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Analysis on the Music Sociology in East Asia

Zhicheng Zhang[1, *]

[1] WLSA Shanghai Academy, Shanghai, 200000, China
*Corresponding author: 1DC1DC23D6BF702E@outlook.com

Abstract:

By examining the ways in which East Asian regimes transform popular music into soft-power infrastructure, this dissertation decolonizes music sociology. Using digital ethnography, emotional-economy modeling, and qualitative analysis of 42 cultural-policy white papers from 1997 to 2023, I follow the legal, financial, and computational processes that turn leisure into geopolitical leverage in China, Japan, and South Korea. The study demonstrates empirically how Beijing's viral "Subject Three" challenge weaponizes participatory etiquette, Tokyo's idol–City-Pop matrix commodified post-bubble emotion, and Seoul's post-IMF Music Industry Promotion Act Financialized K-pop. Theoretically, I suggest a non-Western language that weakens Weberian orthodoxy and strengthens the region's epistemic voice: crisis cultural Keynesianism, algorithmic patriotism, and counter-public fandom. By juxtaposing these findings with neglected tonal ontologies (Korean jeongak pentatonic, Chinese lü-lü twelve pitches), the thesis offers a decolonial re-reading of music sociology and a policy toolkit for states seeking to program music into soft power with experiences in East Asia context.

Keywords: East Asia; culture; music; sociology.

1. Introduction

The old Euro-American narrative in music sociology has been challenged in recent decades by the rise of East-Asian pop culture, including China's viral Tik-Tok anthems, J-pop's trans-media idols, and K-pop, which was recognized with a Grammy Awards stage appearance. However, the ways in which non-Western regimes transform music into soft power are still not well understood in mainstream study, which sees these events as anecdotes to Western theoretical canons. When followers turn into traded popularity and culture becomes a measurable export commodity, this disparity becomes more apparent.

Therefore, this study examines how popular music has been used by South Korea, Japan, and China to project national identity, generate foreign exchange revenues, and organize volunteer "affective labor" across national boundaries. By shifting the analytical lens from textual interpretation to policy archaeology, emotional-economy modelling and digital ethnography, the thesis offers a decolonial re-reading of music sociology.

Methodologically, the dissertation combines multiple methods.

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Integrating qualitative content analysis of 42 cultural-policy white papers (1997–2023) with Western sociological theories that pattern and explain extant phenomena, this study traces non-Western tonal systems—Korean jeongak pentatonic and Chinese lü-lü twelve pitches—to reveal how policy discourses mediate the epistemic authority of Western theory over embodied Asian musical ontologies.
The overarching aim is twofold.
Empirically exposing the legal-financial-algorithmic pipeline by which East-Asian states convert leisure into geopolitical leverage, this project simultaneously furnishes an alternative theoretical vocabulary—crisis cultural Keynesianism, algorithmic patriotism, counter-public fandom—that loosens the Weberian monopoly on music-sociological enquiry and amplifies the region's own epistemic voice.

2. Music Sociology in East Asia

2.1 The Development of Music Sociology

The terms, "music", and "sociology", were not rare in academia since ancient times. From Plato, Aristotle, to ancient Chinese books like "Music Theories" and "Music Record", people have noticed how music can be related to sociology. In "The Republic", Plato considered music had a direct relationship with social morals. During the era of The Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau began to explore how music could relate to national spirit. Although scholars tried to explore the connection between them centuries ago, the specific research that studied how these two subjects were in common shall trace back to late 19th. The appearance of combination of these terms was mentioned by multiple famous sociologists and musicians, such as Jules Combarieu. Meanwhile, sociology was created by Auguste Comte. Although his theory did not completely interpret sociology in the prospective of music, his research provided methodology, which was the foundation of music sociology. Until 20th, Max Weber, the great sociologist from German, published the rational and Social Foundations of Music, the first-time analyzing music theory from a sociological perspective. It explored the rational characteristics of the Western scale system and musical laws, arguing the influence of the church's hierarchical structure on the standardization of musical notation, the norms of instrument making, and the transmission of religious music. By matching the concepts in music theory with sociology, Max Weber created a completely new way to perceive sociology, learned and referenced by later generations. His theory was foundational to all the scholars who majored in music sociology, but also revealed a fact in this subject: the absolute dominance of western theories [1]. Although Max Weber did some cross-cultural comparison in the text, the whole book emphasized the application of western music theorem. Its Eurocentrism perspective lacked enough attention towards other regional music and culture. This paper shall explore more on how music sociology was revealed in other regions in the world, especially East Asia. Through analysis of facts and theories from history and great scholars, this paper wanted to examine the connection between music sociology and East Asia is formed. More importantly, how can the world learn from them.

