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## **K-pop and Authoritarianism: Political Histories and Aesthetic Reflections in South Korea**

### **Abstract:**

After the collapse of military rule in 1988 South Korea entered into an intensive period of social, political and economic democratisation. This essay will argue that rather than a complete shift from authoritarianism to democracy, authoritarian technologies remained embedded within the country's sociopolitical structures. What follows is an examination of the reoccurring disparities between the rhetoric of democratic transformation and the survival of authoritarian practices, albeit in newly diffuse forms.

It will also be argued that the spectre of authoritarianism extended beyond state practices and is evident in the country's more ephemeral cultural productions, most notably in the standardised features of Korean popular music (or K-pop). A close analysis of the aesthetic elements of K-pop will reveal that it is not merely a frivolous spectacle unworthy of serious attention, but rather a hitherto neglected key to understanding the dynamics of the period which produced it. Through such analysis the full extent of historical change (or continuity) during the democratisation period will be able to be determined. Foucauldian concepts and historical methodologies will be utilised throughout the essay.

### **"Remarkable Success" or Incomplete Transition? Rethinking the Historical Narrative:**

Notwithstanding a short-lived civilian government in the early 1960s, military governments ruled the Republic of Korea continuously from 1948 to 1988 with severe control over political institutions and civil society.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this period, especially during the dictatorships of Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) and Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), a ubiquitous democratic discourse justified government practices but was never actually implemented.<sup>2</sup> The country's rapid economic development at this time was dependant on an "ideological construction of the nation [which] enabled the modernising state to deploy disciplinary techniques of surveillance and normalisation, as well as institutionalised violence, in its remoulding of individuals and social groups."<sup>3</sup> Such techniques included the detailed cataloguing of each individual via a national identification system, the widespread monitoring of private communications, the

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<sup>1</sup> Doh C. Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> Geir Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea: The Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 94-5.

<sup>3</sup> Seungsook Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 24.

politically-motivated investigation of activist citizens, and the use of paramilitary violence to break unions.<sup>4</sup> Together they formed a “grid of military-authoritarian practices that threatened citizens’ public rights”.<sup>5</sup> Its effect was “the detailed regulation of individual attitudes, conduct, movement, and thoughts”, the ultimate result being the production of useful and docile members of the body politic.<sup>6</sup>

With the collapse of military rule in 1988, however, these oppressive practices began to recede as emphasis on sweeping democratic reforms saw Korea rapidly become a new polity.<sup>7</sup> Civil liberties and political rights expanded in proportion to the reduction of security agencies which were responsible for the deployment of disciplinary techniques.<sup>8</sup> Basic elements of a social security system were also introduced for the first time including national health insurance, a national pension, and a minimum wage.<sup>9</sup> The implementation of these concrete socioeconomic reforms signalled an effort by successive democratic governments to establish a new identity separate from the preceding military regimes and their empty democratic rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> The World Bank hailed this period as one where Korea “developed greater individual freedoms” as a result of “export-led economic growth [which] promoted openness and new ideas”.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, “[o]nce economic freedom had been achieved, people sought recognition by exercising their political freedom.”<sup>12</sup>

This historical recount is typical of the dominant narrative of “Korea’s remarkable success in democratisation” during this period, a success so complete that it should serve as a model for “contemporaries in transforming [their] authoritarian political institutions and culture”.<sup>13</sup> Yet the totality of Korea’s transformation from authoritarianism to democracy as depicted by this narrative becomes highly tenuous when scrutinised closely. This is evident when examining the persistence of military era legislation, the adaptation of such legislation to new phenomena such as internet usage, and the problematic means by which democratic reforms were pursued after 1988.

Before analysis of these areas is undertaken, however, I would stress that the point of this essay is not to deny the real and hard-fought changes that have occurred in Korea’s history or the significant advances the country has made towards genuine democracy. Rather, the intention is to critique those ideological narratives which reduce the

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<sup>4</sup> Kwang-Suk Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea: From Discipline to a Digital Grid of Control* (2007) University of Wollongong <<http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/230>> at 2 December 2011, p. 5

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*, p. xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank <<http://www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/trans/dec03apr04/pgs11-12.htm>> at 20 December 2011 [subsequently removed].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*, p. xxiii.

complexities of history to simplistic binary distinctions. By doing so they prevent understandings of the past which would help further a comprehensive shift away from authoritarianism in the future.

### **Registration Nation:**

In 1962 the Park Chung-hee regime enacted the *Resident Registration Act*. It required that a unique and unchangeable registration number be issued for each person at birth and that a registration card be carried by those over the age of seventeen at all times.<sup>14</sup> The legislation also enabled the collection of over 140 different types of personal information including all ten fingerprints of each resident in the country.<sup>15</sup> In this way the state was able to comprehensively catalogue each of its subjects and was privy to various aspects of their private lives including the reasons why they changed addresses.<sup>16</sup>

With the strong rhetoric of democratisation and individual rights following the collapse of military rule it would be expected that such a draconian surveillance system be abolished. However, besides several recent amendments which supposedly protect “information which may infringe on one’s privacy”,<sup>17</sup> the law still exists and functions in much the same way as it did at its inception. Its continued impact on the daily lives of individuals is palpable:

If the police ask to see the card, one must be able to provide it... [O]ne must submit it any time one buys certain goods, rents a house, drinks a beer in a bar, applies for loan from a bank, applies for employment at business or school, or even when one posts a comment on the Internet. The regulatory control of citizens is... permanent in duration and vast in scope.<sup>18</sup>

The persistence of this authoritarian surveillance system in post-democratisation Korea raises severe doubts as to the “remarkable success” of the sociopolitical transformation proclaimed by the dominant historical narrative. This, however, is not the only example of such problematic historical residues.

