



The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture

Euny Hong

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A FRESH, FUNNY, UP-CLOSE LOOK AT HOW SOUTH KOREA REMADE ITSELF AS THE WORLD'S POP CULTURE POWERHOUSE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By now, everyone in the world knows the song "Gangnam Style" and Psy, an instantly recognizable star. But the song's international popularity is no passing fad. "Gangnam Style" is only one tool in South Korea's extraordinarily elaborate and effective strategy to become a major world superpower by first becoming the world's number one pop culture exporter.

As a child, Euny Hong moved from America to the Gangnam neighbourhood in Seoul. She was a witness to the most accelerated part of South Korea's economic development, during which time it leapfrogged from third-world military dictatorship to first-world liberal democracy on the cutting edge of global technology.

Euny Hong recounts how South Korea vaulted itself into the twenty-first century, becoming a global leader in business, technology, education, and pop culture. Featuring lively, in-depth reporting and numerous interviews with Koreans working in all areas of government and society, *The Birth of Korean Cool* reveals how a really uncool country became cool, and how a nation that once banned miniskirts, long hair on men, and rock 'n' roll could come to mass produce boy bands, soap operas, and the world's most important smart phone.

The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture Details

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From Reader Review The Birth of Korean Cool: How One Nation is Conquering the World Through Pop Culture for online ebook

Bryn Donovan says

This book was published a few years back, and I'm fairly sure it wouldn't have been without the popularity of the song "Gangnam Style" by Psy. I'm really glad it was, though -- it's a fun and fascinating read.

Hong writes about her own experiences of her adolescence in Seoul, about historical and present-day South Korean culture, and about the country's state-sponsored entertainment industry. I knew a little bit about state-sponsored industries in South Korea from the book *Bad Samaritans*, but I had no idea that K-pop and videogames were among those industries. Hong's voice varies from neutral journalistic tones to quite chatty and personal, which sometimes surprised me, but I didn't really mind.

I also felt like this book gave me a good place to start for K-dramas and Korean cinema.

a little faith says

I've been a fan of South Korean Entertainment for around a decade and like many others around the world I've seen it gain popularity steadily, then rapidly and now exponentially. However trying to understand a culture through media and TV alone is unsafe, naïve and short-sighted. Euny Hong provides not only the background to South Korea's seemingly rags to riches story but her own personal musings about how it came about for those not inclined to believe in fate.

Euny Hong's writing style is eloquent. I often forgot that I was reading a piece of non-fiction, as facts are told with wit and unique notes. The writing flows well so that it is a delightful read sprinkled with a good amount of pop culture. It is rich in details but in a voice that elevates it above the monotone nature of textbooks so that it does not read like a wiki entry. Right from the beginning the titles of the chapters hint at her wry humour. Above all else, I loved her take on things, the way she pieced together the past with the present through odd notes that highlight her oblique slant. It's a beautiful read and I intend to seek out her other works now, in particular her first book which was interestingly a fictional story.

Euny Hong's book has created a history that now frames the programmes I watch, the songs I listen to and a culture that interests me. Her approach is such that I can follow her method and apply it to other nations too, looking closer to home and even comparing themes. It has added depth to my knowledge of South Korea gleaned from TV and the internet so that I see aspects I was not able to before. Issues are now nuanced so that I may comprehend the struggle in a way that adds weight to the seemingly easy success that happened overnight, but was actually brought about through hard effort and a determined spirit.

Ebook provided through NetGalley.

Pawarut Jongsirirag says

?? 90's

These days, as Hong notes, the picture is vastly different; South Korea is the world's fifteenth largest economy, Seoul is one of the most futuristic cities in the world and Korean culture's cool cachet is on a seemingly unstoppable upward trajectory. Hong details these startling changes while making the compelling argument that it was all entirely by design. She writes that the Korean government, starting with Kim Dae-jung, "made the Korean Wave the nation's number one priority" and attributes much of the country's success to enlightened government support and investment. This includes wiring the entire country for high speed broadband and the creation of a billion dollar investment fund in 2005 to promote the country's soft power in the form of music, film and TV dramas amongst many others. Hong dedicates a chapter to each of these key

Hallyu industries and has insightful, intelligent comments to make about each. In one of the book's best chapters, Han – that arguably uniquely Korean feeling of sadness and resentment engendered by years of oppression and invasion – is also highlighted as a prime motivating force behind South Korea's rapid transformation and global ambitions. Hallyu would not be possible without the foundation of Han.