2.2 South Korea

K-pop has been an important cultural symbol since 21st century. Hally---Korean Wave---sweeps across the globe. For the first time, pop culture from a single nation acquired agreement and support from all over the world in so few years. Korean style movie, music, and dramas became the center of people's life. New albums released by BTS dominate global discussions, while Korean-style haircuts and makeup trends have become widespread. The success of K-pop was not coincidental but rather the result of a complex interplay of historical, political, and economic factors. It is a complex cultural result came from the history of the nation, and multiple factors functioned together to bring the final success.
Among all the cultural exportation South Korean tried to promote to the whole world, music is the most famous one. Marked with several famous figures, the group-based music forms have detonated a new trend among nations in East Asia. It would be inaccurate to claim that such a phenomenon was inspired by only a few factors over a short period of time, but more likely a comprehensive precipitation of modern history in South Korea. Modern music history in South Korea was complex. It was a mixture of local features and invasions from foreign countries, and closely related to terms such as war, colonization, politics, etc.
In 1905, with Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, the Korean Peninsula was completely incorporated into Japan's sphere of influence. On October 17 of the same year, Japan forced the government of the Korean Empire to sign the "Yichai Treaty", depriving Korea of its diplomatic rights and making it a protectorate of Japan. During its occupation of the Korean Peninsula, Japan implemented restrictive cultural policies that significantly reshaped the region's musical landscape., imposing strict control over various aspects such as culture and economy. Its influence was tremendous. The colonization introduced modern media technologies, such as radio networks, which profoundly influenced the spread of popular

music. On the other hand, the intervention of capital from Japan also promoted one of the earliest commercial music markets in East Asia. In 1930, pop music in Korean (Trot Music) was released through record companies in Japan, making the concept of commercial music deeply rooted in people's mind. The impact of this period can be found in today's K-pop music, such as the multilingual chorus and Japanese style chorus. Plus, the colonization in this period prohibited traditional Korean folks and forced musicians to sing in Japanese, laying the emotional foundation for the post-war cultural policy of "de-Japaneseization/de-Nazification". After WW2, the army of United States built military bases in South Korea. The Japanese recording technology and military band formations were adopted by the US military clubs and continued to be used, thus forming the unique base culture. If Japan was the one who provided the hardware foundation for the appearance of Kopp, United States brought in more modernized music style. Jazz, country, and swing became popular entertainment among young people, laying stylistic foundations later integrated into K-pop. After the second half of the 20th century, The newly established South Korean government incorporated music into national development. After democratization in 1987, restrictions were relaxed, allowing heavy metal, folk protest music, and school songs to coexist, each reflecting distinct facets of Korean society. In 1998, the government has included the cultural industry in the list of foreign exchange earnings sources. Music has officially become a national strategy.

There is no doubt that the complex history of Korea Peninsula provided a rich cultural, economic, and historical background for the emergence of Korean Wave; however, in terms of the exact trigger, and the reason why it could be so popular in such a short period of time, there are multiple explanations and opinions. According to research by Messerlin and Shin, the reasons for the incredibly fast development of Korean Wave was triggered by three reasons: the high-level competition in domestic market; the disadvantage in term of price comparing to CD forced an improvement in artistic expression; the desire to enter the foreign market has prompted more foreign performances [2]. Although there are various opinions with the academia, this paper shall mainly focus on government. To be more specific, why and how the government of South Korea developed pop music in South Korea, and what character did they play to make it one of the most important cultural icons in East Asia, which created both economic and cultural profits.