### **Outlawing Opposition:**

Another piece of military era legislation which continues to operate in modern Korea is the *National Security Act*. It was enacted by Syngman Rhee in 1948 with the help of riot police who removed members of the opposition from the national assembly so that it could be passed.<sup>19</sup> It functioned as a tool to impede political opposition by severely

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<sup>14</sup> Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea*, p. 7;

Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea*, p. 7

<sup>16</sup> Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> See the 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2004 amendment acts.

<sup>18</sup> Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea*, p. 7

<sup>19</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, pp. 84-5.

blurring the distinction between opposition and subversion.<sup>20</sup> Last revised in 1996, it continues to outlaw “Anti-State groups” which are vaguely defined as “domestic or foreign organizations or groups whose intentions are to conduct or assist infiltration of the Government or to cause national disturbances.”<sup>21</sup> The punishment for involvement in such groups ranges from several years in prison to a maximum of the death penalty.<sup>22</sup> Even those who “praise, encourage, disseminate or cooperate” with Anti-State groups or “create or spread false information which may disturb national order” may be imprisoned for up to seven years despite the freedom of association and assembly assured by the constitution.<sup>23</sup>

As with the *Resident Registration Act*, the *National Security Act* avoided abolishment in the democratisation era. In an indication of continuity with the past, its continued existence is still supported by the majority of the population.<sup>24</sup> As well as this, rather than a steady decline in its deployment over time it has been increasingly relied upon in recent years. Scores of people have been investigated, arrested and prosecuted for a range of disparate activities including the possession of leftist literature and the posting of ironic political messages on the internet.<sup>25</sup> Its contemporary utilisation raises further doubts as to the validity of the “remarkable success” narrative and demonstrates that a clean historical break between authoritarianism and democracy has not occurred. On the contrary, authoritarian technologies continue to survive in a political environment which should be antithetical to them.

### **Deleting Dissent:**

Not only have such technologies survived, they have also become adapted to phenomena unique to the democratic era including the rise of internet usage. In 1995 Korea became one of the first countries to enact legislation limiting free speech on the internet with a provision which allowed for the “regulation of dangerous communications”.<sup>26</sup> In 2002 the law was amended to regulate “illegal content” which

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pp. 94-5.

<sup>21</sup> Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Diane Kraft, *South Korea's National Security Law: A Tool of Oppression in an Insecure World* (2006) Wisconsin International Law Journal  
<<http://hosted.law.wisc.edu/wordpress/wilj/files/2012/02/kraft.pdf>> at 19 July 2012, p. 629.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 57% as of 2004: Hong Yeong-Rim, *National Security Act: Amendments Rather Than Abrogation* (2004) The Chosun Ilbo  
<<http://www.chosun.com/editorials/news/200408/200408080278.html>> at 10 January 2013 [Korean language].

<sup>25</sup> Clive Tillman, *South Korea: Mass Arrests, Raids of Leftists* (2011) Green Left  
<<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/47315>> at 12 January 2013;

Louisa Lim, *In South Korea, Old Law Leads to New Crackdown* (2011) National Public Radio  
<<http://www.npr.org/2011/12/01/142998183/in-south-korea-old-law-leads-to-new-crackdown>> at 12 January 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Privacy International and the GreenNet Educational Trust, *Silenced: An International Report on Censorship and Control on the Internet* (2003) Privacy International

allowed the Ministry of Information and Communication to control and delete content on the Internet without any judicial sanction.<sup>27</sup> The practical effect of such measures was the censorship of websites concerning the anti-military movement, homosexual rights and school dropouts.<sup>28</sup> The censorship of these groups in particular suggests a violent imposition of normativity and homogeneity not consistent with democratic notions of tolerance and multiplicity. Here the anomalous subject is excluded and silenced in much the same way that the “abnormals” of yesteryear were. Just as striking workers, protesting students, progressive politicians, or critical citizens were targeted in the past,<sup>29</sup> so too now are those voices who represent a challenge to the effective management of a docile and productive populous.

This strict regulation of cyberspace may be seen as another disparity between the narrative of the “remarkable success” and the historical reality of an authoritarian praxis surviving in new post-democratic forms. Thus rather than a total shift between the two systems, the former still survives in the latter seeing as “techniques of power were gradually transformed from a centralised and hierarchical model into a distributed and ubiquitous network model.”<sup>30</sup> The result is that “the rigid and visible techniques of power have become more integrated with and veiled by the digital networks, that is, the techniques of control have shifted to more refined and invisible ones.”<sup>31</sup>

### **“Reform Authoritarianism”: The Problem of Democratic Ends and Undemocratic Means**

Another uneasy historical contradiction is evident in the undemocratic means by which democratic reforms were pursued and achieved by successive governments after 1988. For example, the reforms undertaken by Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) were explicitly motivated by democratic concerns:

I was convinced that the fundamental problem was the lack of democracy. Democracy and market economy are like two wheels of a cart. Left apart neither can succeed. With such belief, I have promoted bold reforms in the financial, corporate, public, and labor sectors of the country.<sup>32</sup>

The means by which such reforms were pursued, however, often involved a series of “questionable tactics” given this worldview, ones which became the norm rather than

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<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/125003208/Silenced-An-International-Report-on-Censorship-and-Control-of-the-Internet>> at 15 January 2013, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Surveillant Institutional Eyes in South Korea*, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-1.

