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International Music Business Marketplace

16 Dec 2021

Hip-hop in Korea and Taiwan

Hip-hop began as a culture and art movement in the Bronx borough in New York City. It was widely attained and popularized in the 1970s and 1980s. While the African Americans and the Latino Americans were facing tough times, poor economic conditions, rising crimes and poverty rates, they started to create their own kinds of cultural expressions, which would then form the four pillars of hip-hop. These four pillars originated in the 1970s and still continue to represent hip-hop culture today: Deejaying, rapping, break dancing, and graffiti painting. Besides the four elements, hip-hop is also generally broken down into three phases: old school, new school, and 21st century. So how was this specific music genre discovered and introduced? On August 11, 1973, DJ Kool Herc or Clive Campbell, set up his turntables and began switching from songs to songs as well as isolating and repeating music breaks at a house party. Later on, he mixed percussion beats with dance songs and developed drum beats and record scratches that became synonymous with some of the most popular hip-hop sounds. Besides developing new turntable techniques, Kool Herc also popularized rapping which mainly was about talking blues and black poetry. Towards the end of the old school hip-hop era, the hip-hop scene began to gain national recognition. From developing, introducing, and spreading hip-hop culture to the rest of the United States, DJ Kool Herc has been named the founding father of hip-hop. After entering the new school era, women were brought into the genre and it has also expanded beyond its

regional roots to other cities and slowly, to other countries. Today, hip-hop is a worldwide, best-selling music genre with new audiences and artists emerging everywhere around the world.

Building off of the original four pillars of hip-hop, all hip-hop artists were influenced by American culture and history. Korea and Taiwan are the two countries that I've selected in which hip-hop has been glocalized and both reflect and feed the global hip-hop culture and scene. The popularity of K-pop has skyrocketed in recent years, but even before the term "idol" was coined, there were artists that originated in the late 1980s and early 1990s that brought American hip-hop to Korean society. Starting off with a brief history of Korean hip-hop, in 1989, Seobeom Hong was the first pop singer to rap in Korean. His song Kim Satgat (김삿갓) has catchy melodic chorus and rap verses, but the rap had no flow or rhymes because he had no understanding of rap during that time. One year later, Hyun Jin-young, Seo Taiji and Boys, Deux, and many other artists debuted and brought Korean hip-hop to another level. Their rap lyrics were the first to contain rhymes, where each line ends with either the same vowels or consonants in Korean. Although they were considered as the pioneers of Korean hip-hop, they did not label themselves as "hip-hop" artists because during that period of time, hip-hop was only a device, it hasn't evolved to an end in Korea just yet. These kinds of music and artists were referred to as "rap dance" or "dance pop" with rap as embellishments. The term "rap dance" refers to K-pop's tradition, where most rap is added on for dance members. Moving forward to the 2000s, where Korean Americans played a significant role in localizing American hip-hop culture with their English speaking ability plus access and familiarity with the American background. Tiger JK of Drunken Tiger and his wife Yoon Mi-rae formed the Movement Crew, which later gave rise to famous hip hop groups such as Dynamic Duo, Epik High, Leessang, and Verbal Jint, that planted localized hip-hop into mainstream K-pop music. Specifically, Verbal Jint has revolutionized

rhyming in Korean hip-hop by adding similar sounding syllables rather than only the same letters. His rhyming skill came from his knowledge of English and he has successfully transferred these skills to the Korean language in creating a three-dimensional, progessive rhyming structure. Highly influenced by both the US underground hip-hop of the 1990s and gangster rap, the Korean American rappers have created message-driven music that later led to international popularity.

The concepts of glocalization and hybridization can effectively theorize the move of hip-hop culture into Korea. To be more specific, hybridization has a culture focus that emphasizes where traces of American culture exist in Korean culture within the context of hip-hop. Though highly influenced by American culture, Korean hip-hop music is not a simple copy and paste of American hip-hop. It has been glocalized to fit Korea's cultural norms, expectations, and history while maintaining important aspects of American hip-hop. However, the struggle to define authenticity and the idea of "keepin' it real" has prevented Koreans from being fully able to express themselves through the medium of rap. The use of American aesthetics can be used to argue the authenticity in the hip-hop diaspora. Generally, there are three forms of aesthetics in hip-hop: style, the use of language, and referencing. Style means the clothing and accessories choices of rappers, usually it's baggy sportswear and gold chains; the use of language refers to the vernacular speech in hip-hop culture; and referencing means the use of sound samples or quoting past texts, figures, or hometowns in lyrics. Korean hip-hop songs all contain these three forms of aesthetics; however, the problem is that some forms and symbols are not translatable across different cultures which leads to different interpretations of authenticity; therefore, how does the Korean hip-hop scene understand and define "keepin' it real?" The idea of "keepin' it real" in Korea can be defined as to have down-to-earth lyrics and upfront attitudes

through which Drunken Tiger challenged the system with their unique hip-hop sound and realistic lyrics. Their straightforward attitude was controversial in Korea's traditional, conservative media, but their contribution indeed was valued by the later generations of hip-hop artists.