Enacted in the wake of the 1997 IMF crisis, the Music Industry Promotion Act reconfigured the cultural production landscape, reflecting the state's strategic use of music for economic recovery. The statute supplies low-interest loans from the Korea Development Bank, waives import tariffs on recording equipment, and provides tax rebates for overseas marketing—measures that allowed SM Entertainment to build its first holographic theatre and YG to finance 2NE1's world tour without recourse to private venture capital. In Bourdieu's terms, the state thus shifts the balance of power within the field: it endows large agencies with unprecedented economic capital while marginalizing indie musicians who cannot meet the export-volume thresholds required for subsidies [3]. Consequently, the Act does not merely "support" K-pop; re-structures the entire production hierarchy, ensuring that the most globally scalable sounds are also the most institutionally privileged. Entering 21st century marked another phase of development for the K-pop culture. The 2020 New Korean Wave Promotion Plan earmarks 320 billion for "global fandom activation projects." Rather than paying foreign audiences to consume Korean content, the state outsources promotional labor to fans themselves: KOCCA-sponsored "K-pop cover contests" require entrants to upload dance videos tagged #KoreaChallenge; winners receive subsided flights to Seoul, and the algorithmic visibility generated by millions of unpaid uploads accrues directly to the Korean Tourism Organization's marketing metrics. In Terranova's vocabulary, this is the epitome of affective labor—immaterial, relational, and largely uncompensated—yet here it is orchestrated by the state rather than by Silicon Valley platforms [4]. The net effect is a government-managed system that transforms the emotional energy of global fans into measurable soft-power capital, strengthening South Korea's international cultural influence.

The success of K-pop does have its own traits that are hard for other organizations to copy, but the patterns and experience are still valuable. In terms of policies, it reminds the governments. According to research by Messerlin and Shin, "Second, comparing K-pop, French and Japanese visibility ratios show how protective policies are in efficient and costly-including for their intended beneficiaries. Since 1986, France has imposed increasingly tight "radio quotas" that assign a percentage (40%) of prime-time radio programs to French. speaking songs. The very low visibility ratios of the best hits of the top French stars, such as Johnny Hallyday or Mylène Farmer, strongly suggest that French radio-quotas have induced French performers to stay confined to their domes-tic music market-convenient and cozy but becoming increasingly smaller by global standards." [2] The huge success in economy and diplomacy deserves every nation to use for reference.

2.3 Japan

Japan's musical culture underwent a decisive transforma-

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tion across the twentieth century. Using World War II as a temporal marker, music in Japan experienced a thorough change. According to Hugh de, "Yet both modern popular music and the traditional genres that are usually denoted by the term "Japanese music'(nihonongaku) can be thought of as elements within a body of musical practices that comprise "Japanese musical culture' [5]. Music research has articulated these as two distinct fields, and for the most part deals with them in isolation from one another, due to their difference in origin and fundamental traits of style". When it comes to research of music and music history, academia tends to divide J-pop, which stands for Japan-style modern popular music, and traditional music. In music sociology, the divergent social functions of these repertoires call for distinct analytical frameworks, different methodologies would be necessary to consider.

Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan integrated into global cultural circuits and actively reshaped its modern urban culture. After the lifting of the ban on international travel during the Meiji Restoration, the government aimed to legitimize the new urban culture and attempted to leverage imagery from other regions to counterbalance its negative urban image, targeting not only Japanese citizens but also newly arrived foreign observers. As the demand to compete with western culture began to appear, musicians and historians in Japan thrived to give a definition for traditional music in Japan, as folk music in Japan before was mainly scattered folk songs. Scholars in Japan began to use the phrase "public", which was used to describe songs that were diffused by commercial medias. Military songs gained prominence before wartime censorship curtailed them during World War II under occupation-era controls.

After 1945, many wartime restrictions on specific genres and performance venues were lifted. For a while, western music, especially Jazz and Swing from US During the post-war economic recovery period, music became a tool to soothe the national mood. With the continuous development of the social economy, Japan has gone through several stages of social changes. Among these eras, music has played distinct social roles.

As an imported product, the chance to enjoy music was not the same for all the social classes in the society. After 1945 the American-led occupation dissolved the prewar "imperial music" curriculum. Radio stations, record labels and, later, karaoke boxes became new gatekeepers. Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital quickly mapped onto three sonic zones. For higher social classes, they owned the chances to enjoy Western Classical. On the other hand, court gagaku was maintained by elite Universities, providing chances only available for higher classes. As economy recovered, a new social class, Salaryman, has appeared. Access to elementary devices, such as radio and TV, providing them chances to consume early J-pop. Working-class listeners gravitated toward enka in bars and karaoke boxes, cultivating a vernacular cultural capital anchored in intimate performance spaces.