<sup>32</sup> Kim Dae-jung, *Liberty Medal Acceptance Speech* (1999) The Liberty Medal

<[http://constitutioncenter.org/libertymedal/recipient\\_1999\\_speech.html](http://constitutioncenter.org/libertymedal/recipient_1999_speech.html)> at 19 January 2013.

singular exceptions.<sup>33</sup> Reforms undertaken to reduce corporate power and corruption, for example, were achieved by striking a series of “Big Deals” before Kim’s term officially began.<sup>34</sup> This “controversial process... involved putting public pressure on business and labour representatives to compromise in what Kim presented as the national interest. The government could then present the legislature with laws based on this consensus.”<sup>35</sup> What occurred then was not democratic consensus proper, but rather the creation of an artificial feedback loop with the semblance of consensus. This feedback loop was often supplemented with Kim’s personal ties with the union movement to gain concessions.<sup>36</sup>

It was the view of pro-democracy activists at the time that if a lack of democracy was the problem then surely the use of such undemocratic methods was a paradoxical path to take. Kim’s leadership style was felt to be not dissimilar enough from previous presidents and thus more problematic than helpful in terms of true democratic reform.<sup>37</sup> The term “reform authoritarianism” has been used to describe this conflicted relation between the democratic intent of governments and the undemocratic means by which they actualised it.<sup>38</sup> It has been applied not only to Kim Dae-jung who “rush[ed] his reforms through while his electoral mandate and the crisis atmosphere gave him the edge over the opposition-dominated assembly”, but also to Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) who “hoped to limit the opportunity of dissenters to mobilise opposition by limiting consultation on his policies”.<sup>39</sup> Thus even the most progressive democratic leaders exhibited an “unwillingness to break with Korea’s historic political culture to a more democratic style of leadership.”<sup>40</sup> In this way authoritarian practices survived the democratisation era under the guise of a benevolent *realpolitik*.

From a pragmatic perspective, however, perhaps these criticisms are irrelevant seeing as the intended results were brought about in the interests of democracy. If, however, the value of democracy lies in the fact that it leaves the “resolution of value conflicts open to participants in a public process, subject only to certain provisions protecting the shape and form of the process itself”,<sup>41</sup> then one cannot make a totally consequentialist historical evaluation. The exclusion of citizens from this process and the creation of artificial consensus undermines democracy’s value as a procedure which involves the participation of those affected by it. The fact that successive reformist governments employed methods which resulted in exclusion or diminished public

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<sup>33</sup> Wayne Errington, *Kim Dae-Jung and the Consolidation of Democracy in South Korea* (2004) University of Adelaide <[http://www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/docs\\_papers/Others/Errington.pdf](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/docs_papers/Others/Errington.pdf)> at 20 January 2013, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 261.

deliberation indicates a continuity with their pre-democratic forebears not fitting with the narrative of the country's "remarkable success" in democratisation.

### **K-pop as Mirror to the Age: Justification and Methodology**

As we have seen, there is a reoccurring disparity between the rhetoric of democratic transformation and the survival of authoritarian practices in modern Korea as well as the emergence of more diffuse forms of control. To have continued to openly use military style oppression would have undermined the regimes that used them. Indeed, that is what happened in 1987 when broad cross-sections of the population united in nationwide protests to oppose a crackdown on dissident organisations and "leftist elements".<sup>42</sup> In response the last military president, Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), met all the protestors' demands, apologised for his abuses of power and exiled himself to a remote Buddhist temple.<sup>43</sup>

But if the deployment of openly oppressive power was now a fatal political strategy, a replacement would be found in a forms of power that were adapted to the new era, forms which would not again attract the furore of the polity.<sup>44</sup> Thus arose "a sophisticated form of power that achieve[d] maximum effect at a minimum economic and political cost"; one which aimed "at meticulous control over individuals to maximize their productivity and utility" while minimising their resistance; one which aspired to "the control and exercise of individual bodies to the use of forces specific to the most complex multiplicities".<sup>45</sup> I would argue that the scope of this power was not limited to a field of state practices but also extended into the more ephemeral realm of cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, pp. 70-2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*;

This fairy-tale end to authoritarianism did not magically erase the effect it had on the people who were long subjected to it. On the contrary, the uprooting of "authoritarian cultural codes while fostering pro-democratic behaviour among democratically inclined masses" proved to be "highly challenging because the growth of pro-democratic dispositions does not necessarily bring about corresponding changes in anti-authoritarian or communitarian dispositions" (Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*, p. xxvi). Over a decade after democracy was officially commenced almost a third of Koreans still believed that authoritarianism might sometimes be preferable to democracy, a higher proportion than almost all other new democracies (Chu, Diamond and Doh in Errington, *Kim Dae-Jung and the Consolidation of Democracy in South Korea*, p. 22). Economic development was also overwhelmingly favoured over democratisation in a choice between the two, although much less so amongst the young (*ibid*).

<sup>44</sup> It should be noted here that it was not "the government" or any other sinister party that invented or deployed this new power. I take Foucault's point that "Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective... [L]et us not look for the headquarters that presides over its rationality; neither the caste which governs, nor the groups which control the state apparatus". Rather, we should focus on those "anonymous, almost unspoken strategies which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose 'inventors' or decision makers are often without hypocrisy." (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London & New York: Penguin Books, 2008) pp. 94-5.)