One of the most interesting elements of the book is the personal anecdotes, memories and experiences that Hong weaves into the narrative. For an American teenager suddenly transplanted into Gangnam, life was difficult. Mocked for her American accent, pressured to study and terrified of violent teachers, Hong struggled to fit in. It's in describing these experiences that Hong's wry, ironic voice fully shines through and it's this tone that makes "The Birth of Korean Cool" such a joy to read.

Jolene says

I won a copy of this through Gooreads First Reads

I really hope Hong plans to write more books in the future. Her writing makes you feel like she is sitting across the table from you and speaking to directly to you. There were only a few spots where I felt like I was actually reading a non-fiction book. Besides explaining how Korean Pop Culture has spread through out the world, she also (lightly) touches on S. Korea's economy right after the Korean War, the social changes the country has seen in just a few decades, the differences between her experience with Korea's education system in the 80s and what its like today, and the growing obsession with plastic surgery. Overall this was a very informative and entertaining read

Full review to come

Linh Hoàng says

Đây là một cuốn sách khá thú vị.

Thứ nhất, nói một chút về tác giả, là người Hàn ngữ sinh ra ở Mỹ, từ nhỏ ở Hàn ngữ từ nhỏ là luôn ghét vì mình là người Hàn. Vì vậy này thì đây là cuốn sách về văn hóa người Hàn, nhưng không phải là một góc nhìn "yêu nước" mà người ta có chút "kỳ lạ" ở đây về góc nhìn có sự so sánh thế giới này. Vì vậy nghĩ là nhà báo, tác giả có một quan hệ với khá nhân vật về văn hóa. Còn những nhân vật ở Hàn hay ở Mỹ thì nhìn thấy một thế giới khác nhau.

Thứ hai, tác giả khai thác về văn hóa khá sâu và đưa ra về văn hóa như một phần hay trong tính cách người Hàn, ví dụ như "han", về những sự kiện về văn hóa quá khứ, rồi về văn hóa áp lực, những sự thay đổi do bối cảnh nên.

Thứ ba, thế giới này mình phải đưa một thế giới gian trong về văn hóa mình về 4 năm trước thì nhìn thấy nó đúng và khách quan hơn. 4 năm về qua thì ra thêm tập 2 cho cuốn này nhé. Đúng là thế giới thay đổi nhanh về văn hóa. 4 năm trước khi cuốn này ra thì bà Park Geun Hye về một lần ghé thăm thế giới gian, gì khi mình về cuốn này bà đã ghé thăm nhà lao; 4 năm trước Simon và Martina sang nhà ăn với Eat Your Kimchi, gì nó đã trở thành Eat Your Sushi rồi; 4 năm trước Psy về "Gangnam Style" thành hiện tượng toàn cầu, khu vực nào cũng có một người như vậy này nhé, gì Psy chỉ còn là cái tên "vang bóng một thời", nhưng chỉ cho BTS, nhưng người mà hồi 2014 mới bắt đầu có chút tiếng tăm về "War of Hormone" và gì đây nhé

chung sản kh?u v?i nh?ng cái tên kh?ng nh? Nicky Minaj hay g?n nh?t là Charlie Puth. ?úng là v?t ??i sao d?i. Mà nh?c t?i K-pop và Hallyu, ?i?m mình r?t thích là cu?n này là nói ??n vai trò c?a chính ph?, ??c ??n ?o?n này mình m?i v? òa ra m?t chuy?n, chính ph? Hàn Qu?c qu? th?c có t?m nhìn chi?n l?c v?i Hallyu. H?i cách ?ây m?y n?m, ph?i nói là K-pop có chút ch?ng l?i, v?i nh?ng cái tên th? h? sau không m?y bùng n?, các nhóm nh?c debut hàng loạt v?i ch?t l?ng sản sản khó nh? n?i tên, quan tr?ng là Kpop dù thành công ? ??a h?t châu Á v?n ch?a có m?y tên tu?i ? nh?ng th? tr?ng khác, ??c bi?t là th? tr?ng M?. Nh?ng cái tên nh? BoA hay Wonder Girls ???c mang ?i chinh chi?n cu?i cùng tr? v? tay tr?ng. Mãi ??n khi có Psy (nh?ng thành công c?a Psy có chút "b? m?a mai" ? ??t M?, Psy c?ng không ph?i ki?u idol), r?i ??n l?t BTS v??n ra ???c th? gi?i, mình ?? r?ng h?n có s? nhúng tay không ít c?a chính ph?. Ôi ??c ??n ?ây mình t? d?ng m?i v? l? ra, ?i?u gì m?i th?c s? là "invisible hand" ? phía sau BTS.

