

Hegemonic Mimicry: Korean Popular Culture of the Twenty-First Century by Kyung Hyun Kim. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 328 pp.

Hegemonic mimicry “sought to understand the blurring of boundaries between innovation and plagiarism and between hegemony and underdevelopment that has occurred over the past several decades” (x). Kyung Hyun Kim argues that Korean popular culture was born and formed under the influence of hegemonic American and local cultures. However, to be more precise, the American culture discussed here by Kim more closely resembles African American culture. In that sense, this book is reminiscent of Crystal Anderson’s *Soul in Seoul* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000). It differs from Anderson’s work in that it extends beyond an explanation of K-pop as a mere imitation and appropriation of African American pop music. For Kim, “K-pop glitter today represents an ideal of Asian affluence and glamour that is just as commodifiable as the porcelain beauty of a British film star, the hip-hop cool of black rappers from the ‘hood,’ or the sensuality of Latin American music icons” (xii). Kim explores the relationship between the United States and South Korea and the influence of the US military base *shodan* after the Korean War, and, at the same time, does not overlook the impact of traditional Korean performance arts such as *madanggeuk* and *pansori*. While interpreting the secrets behind the global success of Korean pop culture, or Hallyu, Kim aims to discuss the development of Korean popular culture within the crucible of globalization as well as narrate Korea’s modern and contemporary history after the foundation of the Republic of Korea. Kim describes the objective of the book’s diverse insights as follows: “My hope is that *Hegemonic Mimicry* will in a small way help further the discussion of race in the Asian and Asian American studies” (xv). This book appears to be somewhat ambitious, but it is undoubtedly sufficiently engaging to capture readers’ interest.

The book consists of seven chapters, in addition to a lengthy preface and introduction. The chapters lack continuity but are interconnected. Chapter 1 examines the short history of K-pop, K-cinema, and K-television. Kim effectively contextualizes the emergence of Hallyu within a broader historical framework. The chapter highlights how South Korea, in the postcolonial and postwar period, shifted away from a narrative dominated by the US military occupation and its role as a bulwark in the Cold War. This analysis provides a lens for understanding Hallyu as more than simply a cultural phenomenon, situating it within South Korea’s evolving historical identity and its redefinition of its global position. The chapter offers a nuanced exploration of the intersection between

history, politics, and culture.

Chapter 2 provides an insightful analysis of the history and aesthetics of rap music in South Korea through the lens of ethnic studies. By situating Korean rap within a broader sociocultural and historical context, the chapter examines how this genre has evolved as a form of expression, reflecting identity, race, and cultural exchange issues. The chapter will likely appeal to readers who are interested in the intersections of music, identity, and sociopolitical dynamics.

Chapter 3 offers a compelling exploration of the impact of digital-age surveillance on South Korea's film and television narratives. By analyzing how heightened surveillance practices shape storytelling, the chapter sheds light on how creative industries respond to and critique the pervasive presence of surveillance in everyday life. This analysis highlights the interplay between technology, societal norms, and artistic expression, showcasing how narratives in South Korea adapt to and comment on the realities of living under constant watch.

Chapter 4 delves into the phenomenon of a Korean variety game show's remarkable global success on the internet, examining the factors behind its widespread appeal. The chapter explores the cultural, stylistic, and structural elements that resonate with international audiences, as well as the role of digital platforms in amplifying its reach. By addressing both the "why" and the "how," it provides a comprehensive analysis of the show's success, shedding light on the interplay between Korean entertainment and global media consumption.

Chapter 5 offers an intriguing examination of two contemporary films centered on food—one primarily known within Korea and another that achieved global recognition. This comparative analysis explores how each film uses food as a narrative and cultural device, reflecting different societal values, traditions, and perspectives related to culinary culture. By juxtaposing a domestically popular film with an internationally acclaimed one, the chapter provides insights into how Korean cinema negotiates local and global identities.

Chapter 6 presents a fascinating juxtaposition of Samsung and K-pop, examining both through the lens of "meme-ification." The chapter highlights the interplay between corporate branding, cultural production, and digital virality by exploring how these two cultural and economic powerhouses leverage memes to build global recognition and influence. This innovative approach offers a unique perspective on how Korea's technological and cultural exports shape global perceptions.

The final chapter presents a captivating historical journey, tracing the roots of satire in modern Korean performance back to the *madanggeuk* tradition of the 1970s and to Choe Seunghui's dance pieces from the Japanese colonial era.

By connecting these early instances of satire to contemporary comedy sketches, mimicry, and the recreation of global Korean phenomena, the chapter offers a rich analysis of the continuity and evolution of satire in Korean cultural performances. This exploration underscores how satire serves as both a form of resistance and a means of cultural reinterpretation.

Kim's perspective enriches the understanding of Korean rap as not merely a localized adaptation of a global genre but as a meaningful site of the negotiation and reinterpretation of cultural and ethnic identity in Korea. He does not overlook the attempt to connect philosophical theories, such as those of Bhabha, Deleuze, and Saussure, with cultural theory. However, it appears that the author's own reflections on race and identity are the underlying intent of this book.

This book is recommended for those in English-speaking countries who wish to study modern and contemporary Korean history through a comparison with the localization of Korean popular culture in their own cultures.

Wonjung Min
Visiting Researcher
Seoul National University Asia Center