<sup>45</sup> Foucault in Moon, *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, pp. 27-8.

production and aesthetics. Thus the need to for a certain oblique approach to this historical period and its politics:

If the reason for studying Korean politics is a desire to understand it, one has to approach the field in a more indirect way. It is necessary to bring non-political aspects of social life into the study, to broaden the perspective and allow for alternative views on the basics of human existence.<sup>46</sup>

Such aspects include culture, or the “unstated assumptions, standard operating procedures, ways of doing things that have been internalised to such an extent that people do not argue about them”.<sup>47</sup> Analysis of cultural forms is vital because they denote the “values and norms shared by people living together in a society... [and] represent deeply embedded and enduring orientations towards political actions and the political system.”<sup>48</sup> As Edward Said noted, historical criticism

cannot assume that its province is merely the text... It must see itself, with other discourse, inhabiting a much contested cultural space, in which what has counted in the continuity and transmission of knowledge has been the signifier, as an event that has left lasting traces upon the human subject.<sup>49</sup>

The aim is to extrapolate “the alliance between cultural work, political tendencies, the state, and the specific realities of domination”.<sup>50</sup> The result should be the production of “histories of the present” which help us “to understand the world that we live in and the forms of history that have both helped produce it and which it has produced.”<sup>51</sup>

I would argue that K-pop is the perfect discursive site to attempt such a history: it is one the most dominant cultural phenomena to emerge in Korea during the democratisation period;<sup>52</sup> it has had little serious academic attention paid to it despite its increasing social and economic influence; it forms a living cultural discourse upon which the political contradictions of the era are inscribed on a microscopic level; it provides a wealth of uncanonical historical material by which the dynamics of the age can be gauged and its continuity or discontinuity with the past assessed. It is not that K-pop necessarily acts as an insidious new form of social control, but rather that it is a mirror which reveals and reflects the political techniques of the era. Hence the necessity for an historical investigation into the relation between K-pop, economy, and the state, as well

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<sup>46</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Triandis in Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>48</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 225.

<sup>50</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> Admittedly, K-pop is one aspect of a broader cultural movement known as *Hallyu*, or “Korean Wave”, which also encompasses a range of other media including film and television drama. However, due to space restraints this essay will deal K-pop specifically as oppose to *Hallyu* in general, though at points they will be inextricable.



as a close analysis of the internal dynamics of the genre and how they reflect broader historical trends.

A final word of insurance against those who would say the subject matter is not appropriate for serious historical investigation: "One ought to read everything, study everything. In other words, one must have at one's disposal the general archive of a period at a given moment."<sup>53</sup> Without such an archive one cannot adequately understand the dynamics of a historical period.

### **K-pop, Economy and State:**

With a delectable hint of geopolitical requisite, the official Korean government website declares that that K-pop "has not only conquered the charts in Korea, but also many of the nations in Asia. Korean girl bands can not only challenge the Japanese groups, but even make their official debuts on Japanese soil."<sup>54</sup> Commentators have picked up on this tone and noted that "there appears to be a one-sided, nationalistic superiority complex regarding the *Hallyu* phenomenon. This attitude reveals the self-satisfaction through the excellence of Korean culture."<sup>55</sup> Yet to see this as merely an exercise in narcissism would be to miss the deeper implications of the relation between K-pop and state. To the state K-pop plays a specific role in serving "to raise the national image, and to let the world know about Korea's relevance".<sup>56</sup> K-pop thus bears an official function of "building a 'Korean brand'" which will produce the "precious property" of "friendliness toward Korean society".<sup>57</sup> The distance between politics and culture collapses into a singular "cultural policy" in which K-pop is a centrepiece.<sup>58</sup>

As well as this ideological relation, there are also concrete economic links between K-pop and the state. As Debord predicted, "[w]hen culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society."<sup>59</sup> And so it was when in 1994 President Kim Young-sam was shown a report equating the overall revenue from *Jurassic Park* with the profit from exporting 1.5 million Hyundai cars.<sup>60</sup> Amazed ministers were quick to identify the cultural industry as the next

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<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 263.

<sup>54</sup> Kim Hee-sung, *K-pop Going Global* (2010) Korea.net <<http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=82649>> at 23 January 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Kang Chul-keun, 'Conclusion' in The Korea Herald eds., *Korean Wave* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2008), p. 325.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 329.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid;

Indeed, at the 2011 *K-pop Music Fest* in Sydney the performers conveyed this policy directly to the audience: "We're so glad to play such a meaningful show and introduce K-pop to the world," especially considering the "beautiful friendship between our two nations".

<sup>59</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 2010), #193.

<sup>60</sup> Kang Ah Park, *The Growth of Cultural Industry and the Role of Government: the Case of Korea* (2008) Massachusetts Institute of Technology <<http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/45761>> at 26 January 2013, p. 19;

economic growth engine and established several research agencies including the Cultural Industry Bureau.<sup>61</sup> In 1999 the self-proclaimed “President of Culture”, Kim Dae-jung, enacted the *Basic Law for Cultural Industry Promotion* and allocated significant funding to its development.<sup>62</sup> Since then there has been consistent government support of the culture industry via a wide range of means. These include

the provision of promotion funds and tax benefits, software support (development of management programs and digitization of culture content resources), hardware support (support for cultural infrastructure), education and training, support for innovation (planning and provision of incentives for innovative agents), R&D (development of research agendas, establishment industrial-educational-research connections, and standardization of technology), and networking (establishment of networks for human resource management).<sup>63</sup>

After a decade of such support Korean cultural exports amounted to a record \$4.2 billion in 2011.<sup>64</sup> This is especially significant considering that for every \$100 increase in exports of cultural products themselves, an additional \$412 is spent on Korean consumer goods.<sup>65</sup> As such, there is a deep reciprocity between K-pop, economy and state as each partially depends on the other.