Cu?i cùng, lí do mà mình nói cu?n nay thú v?, ch? ch?a ph?i hay là vì logic gi?a các ch?ng trong cu?n này th?c s? không ?n. Nh?t là ph?n ? gi?a, có ?o?n ?ang nói v? Hallyu, âm nh?c l?i nh?y sang nói v? Gái B?c Trai Nam r?i l?i quay l?i Hallyu, m?ch ??c t? d?ng b? ??t v?.

V?y thôi, mình s? không vi?t thêm b?i b?n thân ??t n?c Hàn Qu?c v?i mình r?t ??c bi?t, s? r?ng s? làm m?t ?i nhi?u ph?n khách quan khi nói v? n?i dung cu?n sách, nói chung ?ây là m?t cu?n sách thú v? dành cho nh?ng ai mu?n hi?u thêm v? Hàn Qu?c.

Brenna says

Hong's book is half-memoir, half-social study. She has a lot of material to cover, so often the chapters feel superficial, but the book is a breezy read that offers a solid lesson on Korea's move from the third world to the first.

As K-pop has been the major obsession of my life for the last eight years, the chapter covering K-pop was my favorite. But I did find the rest of the book insightful and full of things that will help fans of K-culture come to understand Korea's history and motivations.

The only thing I didn't like? Being reminded of the 20-ish hours I wasted watching "Winter Sonata."

Staci says

This is more personal than strictly research based like some other books on the topic; as such it has a lot of the author's opinions in it. For example: the artist PSY doesn't have the best of relationships with his father, which has been mentioned in several interviews. But according to the author of this book: "in the western media, the press wouldn't write about this even on a slow day". Or, continuing the theme, PSY has a song called "Father" but the author states that "no western pop icon would write a song about his or her parents, with the possible exception of Eminem's song 'Cleanin' Out My Closet'" -- she's trying to point out the differences between Korean culture and Western culture and how that led to the "Birth of Korean Cool" but she undermines herself in examples like these that are not only a broad generalization but obviously false.

She continues to make false generalizations, even when she gets down to talking about actual K-pop: "[in K-pop music videos] the girls always smile, the boys never do, instead bearing warrior expressions" -- um, no, not exactly. Rather the amount of smiles most likely has to do with what type of concept the video has: if it's

a cutesy, "aegyo" concept then you're likely to see plenty of smiles, regardless of gender. Several examples of boy group videos that are more "aegyo" and therefore have plenty of smiles include SHINee's "Hello", TVXQ's "Balloons", Boyfriend's "Boyfriend", B1A4's "Beautiful Target", etc. Likewise, girl groups don't smile as much when they're doing a sexy or more serious concept; examples include SNSD's "The Boys", Girl's Day "Something", After School's "First Love", etc. This book doesn't actually talk about K-pop that much even though it was published in 2014, well after PSY's viral success marked how much the Hallyu Wave seems to have shifted from Kdramas to music, therefore I guess it's not too surprising that Hong's reading of K-pop would be a bit lacking. Or maybe she's counting on her readers not knowing enough to catch her in these false statements: almost immediately after the "girls smile, boys don't" generalization she states that "to get an idea of how manufactured K-pop is, one Korean television program started four simultaneous and separate K-pop bands with a color theme. Collectively, they are called the Color of K-pop". No, no they didn't. That was a ONE TIME performance for an end of the year awards show that had different artists from EXISTING K-pop groups come together to perform as these color-named groups, they weren't actually new K-pop groups. Actually, collaborations amongst K-pop artists are quite frequent at award shows (as well as at other times), whether or not the collaboration gets a name. The crossing of label lines to work with artists not at your agency could actually have been an interesting topic (and if she wanted to talk about the manufacturing process of K-pop she could have talked about "visuals" and other members of groups who are not picked for their actual music ability but because of their looks) but, as usual, Hong misses the mark with her examples. Later on, when she's talking about how Korea overtook Japan as the major Asian cultural power, she gives an example (again trying to show how different the two cultures are, and again, being mistaken) about how member of Japanese girl group AKB48 wear school uniforms and sing that "My school uniform is getting in the way" while "in Korea, schoolgirl uniforms are only worn...for school". Again, no. EXO's "Growl", f(x)'s "Rum Rum Pum Pum", Apink's "Mr. Chu", BTS's "Boy in Luv" -- all of these had a uniform concept, even back in 2004 TVXQ wore uniforms for their debut song "Hug". To be fair, the number of groups with a uniform concept has definitely increased since the book's 2014 publication but the uniform concept, despite what Hong says was not unheard of before then, after all, the prime audience for K-pop (and indeed, many if not most of the idols in K-pop groups) are teenagers and would thus be able to relate strongly to such a concept.