In Korea in particular, there are two interpretations of authenticity in hip-hop. The transnational Korean hip-hop with emphasis on rapping was perceived to be authentic because it adhered to the American hip-hop styles; on the other hand, local Korean hip-hop is perceived to be more "real" by most of the Koreans because the lyrics and music typically sampled K-pop ballad or old iconic songs that Koreans can comprehend more easily. For example, some Korean hip-hop artists began using regional dialects in their rap to showcase strong regional identities. At the same time, the language choice also indicates another phase of Korean hip-hop's localization within its own country. Whereas the transnational hip-hop consists of frequent use of English in both lyrics and the way Korean rappers speak. For example, rappers from *Illionaire Records*, Dok2, Beenzino, and The Quiett speak English and use English words widely because they were raised in the United States. They believe the use of English is paying homage and showing respect to the original American hip-hop culture, but for the local Koreans who do not have similar background as those Korean-American rappers, they think the use of English is only for coolness and not authenticity. Korean journalists and industry analysts have critically discussed this matter and claimed that many Korean rappers prefer using English slang and curses over local Korean slang and curses in their lyrics, which damages Korean hip-hop's authenticity. Fortunately, in recent years, because of the huge impact of Korea's rap survival show *"Show Me The Money,"* many judges and rappers have been minimizing the use of English in their lyrics to better represent Korean culture and their backgrounds. A recent example is a

scene in *Show Me The Money 10,* where contestant Basick raps in mostly English and his producer Yumdda asked him to rewrite the lyrics again and delete all the English lyrics. As for referencing, many Korean rappers have referenced Korean places, cities, and social issues to illustrate the importance of rapping about situations and scenes to reflect the rapper's authenticity. Moreover, the concept of location referencing in lyrics allows rappers to claim ownership over their music which also reflects hybridization through the adaptation of local context. Additionally, other differences between the American and Korean hip-hop elements can highlight and explain that hip-hop has glocalized in Korea. In the U.S, becoming a rapper in the beginning was a way to revolt against the upper class White people; whereas in Korea, becoming a rapper at first was a form of rebellion against traditional Korean standards and lifestyle driven by Confucian ideology. Furthermore, lyrical themes also differed between the two countries. American hip-hop lyrics are more aggressive while Korean hip-hop lyrics are more sentimental which can often be associated with love. The main cause of this difference is that Korean hip-hop evolved from pop culture whereas American hip-hop began with street culture. Sentimentality in lyrics refers to the fact that many Korean rappers nowadays have started to openly express what they are not happy about in their relationships, social, and family life, disregarding the struggles with authenticity at the beginning of the Korean hip-hop scene. For example, many contestants in *Show Me The Money* have been rapping about social issues happening in Korea such as high unemployment rate, low and unfair compensation for artists, huge gap between lower and upper social classes, and more serious problems. Korean rappers are not reluctant to speak out for fear of consequences anymore compared to before.

Speaking about Korea, competition or survival shows cannot be neglected. Similar to the idol survival shows that form K-pop idol groups, Korean hip-hop also has its own genre's

competition shows. Three notable ones are *Show Me The Money (SMTM), Unpretty Rapstar, and High School Rapper. Show Me The Money* premiered in 2012, with the aim of letting people know that there is more than just idol dance music in Korea. So far, the show has ten seasons, with different formats and rules for each season. However, the similarities between all three rap shows are that there will be experienced rappers serving as producers, a role of both mentors and judges and only one rapper will be the winner with cash prizes and the chance to participate in a music project with famous MCs in the Korean hip-hop industry. Many traditions in the show have already become well-known in the local scenes of Korea and other Asian countries, such as guest featurings, collaboration tracks, diss battles, the handing out of the "Show Me The Money" necklace at first rounds, and competition songs available on streaming platforms. Particularly, *Unpretty Rapstar* was produced as a female-only version of *Show Me The Money* seeing that females often were disadvantaged in a male-dominated show. Similarly, *High School Rapper* was produced only for high school students who are rappers wannabes. While idol survival shows have produced multiple famous artists and groups, likewise, rap shows have also brought fame for numerous underground hip-hop artists. To name some notable ones: Loco, MINO of WINNER, BewhY, Woo Won-jae, nafla, Loopy, Punchnello, Wonstein, lilBoi, Mirani, BE'O, and more. Due to the creation and development of *Show Me The Money,* Korean hip-hop was able to resurge even with the rise of mainstream K-pop and idol groups. The show is so influential in the Korean hip-hop scene that it has already evolved into an icon for the hip-hop genre in Korea. Some might argue that SMTM has messed up Korean hip-hop culture by commercializing the industry to simply make a good show and generate profits, but in my opinion, it is the Koreans' own way of spreading its definition of authentic hip-hop culture. In other words, I can argue that this is how hip-hop culture has been glocalized in Korea's culture. Because of this particular

show, many rappers have gained exposure and respect that they could not have ever had before and many audiences who did not appreciate or understand hip-hop turned to supporting, appreciating, and respecting hip-hop culture.