Given that these mutual relations are so close, can it be maintained that each area remains hermeneutically sealed and blocked off from the others? Or does each bleed into the others so that they all bear the distinctive marks of their reciprocal influence? Assuming the latter is true, state and economy become embodied in K-pop just as K-pop forms part of the other two. The task now is to examine exactly how these marks are borne out in the techniques of the genre, as well as how these techniques reflect a

Jeeyoung Shin, ‘Globalisation and New Korean Cinema’ in Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer eds. *New Korean Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> Ah Park, *The Growth of Cultural Industry and the Role of Government*, p. 19;

Jennifer Rousse-Marquet, *K-pop: the Story of the Well-Oiled Industry of Standardized Catchy Tunes* (2012) French National Audiovisual Institute (INA) Global, The Review of Creative Industries and Media <<http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/music/article/k-pop-story-well-oiled-industry-standardized-catchy-tunes>> at 27 January 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Ah Park, *The Growth of Cultural Industry and the Role of Government*, p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Lee and Kim in Ah Park, *The Growth of Cultural Industry and the Role of Government*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>64</sup> *Korean Cultural Exports Still Booming* (2012) The Chosun Ilbo <[http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2012/12/12/2012121201407.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/12/12/2012121201407.html)> at 1 July 2013;

It has been noted, however, that government policy settings are but one factor amongst others contributing to export growth. To characterise export growth as a solely function of government policy would be misleading: Milim Kim, *The Role of the Government in Cultural Industry: Some Observations from Korea’s Experience* (2011) Keio University <<http://www.mediacom.keio.ac.jp/publication/pdf2011/10KIM.pdf>> at 2 July 2013, p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> *Korean Wave Gives Exports a Boost* (2012) The Chosun Ilbo <[http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2012/05/31/2012053101166.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/05/31/2012053101166.html)> at 1 July 2012; Rousse-Marquet, *K-pop* <<http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/music/article/k-pop-story-well-oiled-industry-standardized-catchy-tunes>>.

historical continuity regarding the persistence of authoritarianism in an era that supposedly purged itself of its influence. Before this can be done, however, certain social dynamics must first be understood.

### **On Homogeneity and Social Conformity:**

A traditional feature of Korean social relations has been the emphasis on conformity in thought and behaviour as well as antipathy towards heterogeneous elements in society.<sup>66</sup> Political success has been founded on this emphasis and has depended on the linkage of a related set of ideas:

Koreans as a homogeneous race; belief in the necessity for national strength and prosperity (of which anti-communism is an important element); cultural continuity; belief in democracy and modernization (as these phenomena are interpreted by the authorities); and a political system ideally headed by the most competent and morally uncontaminated person in the Country.<sup>67</sup>

These concepts can be traced back to Confucian values which still manifest themselves in terms of strong filial devotion, loyalty to the nation, and rigid gender roles.<sup>68</sup> If, however, such values have a pre-modern origin, it was only under the modern authoritarian state that they were solidified into rigid practices. Through various state apparatuses they were entrenched and extended into the most disparate regions of social reproduction. Thus even the front page of school textbooks bore the following declaration until 1995:

With sincere mind and strong body, improving ourselves in learning and the arts, developing the innate faculties of each of us, and overcoming the existing difficulties for the rapid progress of the nation, we will cultivate our creative power and a pioneering spirit. We will give the foremost consideration to public good and order, set a value on efficiency and quality, and, inheriting the tradition of mutual assistance rooted in love and respect and faithfulness, promote a spirit of fair and warm cooperation. Realizing that the nation develops through creative and cooperative activities and that national prosperity is the ground for

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<sup>66</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, p. 7;

Note that in apparent defiance of this trend Lee Soo Man, founder of the largest music label in South Korea (SM Entertainment), has publically emphasised the need for a new educational system to foster “extraordinary talent who thinks in uncommon and abnormal ways” (Lucia Hong, *Lee Soo-man Gives Lecture at Harvard Business School* (2010) Hancinema <<http://www.hancinema.net/lee-soo-man-gives-lecture-at-harvard-business-school-22764.html>> at 4 July 2013). Rather than a rejection of homogeneity and an embrace of difference, however, such sentiments should be seen as permissible insofar as they accord with a greater unifying principle: that of HR, of the development of humans as resources. Abnormality only as investment strategy; deviation only as potential return. An incommensurable Otherness will not be tolerated under this principle.

<sup>67</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> Ah Park, *The Growth of Cultural Industry and the Role of Government*, p. 13.

individual growth, we will do our best to fulfil the responsibility and obligation attendant upon our freedom and right, and encourage the willingness of the people to participate and serve in building the nation.<sup>69</sup>

Here a benevolent overtone masks an underlying set of authoritarian values. Note how the terms *arts / creative / individual growth / freedom* are not ends in themselves but are inextricably bound to economic constraints or are seen as means for the further ends of *efficiency and quality / public good and order / responsibility and obligation / power* (thus *creative* cannot be mentioned except as *creative-power*). In much the same way, K-pop demonstrates this schizophrenic symbiosis of liberal democratic values and authoritarian ones, the ultimate emphasis falling on the latter to the degradation of the former. Imagery (or one should rather say *imaginary*) of freedom, self-expression, individuality or love cannot be expressed except through a highly formalised set of generic conventions which betray their antitheses. Let us begin to examine some of these in detail and how they reveal a continuity with authoritarian technologies which should have disappeared with the onset of democracy, but which have nonetheless survived in the transparent hiding place of aesthetics.

### **Hierarchy and the Leader as Aesthetic Categories:**

Perhaps the most striking aesthetic feature of K-pop upon first glance is its overwhelming penchant for the organisation of its idols into multitudinous groups whose members can number up to twenty-four.<sup>70</sup> This is in stark contrast to the organisation of western pop groups which rarely exceed several members, the solo artist often being preferred to the group structure altogether so as to propagate the image of the authentic artist. In K-pop there is also the tacit requirement that groups will be organised hierarchically with a leader overlooking the remaining members who are allocated roles according to a generic division of labour.<sup>71</sup> It is as if there is a discipline at work here which diffuses itself into the productive units of the aesthetic, one in which “the elements [i.e. idols] are interchangeable, since each is defined by the place it occupies in a series, and by the gap that separates it from the others.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, changes in group line-ups are common and it is not unheard of that a group may retain its original name while retaining none of its original members.<sup>73</sup> K-pop thus features “a technique for the transformation of arrangement. It individualises bodies by a location

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<sup>69</sup> President Park Chung-hee’s 1968 Charter of National Education in Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>70</sup> Leader’S debuted with 24 members, A-Peace with 21, SEVENTEEN with 17, Super Junior and i-13 with 13, Co-Ed School with 10, Girls’ Generation and Nine Muses with 9, After School with 8, U-Kiss, Rainbow and T-ara with 7, etc.