I'm not sure how "Korean" Hong is considering she moved there when she was twelve and has also lived in other places like Europe but her Americaness seems a bit questionable to me -- again, she moved to Korea when she was twelve so while her early childhood was spent in America, her adolescence and early adulthood, arguably a person's most defining years, was not. This shows up at times in the book, for example, she writes "the American in me understands how easy it is to take pop music for granted as something that moody teenagers listen to in order to piss off their parents or deal with the boredom of living in suburbia"...um, when, in the 1950s? That sentence would make sense if you replaced "pop" with "rock" or "alternative" but pop? The only explanation I can think of to have that sentence make sense is that she is using a definition of "pop" that is different from most people's use of pop as a genre of music and instead means just "popular" (which has definitely been done before but gets really confusing when "pop" is considered it's own genre).

Also, I'm not sure what Korean Romanization system Hong is using, it doesn't appear to be the one currently used by the Korean government nor does it appear to be the McCune-Reischauer, the system that was by the Korean government until 2000. For example, above I used the word "aegyo", which is a way of acting in a cutesy manner; most people spell the word the way I did--aegyo. Hong chooses to spell the word "ehgyo", which I imagine would throw off a good portion of her audience who came to her book, like I did, because they got into K-pop or K-dramas and want to know a bit more about the culture and how it came to be so popular -- those people would probably already be a bit familiar with romanizing Korean names and words such as "aegyo" and "ahjummas" (or ajoomas, if you're Hong).

Overall, this book's strong points are the fact that it looks at the history and culture behind the rise of "Korean cool" beyond just looking at the shows, films, music acts, etc. that became well-known because of that rise. However, it does it in a more personal as opposed to research based way (even though Hong did interview several people for the book, her usage of those interviews is still juxtaposed by the tainting of her own personal thoughts to the degree that it starts to feel less like a professional interview and more like "this guy I talked to said...") and the above-mentioned generalizations can get in the way. There are other books that look at how and why Korean culture/Hallyu has become cool, I would recommend looking at one of those books instead.

Kristian Bjørkelo says

I was taken completely by surprise by *The Birth of Korean Cool*. I don't know what I actually expected, as one with only a passing interest in Korean pop culture. I've seen some Korean reality shows, followed some bands and drama. Mostly for the heck of it, and as a result of a general curiosity. And while I have grown critical of what I suspected was the machinations of a well oiled fabrication process, I lacked the cultural and historical context to fully comprehend it. Euny Hong has rectified that in a marvellous fashion.

In *The Birth of Korean Cool* she serves up well a well written context and explains how the past and future aspirations create what is the current state of the cultural industry in Korea. And industry that is dominated by large companies who are obedient servants of the Korean state. She effectively demonstrates the power a government has to shape not only the economy of a nation, but also it's culture. In particular a deeple confucian culture like the one in Korea.

Through this book I have found a better understanding of all the things about Korean pop culture and its popularity that I've had a hard time of grasping. It is well written, and the anecdotes used to illustrate the history of Korean culture are quite compelling. The images of Korean school discipline and inter-generational interaction will probably stick with me for some time.

Great read. And inspiring.

Marina says

**** Books 24 - 2016 ****

4 of 5 stars!

Should i mention again why this books is awesome?? I doesn't learn much about South Korea and more curious the story about North Korea.. After i read this books. wow okay just wow i've got so many information that i haven't know about South Korea before especially Hallyu wave.

You can saw a lot of my status updates for this books. some facts that really overwhelming me and i can get it why K-pop and hallyu wave is bigger like nowadays.

This books also already being translated by Bentang Pustaka. If you love korean culture (for me i am an VIP fufu) you should try read this books ;)

Jake Goretzki says

This is a well paced and personable look at the K-phenomenon, nicely augmented with that outsider-insider angle that comes from Hong having spent most of her childhood in the US and where being Korean was once embarrassing, not hip.

