing body that undermines the processes of utility in disciplining the body as a normalizing force. It is not the icing on the cake – it rethinks the cake altogether. Ai Wei Wei's performance too is a rethinking moment between his enactment and its reception. What are the burdens of dissent and what does it

mean to re-narrativize dissent through the model of victimhood when the self-presentation was full of celebratory defiance? Does the reading of the performance always come after Ai Wei Wei as a Chinese dissident, conflatable to all other dissidents? Is this how coalition is built or how liberation mentality figures the other as weak, as soft?

These reperformances build on a sense that persists in Gangnam Style in spite of its dismissal as an infectious flash trend. Gangnam Style is inherently political. Through the figure of Psy's body as strange, as throwing into question set definitions of culture and what is proper, the message of the music video as a cross-cultural mode of critique enabled by humor's de-situating potency is made clear despite the initial opacities of its politicality. It is through this combination of levity and cross-cultural objectives that the video is effective; it is its undermining of tropes of wealth as desirable that makes its appeal so great while also preserving its subversive force. In particular, Psy's bodily movements and displays gear the viewer to look beyond what may seem to be traditional K-pop to see a political message that resonates in those whose bodies have also been made strange from themselves in their representation. The Gangnam Eth(n)ic is thus a mode of performance-as-critique operating through particular ethnicized bodies and carrying a powerful message of political reconceptualization.

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