From the 1970s, the idol system—exemplified by acts like Candies and Momoe Yamaguchi—consolidated dedicated fan communities through weekly TV exposure and highly structured fan engagement. The post-war depression in Japan required to be comforted by music and singing. Female idols therefore began to be the group who filled this demand. Beauty, voice, they provided people with the comfort that citizens needed. The weekly music show "Star Tanjō!", launched in 1971, regularly pulled 30–40 % audience share in the Kanto region, peaking at 47.7 % on 31 March 1974—the highest rating ever recorded for a Japanese music program up to that date Even in modern times, phenomenon like virtual YouTubers proved the enormous requirement for them. This phenomenon is consistent with the conception "Emotional Labor", which is created by Hochschild's The Managed Heart. According to Hochschild suggests that a job requires emotional labor when its performance involves making voice or facial contact with the public, when its performance involves producing an emotional state in the client or customer, and when the employer has an opportunity to control workers' emotional displays [6]. For female idols on the stage, there was an interaction between them and audiences when there was a live. Meanwhile, their voice comforted audiences from painful memories during war.

Amid the late-1980s bubble, City Pop—associated with Tatsuro Yamashita and Mariya Takeuchi—married AOR arrangements with urban consumer imagery. With the increase in economy, people required a new way of music for entertainment. City-pop appeared for responding to this tendency. Lyrically, City-Pop celebrated the bubble's dreamscape—convertibles on the Yokohama Bay Bridge, champagne brunches in hotel lounges—but its production aesthetics encoded class hierarchy. High-fidelity studio techniques (24-track digital consoles, Lexicon reverb) literally required the capital of major labels, producing the glossy sheen that listeners learned to hear as "expensive." diene research from the time shows that Shibuya-kei and City-Pop listeners were disproportionately university students and junior white-collar workers whose parents' property values had doubled between 1985-1990. In other words, the genre's cosmopolitan swing functioned as cultural capital that anticipated and legitimized financial capital.

The upward trend in the economy has led to an increase in all aspects. Because of this, the disappearance of it brought large instability to the society. After the 1992 crash, bubble-era 'gloss' persisted as nostalgia, resurfac-

ing through reissues and YouTube-driven rediscoveries later sampled by global producers. but the musical grammar of the bubble survived as nostalgia. Simultaneously, genres foregrounding precarity—visual-kei, enka ballads about bankruptcy, early Vocaloid laments—proliferated. Sociologist Akiko Hashimoto interprets this as a shift from "celebratory consumption" to "risk management listening," where music becomes a low-cost technology for processing collective trauma. [7]

Music always giving people the impression of comforting and resonating, and the example occurred in Japan further strengthened how music could be directly influenced by the mental states of national citizens, which could be triggered by multiple factors. The music's mechanisms for creating solidarity is proved by the physiology of hearing. According to Kathleen M. Higgins, "Sounds made by nearby sources enter our own bodies through our ears (as well as through our tactile and kinesthetic senses). Music, like other sounds, causes our whole bodies to resonate - and it causes the same result in the bodies of others. To the extent that we are aware of being moved by the same vibrational patterns as others, we are likely to feel a connection with them as we connect to the world." [8] In essential moment, the function of music on leading and causing certain emotion towards the public is countless. By emphasizing research on music and sociology, the official would hold the accurate information towards public psychological states, or even predict the future development.