Still staying in the Asia continent, Taiwanese have also transferred the American hip-hop culture and adapted to its own local culture. Similar to Korean hip-hop, Taiwanese hip-hop also started in the early 1990s, mainly popularized by the Taiwanese-American hip-hop trio, L.A. Boyz. They've achieved widespread popularity in Taiwan with its combination of American and Taiwanese background, where they wrote the lyrics in both English and Taiwanese Hokkien (a native language spoken by 70% of the Taiwanese population). For several years after, Taiwan's hip-hop scene remained underground. Thankfully, because Taiwan is a democratic country that enjoys the freedom of speech, which allows artists to express their thoughts freely with artistic freedom, it has allowed Taiwanese hip-hop artists to nurture and develop into rappers with authenticity. In the early 2000s, with record labels slowly propelling hip-hop, many pioneering artists such as MC HotDog, TriPoets, Dwagie, and 頑童MJ116 were able to shape the trajectory and solidify the presence of Taiwanese hip-hop. Today, Taiwanese hip-hop songs are released under prominent labels but still maintain the resemblance of American hip-hop culture with its Taiwanese culture. Moreover, many Taiwanese hip-hop songs nowadays showcase an extensive blend of trap, old-school boom bap, R&B, and jazz. Much like it has done in Korea, hip-hop has ignited new artistic visions for the Taiwanese. Before hip-hop went mainstream, songs that were popular in Taiwan were mostly conventional, ballad, and Mandopop. So it was mind-blowing when the Taiwanese heard MC HotDog rapping about his anxieties and what he felt about the Taiwanese society in a colloquial, bold way. By exploring and creating the unique beats, Taiwanese hip-hop artists have built a rich and varied hip-hop scene that stands out and reflects

the global music culture. Some notable artists that have show the diversity and excellence of Taiwanese hip-hop music include Leo王, 周湯豪NICKTHEREAL, Trout Fresh呂士軒, 高爾宣 OSN, and Øzi.

Just like how rap survival shows have helped hip-hop artists in Korea to gain exposure and respect, award ceremonies such as Golden Melody Awards (GMA) and Golden Indie Music Awards (GIMA) have pushed obscure artists into the spotlight. Leo王 won the Best Male Mandarin Vocalist Award at the 30th Golden Melody Awards, making history at the GMA by becoming the first hip-hop artist to win this category. Apart from the usual American rappers that typically rap about fame, money, and girls, Leo王 raps about his local Taiwanese background and everyday routines like skipping school. The difference in topics is a result of glocalization, seeing that many Taiwanese hip-hop artists have been rapping about Taiwanese local scenes, instead of copying and pasting what the American rappers rap about. Another influential artist in the Taiwanese music scene is Øzi, who produces and sings songs with a mix of urban hip-hop and R&B. He was born in Los Angeles and raised in Taiwan, so his music often consists of a blend of contemporary Western sound plus lyrical narrative style in Taiwanese. He also won the Best New Artist Award at the 30th GMA. Indeed, these Taiwanese rappers have made meaningful contributions and impact to the growth of Taiwanese hip-hop scene from the early 1990s to today, but in my perspective, Taiwanese hip-hop scene still is not as stable compared to that of the Korean's. The reason for this might be caused by the lack of support from the government and the general public in Taiwan, so Taiwanese hip-hop has not become a widely-accepted genre and still hasn't matured yet. Again, compared with the Korean hip-hop scene, although hip-hop has glocalized in Taiwan, it has not spread internationally. Therefore, besides China, there are few countries around the world that either know or have heard about

Taiwanese hip-hop music. Nevertheless, as a Taiwanese who've seen these hip-hop artists making their way out and succeed on this small island country, I believe that together with the unique cultural background Taiwan offers and the beauty within Mandarin and some other Taiwanese native languages, the Taiwanese hip-hop artists would be able to showcase the distinctive beats, rhythms, and rhymes to the rest of the world.

Certainly, hip-hop has glocalized in both Korea and Taiwan where hip-hop has adapted and evolved to blend or fit into these two countries' culture, language, history, style, and politics. It is clear that hip-hop is not of either Korea or Taiwan and rappers inevitably incorporate global elements into their artistic creation. Although it's a cultural artifact that the two countries have imported, this genre has been through two decades to be where it is now. Rappers in these two countries have worked really hard to transfer and introduce hip-hop to their own countries while maintaining elements in the original American hip-hop and combining it with their own cultures. Thus, to me, the definition of authenticity and "keepin' it real" requires only the expression of the rappers' true inner selves rather than following exactly what the American rappers were doing. Since hip-hop is all about lived experiences, rappers in different cultures reflect local concerns and issues through expressions of creative musical outlets, which is the main reason why hip-hop sounds unique in different countries as well as the result of music glocalization.

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