<sup>71</sup> Standard roles include main singer, lead singer, main rapper, “visual”, *maknae* (youngest member), main dancer, lead dancer, etc. (Eli Shand, *KPOP 101: Breaking Down the Idol Group System* (2012) KKconnect <<http://kkconnect.net/2012/06/25/kpop-101-breaking-down-the-idol-group-system-4-2/>> at 5 July 2013.)

<sup>72</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 145-6.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Jewelry.

that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations.”<sup>74</sup> There is also a functional reduction of the individual to an exchangeable body-segment which has value only as part of a multi-segmentary machine, that is, as part of a group.<sup>75</sup> The implication is that the individual member is not so important as the position they occupy in a series or rank and is thus infinitely replaceable. They are not autonomous ends in themselves as would be fitting in a democratic context, but rather a means towards the further end of fulfilling the dictates of the genre. These dictates are informed by specific historical forces which bear down upon the genre and inscribe upon it the dynamics of the age. This is especially evident if we consider closely the role of the leader in this network of aesthetic relations and how historical political structures are reflected in them.

For example, all post-war governments in Korea (with the exception of the short-lived one formed after the student revolution in 1960) have been characterised by the necessity of strong leadership.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, most forms of organisation in Korean society, whether they be student bodies, religious institutions or corporations, feature charismatic leaders upon which their success often depends.<sup>77</sup> The organisation of these groups is often influenced by Confucianism which demands that the eldest member is allocated the leadership position, but this is not always the case. There are also substantive criteria which must be fulfilled, especially in the political sphere:

Future political leaders are still expected to be honest and morally strong, benevolent and knowledgeable, humble-minded, compassionate and virtuous. A great human being is needed to meet these expectations: “a national leader or group of leaders, charismatic or otherwise, who could command the respect of the entire people”.<sup>78</sup>

The leaders of K-pop groups are required to exhibit these exact same characteristics. The unflagging display of these normative values makes up the core of their obligations as leaders, actual administrative duties largely falling to the management companies which produce the groups. As with national leaders, they must be able to command respect and devotion while reflecting a morally scrupulous image, to engender trust amongst their subordinates, and to unify the group as in a totalising familial structure. Failure to do this will draw the harsh criticism of “netizens”, the virtual polity of partisan fans who comment on every facet of generic mutation as it arises. They understand the function of the leader as “necessary for every group both physically and emotionally”, and praise or doom their idols according to the aforementioned criteria.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 145-6.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>76</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>79</sup> *Taeyeon is No Longer SNSD's Kid Leader?* (2009) allkpop

<[http://www.allkpop.com/2009/11/taeyeon\\_is\\_no\\_longer\\_snsds\\_kid\\_leader](http://www.allkpop.com/2009/11/taeyeon_is_no_longer_snsds_kid_leader)> at 5 July 2013;

One's status as leader may also come into question if one is barely identifiable as leader. This would not be an issue were it not also for the corresponding, contradictory requirement that a leader not be *too* differentiated from their subordinates. According to the judgement of netizens there must be "something about the way they move within their respective teams that sets them slightly apart, but in such a way that holds everyone together".<sup>80</sup> Similarly, leadership crises in the political sphere from 1989 to 1995 revolved around the perception of leaders "as either too strong or too weak" or there being a "lack of congruence between the leader's and the followers' perception of roles".<sup>81</sup> The ability to maintain this impossible double image of distinct leader yet undifferentiated, normalised member of the body politic becomes an essential criteria of the aesthetic, so much so that a K-pop group may become incomprehensible without such mediation: "It just makes things harder to understand when you can't easily look to a specific member to see how the group runs."<sup>82</sup> Here we have a convergence of political expectations and aesthetic configurations, one which demonstrates the extent to which the latter is marked by the former despite their apparent incongruence.

### **The Docile Bodies of K-pop Idols:**

Such political markings are also evident in various other aspects of the genre, especially if we consider the impact that generic convention has on the bodies of those who participate in it. Foucault's concept of the production of docile bodies is relevant here as it helps elucidate these connections.

For Foucault a "body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."<sup>83</sup> In such a body there is a "constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination".<sup>84</sup> This link is proportional in that an increase in the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) will correspond to a diminishment of another set of forces (in political terms of obedience).<sup>85</sup> I would argue that this dynamic can be seen operating in historical situations where the body has become the site of particular contextual imperatives. Post-democratisation Korea is one such situation seeing as there the body has been identified as a driver of economic growth and an ambassador for national interests via its arrangement and deployment through K-pop. Foucault's description of the mechanics of docile bodies is thus perfectly analogous to the aesthetic features of the genre and the way in which the bodies of idols are directed. We can see this if we consider the hypnotising dance choreographies of K-pop groups as

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*A Leader's Heart* (2011) SNSD Korean <<http://snsdkorean.com/2011/11/08/a-leaders-heart/>> at 5 July 2013.

<sup>80</sup> *A Word on Group Leaders (in Kpop)* (2009) Fangirltainment <<http://fangirltainment.com/2009/07/02/a-word-on-group-leaders-in-kpop/>> at 5 July 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea*, p. 242 & 250.

<sup>82</sup> *A Word on Group Leaders (in Kpop)* <<http://fangirltainment.com/2009/07/02/a-word-on-group-leaders-in-kpop/>>.