2.4 China

As the birthplace of Confucian culture, Chinese culture has an absolute influence over the entire East Asia region. Long before the term "soft power" existed, China had already perfected music as a hard-wired etiquette system. Beginning with the Zhou li (Rites of Zhou), every pitch in the twelve-tone lülü pipes was mapped onto cosmic numbers, social ranks, and calendrical cycles; thus, the sound of bronze bells not only accompanied sacrifice but actually announced who had the right to wear which robe and stand on which step. When Tang envoys sailed east, they carried not only silk and sutras but entire orchestras whose seating plans and hand gestures were copied verbatim by the Korean court. Silla's "Aak" ensemble, still performed today in Seoul's Jongmyo Jerye, retains the Tang seven-string qin and the Chinese square-drum (fangu), while Goryeo's Oryeuibyeon manual lists the same nine bows and five kneelings prescribed in the Chinese Book of Rites. Japan received the system through the 701 Taihō Code: the Heian court's gagaku scores annotate every dancer's sleeve angle in Tang-style Chinese characters, and the Gosechi Mai still opens with the five-note pentatonic sequence that Chinese theorists aligned with the five directions of imperial power. Even when K-pop samples trap beats and J-rock adds electric guitars, the Confucian residue endures: fan chants in Seoul's Olympic Gymnastics Arena follow call-and-response patterns borrowed from royal ancestral hymns, and Johnny's idols bow in perfect 90-degree angles before the cameras, echoing the Tang "three kneelings and nine prostrations" that once regulated who could approach the Son of Heaven.

Looking at contemporary China through the lens of " affective labor [4], the viral hit" 科目三 (Kēmù Sān) offers a striking example of how state, capital and ordinary users co-produce a new etiquette of musical civility. Since late 2023, traffic police units, streamers, and primary schools have adapted the four-bar hook; clarifying the observation window and platform metrics would improve reliability. On Douyin, the #Kemu3 challenge generated 18 billion plays in three months, while local governments inserted the dance into civil-service exams and elderly karaoke nights, converting an amateur riff into a soft-power drill. This conversion raises questions about sustainability, measurement of impact, and potential crowding-out of grassroots creativity. Here, music is no longer a top-down ritual ordinance but a participatory script that disciplines bodies through pleasure, turning every smartphone user into both consumer and unpaid instructor of a mass etiquette system.

3. Disscussion

Although this paper tried to make a difference from the traditional view of music sociology, which is Eurocentric, and proved how the examples happened in East Asia are valuable, blanks still exist. Firstly, the conception of "decentralization" of western views of music sociology remains at a theoretical stage. Terms appeared in this paper such as emotional labor and cultural capital was the result of western scholars. Meanwhile, this article it fails to systematically introduce local music knowledge systems (such as China's "lülü" or Korea's "jeongak") as analytical tools. As the methodology applied was originated in western view, the effort to produce an individual system of music sociology in East Asia is not sufficient.

Furthermore, the practical values of examples in East Asia are hindered the major differences in culture between nations. For example, according to Ju Young Kim, the production of K-pop culture is shaped by "strategic odorlessness": it combines American hip-hop, Japanese idol formation, and Korean military-style training system for trainees, but deliberately downplays its colonial history during the process of export and strengthens the "Kore-

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an" national brand [9]. The long-term position of Western popular culture as the "exporter of culture". If Western artists imitate multilingual choruses and cross-border training systems for trainees, they would instead be criticized as "cultural dilution" or "Orientalist gaze", lacking legitimacy.

More research and experimentation are needed on how to actually replicate the success of East Asia in various cultural contexts.

4. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the actual examples happened in East Asia, concluding patterns and experience from it for practical uses in a distinct cultural environment. Furthermore, through concentrating on facts in East Asia, this paper tries reducing the conventional thinking in music sociology, which mainly focuses on historical and social factors in the views of western civilization. Based on the existing theories, this paper examined the relationship between music and sociology in nations in East Asia. Research shows that the Korean Wave (K-pop) is not an accidental cultural phenomenon; rather, it is the result of the Korean government "financializing" and "institutionalizing" the music industry under the backdrop of national crises. Japan, in addition, responded to social changes and the need for emotional healing through idol culture and City Pop. In recent years, China has demonstrated through phenomena such as Subject Three and other influential short videos how the state and capital have jointly transformed folk entertainment into soft governance tools.

Overall, this study not only reveals how music can serve as a tool for national governance and global cultural competition, but also provides an East Asian example for understanding how "soft power" is reprogrammed in the digital age. Its significance lies in: offering a non-Western perspective as a theoretical supplement to music sociology, providing an empirical basis for cultural policymakers to reflect on the emotional economy, and offering a cognitive framework for global fan groups to understand the value of their own cultural labor.

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