It's pretty useful on Korean culture in general. I love the idea of shame and rage ('han') being the engine of so much ambition and progress. I find myself thinking of Korea at moments as the Asian answer to Ireland (or perhaps Poland); dicked around by boorish neighbours for centuries, only to emerge with the social understanding and bitter experience of the bully to know how to stride into his living room and be welcomed as a sweetheart.

It's also interesting (for an unapologetic liberal capitalist type comme moi at least) just how much state investment and involvement there has been in the strategic direction of Korean enterprise (not to mention protectionism). Definitely helped.

Can't help admiring Korea hugely, really: the technophilia, the good looks and the sheer industry. There's also wry pleasure to be had from seeing them knock Japan off its perch, frankly. When I was growing up, Japan was the future - and Sony was the future of technology (not the laughing stock it is now). There are good reasons for it running out of steam and for Korea storming ahead (I had never heard of Galapagos Syndrome in economics and tech, but it's a pretty decent hypothesis). But sure as night follows day, K follows J. Good effort.

Amar Pai says

Breezy, cheesy, wheezy... it's an OK book but due to the memoir-ish nature of it, doesn't actually get into the details of Korean Cool as much as you'd expect. I mean she does get into those details, but it's all presented through this lens of personal experience that I didn't find that compelling. The whole thing just felt a little too light weight, e.g. it annoyed me that there's a chapter on "The Birth of Irony" where she argues that irony is only present in wealthy countries and Korea had to learn it to thrive... but there's zero evidence or explanation for her claims and the chapter goes off in a totally different direction!

There are some interesting tidbits in here about Korean schooling, Confucianism, Wan... I think the subject matter is fascinating; it just deserves a more thoughtful/compelling response.

Indah Threerz Lestari says

685 - 2016

Sejauh ini aku belum terkena gelombang Hallyu, khususnya dari sisi Drakor atau K-Pop (kalau manhwa mah lumayan banyak yang dibaca, meskipun cuma sedikit yang dikoleksi). Bukan berarti aku belum pernah mencoba menontonnya sedikit, tapi tetap saja tidak tertarik meskipun lingkungan sekitar sepertinya doyan benar.

Kalau dari sisi teknologi sih, ada beberapa barang merek Korea yang cukup lama kugunakan, terutama yang bermerek Samsung atau LG. Meski demikian, buat hp sepertinya aku masih setia dengan Sony.

Kita lihat saja nanti, apakah aku bakal tetap kebal dari drakor atau k-pop atau tidak :))

Anthony says

Great funny personal introduction to Hallyu Wave and "soft power" in general. I was a little bit familiar with some things from my time as a SONE, but this one really hits all the notes. It connects Korean economics, history, and geopolitics to Hallyu Wave in a serious way really well without being dull or academic. It's all framed in a bit of a way for green-eared Westerners to be like "I can't believe this!", which can be a plus or minus depending. But that's my demographic so it worked for me. Good Read (she does cite EatYourKimchi tho).

Teguh Affandi says

Setelah tertunda-tunda dengan bacaan lain (bukan berarti buku ini jelek, bagus bahkan) karena entah PR atau apa, buku ini tamat dengan cepat setelah seharian saya kunyah. Saya yang belakangan (mungkin dimulai dari dua tahun terakhir) memilih drama korea sebagai hiburan ketimbang nonton televisi kita, merasa yakin bahwa Korea punya rahasia dan sejarah panjang akan k-pop nya.

Dua drama yang membuat saya ngeh, bahwa being k-pop idol bukan seperti artis di indonesia. Ada aturan mengikat, dan tata kelola perilaku perihai image dan persona yang hendak disampaikan seorang idol kepada penggemar. **Producer** dan **The Best Hit** adalah dua drama yang bisa membuat kita menengok sejenak bahwa menjadi idola di Korea bukan mudah, ada latihan keras dan juga persaingan dengan sesama peserta karantina. Tapi dengan membaca buku yang ditulis oleh orang Korea sendiri, kita jadi yakin bahwa di tengah gemerlap dunia populer Korea kita juga disuguhi budaya mengerikan di Korea sendiri. Percaya dukun, pendidikan dan les-lesan yang mengerikan, juga operasi plastik.

Setidaknya buku ini buku ringan yang membahas secara mendalam bagaimana Korea menjadi sekeren sekarang, dan se-cool sekarang.