<sup>83</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 136.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 138.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*.

they are repeated perfectly on music shows and at concerts *ad nauseam*. It is as if in each choreography

A sort of anatomo-chronological schema of behaviour is defined. The act is broken down into its elements; the position of the body, limbs, articulations is defined; to each movement are assigned a direction, an aptitude, a duration; their order of succession is prescribed. Time penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power.<sup>86</sup>

Perhaps “performance” is a more apt term than “dance” to describe these practices as each time the choreography is performed it is without deviation and with military precision. Improvisation and spontaneous expression are also necessarily absent from these routines. Their presence would disrupt the nexus of obedience and usefulness that discipline requires by introducing uncontrollable elements. The maintenance of this nexus is so significant that idols will prostrate themselves before the demands of any choreography despite personal reservations or physical injuries for fear that disobedience will give rise to their replacement by more disciplined bodies.<sup>87</sup>

Everything is done, however, to prevent the truth of the docile and regulated body from becoming too apparent. Thus the inclusion of simulated spontaneity within dance routines and at public events, of miniscule gestures which intimate the natural wherever possible. There is “a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement” so that the slightest pause is filled by these gestures.<sup>88</sup> Strategically placed winks, smiles, hand signals or poses create a simulacra of impulsiveness which allows for a disavowal of the rigid pre-configuration of the performances. The result is that “nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to form the support of the act required. A well-disciplined body forms the operational context of the slightest gesture”.<sup>89</sup> And so idols are trained to emote, move and gesture in particular ways and at particular points according to the role they fulfil within the group dynamic.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>87</sup> Such is the testimony of one group: “Our CEO ordered us to do the pole dance. He didn't order it directly but showed us a video about pole dancing and asked us if it was cool or not. We can't say anything other than agree that it's cool. He'll then choose it as our next concept and make us practice it. It was the same for our tap dancing and marching concepts... If we say we don't want to do it, then he says that he's going to make another rookie group do it. We end up having to do it anyway.” (*After School “Our CEO Keeps Making Us Do Difficult Performances”* (2013) Netizen Buzz <<http://netizenbuzz.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/after-school-our-ceo-keeps-making-us-do.html>> at 6 July 2013)

<sup>88</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 137.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>90</sup> “[O]ur dance choreographer... laid out a set of moves and gestures that are fitting for each member... They’re actually part of the choreography. But because we have so many of those pose and gestures, I feel like many people assume that we’re super bubbly and animated. It’s not like I’m going to ask Jessica [*poses a gesture*], ‘Did you eat?’” (Jaeki Cho, *Interview: Girls Generation Talk Fame, K-Pop, and World Domination* (2011) Complex Music

Training is not limited to these practices but is instilled in various ways over a long production process. Potential idols are selected from tens of thousands of initial applicants and undergo a rigorous training regime which may last anywhere from three to seven years.<sup>91</sup> The constitution of a typical training regime is as follows:

JYP Entertainment runs a tough level system for its star wannabes. After passing the audition, a prospect is at Level A. At Level B, the prospect moves into one of JYP's dorms and gets a manager, and the training gets even harder. The highest level is Level C, and after that the prospect becomes a full-fledged singer. At first, everyone learns the same subjects, but as prospects develop, they get individual training programs... Each month JYP holds private tests and showcases, and once a year hosts a public showcase. It is a long, grueling process...<sup>92</sup>

The point of these periodical tests is to continually check the progress of "prospects" and replace them with more promising ones lest the slightest signs of incompetency be exhibited.<sup>93</sup> The levels of competency and obedience demanded are staggering: a prospect is expected to diet heavily and have cosmetic surgery so as to become more commercially appealing, to completely forgo romantic relations during training, and to train in multifarious practices for up to seven days a week with as little as two hours sleep for years on end.<sup>94</sup> The result should be (notwithstanding potential gastritis and kidney disease<sup>95</sup>) a perfectly docile body in which the nexus of obedience-utility is

<<http://www.complex.com/music/2011/11/interview-girls-generation-talk-fame-k-pop-and-world-domination>> at 7 July 2013.);

"[W]e are trained by an acting coach who teaches us how to express our emotions and acting in general. We sometimes invite comedians and are trained in individual skills and talents."

(*What's the Successful Process that Helps Create Korean Idols?* (2011) allkpop

<<http://www.allkpop.com/2011/02/whats-the-successful-process-that-helps-create-korean-idols>> at 7 July 2013.)

<sup>91</sup> Rousse-Marquet, *K-pop* <<http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/music/article/k-pop-story-well-oiled-industry-standardized-catchy-tunes>>;

*The Road to K-Pop Stardom: Training* (2012) seoulbeats <<http://seoulbeats.com/2012/02/the-road-to-k-pop-stardom-training/>> at 7 July 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Mark James Russel, *Pop Goes Korea: Behind the Revolution in Movies, Music, and Internet Culture* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2008), p. 147.

<sup>93</sup> Rousse-Marquet, *K-pop* <<http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/music/article/k-pop-story-well-oiled-industry-standardized-catchy-tunes>>;

A successful idol recalls his experience of this aspect of the training process: "It's pretty cutthroat... You have a bunch of guys who are trying to debut, and you don't know who's going to make it or who they're going to choose. You could be placed, but then they might feel like someone else fits better and swap you out. You always have to be on top of your game" (Ibid).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid;

*Want to Know What it Takes to be Kpop Star? Exclusive Interview with Mr Park from Cube Entertainment* (2012) (x)clusive <<http://x-clusive.sg/2012/05/06/cube-exclusive/>> at 10 July 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Gil Hye-seong, *Hankyung "For Two Years, Never Off... Gastritis, Kidney Disease"* (2009) Star News <<http://star.mt.co.kr/stview.php?no=2009122216434873297&type=3>> at 11 July 2013 [Korean language].



firmly entrenched, ideally someone “who would automatically do whatever was asked of him - practice, travel, fan events, anything - without complaining or asking why.”<sup>96</sup>

So what we have here are training regimes that produce docile bodies via levelling structures and strict regimentation, progressive examination and differentiation, the exchangeability of bodies, and Spartan effacements of the self in dereference to the group. All these techniques are precisely Foucauldian:

1. Divide duration into successive or parallel segments, each of which must end at a specific time. For example, isolate the period of training and the period of practice; do not mix the instruction of recruits and the exercise of veterans... and do not pass to another activity until the first has been completely mastered...
2. Organise these threads according to an analytical plan – successions of elements as simple as possible, combining according to increasing complexity... Simple gestures – the position of the fingers, the bend of the leg, movement of the arms – basic elements for useful actions that also provide general training in strength, skill, docility.
3. Finalise these temporal segments, decide on how long each will last and conclude it with an examination, which will have the triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject undergoes the same apprenticeship and of differentiating the abilities of each individual.<sup>97</sup>

K-pop producers are aware of the image that such techniques can effuse and are quick to distance their own programs from negative perceptions:

On the outside it may seem that an idol group’s training follows a universally standardized system; however it is more fitting to make the process about finding each artist’s unique style and individuality. With this system, never seen before in any other country, each trainee can grow into a well-prepared artist.<sup>98</sup>

But even this apparent humanism is part of a Foucauldian disciplinary regime whereby “individuality” is sublimated into individual capacity:

4. Draw up a series of series; lay down for each individual, according to his level, his seniority, his rank, the exercises that are suited to him... At the end of each

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<sup>96</sup> A description by executives of “the best star they ever had”, Rain (Russel, *Pop Goes Korea*, p. 149).

<sup>97</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 157-8.

<sup>98</sup> J.Y. Park in *K-Pop's 'All-in-One' System: Why it Works for Idol Stars* (2012) allkpop <<http://www.allkpop.com/2012/07/k-pops-all-in-one-system-why-it-works-for-idol-stars>> at 12 July 2013.

series, others begin, branch off and subdivide in turn. Thus each individual is caught up in a temporal series which specifically defines his level or his rank.<sup>99</sup>

So assuming the production of K-pop idols is an example of the production of docile bodies *par excellence*, what does this have to do with the alleged historical continuity with authoritarianism? For one, both the fans who consume K-pop and the producers who create it have explicitly linked the production process to the specific historical conditions of the country. As one fan writes,

In a country that had a military government until 25 years ago and has grown to be an impressive industrial nation in the last decades, the matter of course young Koreans are taking this path is a different one. One that teenagers that have been raised westerly will barely be able to comprehend. South Korea's population knows that their country would not have come so far without the well-functioning system of school and work. Diligence is a highly valued virtue and the respect towards the ones who are working hard can be shown best through more diligence. And like this the country clicks like a clockwork in which one builds on one another. [sic]<sup>100</sup>

Similarly, Lee Soo Man, producer and founder of the contemporary production process,<sup>101</sup> comments on the unique conditions underlying the management system he helped forge:

The U.S. couldn't establish a management system like ours. Picking trainees, signing a long term contract, and teaching trainees for a long period of time, this just can't happen in the U.S. U.S. agencies are hired as sub-contractors after an artist has grown and gained popularity on their own. As a result, the agencies only play roles of sub-contractors, and can't make long-term investments in singer-hopefuls. However, in Korea and Japan, whose cultural industries developed later, agencies were free to make such contracts.<sup>102</sup>

Here there is the tacit acknowledgment by both the producers and consumers of K-pop that its features and practices could not have existed were it not for the legacy of a recently overcome authoritarianism. The sociopolitical structures of yesteryear are recognised as having residual effects on of the formation of the genre and its participants. This corresponds to the thesis that K-pop reflects the contradictory dynamics of the era seeing as they are deeply inscribed within its aesthetic features.

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<sup>99</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 158-9.

<sup>100</sup> Esther Klung, *The Role of K-Pop Idols in the Korean Culture [sic]* (2012) ColorsofKorea <<http://colorsofkorea.tumblr.com/post/25997260894/the-role-of-k-pop-idols-in-the-korean-culture-yg>> at 16 July 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Sarah Leung, *Catching the K-Pop Wave: Globality in the Production, Distribution, and Consumption of South Korean Popular Music* (2012) Vassar College <[http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/149](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/149)> at 18 July 2013, pp. 25-6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

Thus rather than embodying democratic practices (or at least effacing military ones) as one would expect in a period of strong democratic rhetoric, K-pop consistently deploys technologies which are far more in line with the processes and mentalities of authoritarianism. Indeed, it seems to have depended on them for its very emergence and constant reproduction.

### **Conclusion:**

It has been argued that despite the narrative of South Korea's "remarkable success" in converting to democracy after 1988, authoritarian practices still persist within the country's social, political and legal spheres. This was evidenced by the survival and increasing usage of the *Resident Registration Act* and *National Security Act*, the regulation of "dangerous communications" on the internet targeting heterogeneous social elements, and the "reform authoritarianism" manifest in policy development during the democratisation period. It was also argued that these contradictory dynamics are reflected in the aesthetic features of K-pop. This was demonstrated by the hierarchical and anti-individualistic structure of groups, the aesthetic necessity of strong yet normalised leaders, the military aspect of choreography, the micromanagement of seemingly spontaneous gesture, and the disciplinary nature of training regimes. These features combine to produce truly docile bodies in which the utility-obedience nexus is a paramount feature. The resulting functionalist reduction of the individual and the extension of control into their very being demonstrates the inadequacy of the dominant historical narrative. It is oblivious to the fact that the spectre of authoritarianism has not only survived in concrete political practices, but also in cultural productions which infiltrate the very bodies of those who participate in them.

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