A Reflection on Those with “Gangnam Style”

Sean Ji

It was like nothing I had ever witnessed. On October 5th, 2012, a massive mob swarmed Duke’s campus, swallowing up the grass on Main Quad at a deadly pace. Sonorous music blared throughout the serene autumn air, startling an otherwise quiet, sunny afternoon. Here is how the event developed: at first, giant speakers placed on the corners of the quad started to blast an electro synth tune accompanied by a thumping bass beat and foreign lyrics. Once the music started, a group of approximately fifteen students started to perform a specific choreography; they jockeyed and shuffled in unison, perfectly in sync with the beat. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, a couple hundred students, of all ethnicity and color, rushed out at the song’s chorus to join in. Many of them wore silly costumes or donned cheap plastic sunglasses that one often finds at a college tailgate. The few bystanders who did not recognize the song seemed bewildered as they witnessed this flash mob¹ on their way to class – who are these people, and what are they doing? For those who recognized Psy’s latest global hit single, however, it was certain: Gangnam Style² fever had struck Duke.

The man responsible for this global phenomenon is Jae-sang Park, more commonly known as Psy. Park is one of the most controversial artists in the Korean music industry today. His songs often focus on media-sensitive topics and are frequently accompanied by somewhat sensual choreography. As a result, the older and more conservative Korean population frowns upon the artist, but the younger and more liberal audience loves Psy’s charisma on stage. Even by appearance, Psy is not your regular Korean pop star. Standing at just 5 feet 7 inches, Psy is a chubby little man who resembles your dad’s drinking friend in a pub more than he does a celebrity³. His homely and humorous image differs greatly from that of other iconic Korean pop stars, such as Rain⁴ and Se7en⁵. And because he is very different from the other pop icons, Psy always seemed like a second-tier pop star to me: he has always been pretty popular, but he never

¹ A public stunt in which a group of dancers march into a public area and dance to a specific choreograph in front of an unsuspecting crowd
² http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19f0
³ http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%EC%8B%B8%EC%9D%B4
⁴ http://www.rain-jihoon.com/n2/
⁵ http://www.ygfamily.com/artist/Main.asp?LANGDIV=K&ATYPE=2&ARTIDX=16
seemed to be among Korea’s elite. As such, Psy shocked me (and the rest of the world) when he became the first Korean celebrity in history to obliterate the formidable cultural barriers that have stopped so many stars before him and successfully debut in the US with his most recent hit, *Gangnam Style*.

Psy’s newest single has been absolutely sensational since its release in July, and its impact has been nothing short of meteoric. As the song exploded online, I witnessed its unprecedented rise, both in-person and through social media. At first, my Korean friends started posting the song on their Facebook pages, gushing over the song’s infectious vibe. Then, surprisingly within two weeks, my non-Asian friends’ started to post the video on their walls as well, catching on with the song’s groovy beats despite not understanding a single word of the lyrics. Finally, on October 5th, my experience with the song’s popularity reached its climax, as I watched a couple hundred Duke Students (some of whom happily skipping class to join in) dance to the song in unison, causing a brief uproar on Main Quad.

The *Gangnam Style* flash mob on West Campus Main Quad was organized by Duke Korean Undergraduate Student Association (KUSA), and their initiative enabled me to recognize the song’s impact in the US. During my four years at Duke, KUSA and its Korean international students always seemed to keep to themselves, rarely publicizing their events to the larger campus community. *Gangnam Style* flash mob was the first event in which the group broke that mold and actively sought a bigger presence outside of its own comfort zone. Watching the event unfold, I strongly believed that only one thing could have led these Korean international students to step out and daringly promote *Gangnam Style* to the entire student body: national pride. And as a shy witness and another Korean student who could not bring himself to join the fun, I confess that I, too, vicariously felt lifted; my country produced something very special for the world to see.

As I considered *Gangnam Style*’s strong impact on me and my surroundings, I began to wonder why it was so popular. Numerous Korean pop stars before Psy have also attempted to enter the music market in the US, but none has been even close to his level of success: what made *Gangnam Style* so special? After listening to the song repeatedly, I realized that although the song’s unprecedented rise in the US is exceptional, it is not necessarily enigmatic; upon
further examination, the song possesses unique qualities that can embrace both the Korean and non-Korean audience.

Furthermore, what is more intriguing is that one could interpret *Gangnam Style* as a social criticism. Through its lyrics and music video, Psy seems to subtly attack excessive materialism in today’s society. If that is the case, however, *Gangnam Style* inevitably points its condemning finger towards its most faithful advocates in America: Korean international students. Before diving in to understand the intricacies of this irony, however, let us first examine the song’s phenomenal rise in the US.

**Why Is It So Popular?**

Since the song’s release, Psy has ventured into places in the American market where no other Korean artist has gone before. The video has the most number of views on YouTube, and almost all American radio stations play the song repeatedly throughout the day. Furthermore, numerous American celebrities have also endorsed the song: Brittany Spears, Snoop Dogg, and Justin Bieber have all officially tweeted their fondness for the song, and talk show hosts such as Jay Leno seem to never stop discussing Psy during their shows. And, if such exposure to the American media was not enough already, Psy even made it to NBC’s Today Show, performing his world famous dance right in the middle of Times Square.

So what makes Psy’s song so popular internationally? First, the song’s addictive electro house beats appeal to a universal audience. In recent years, electro music has become very popular on the global scene. Characterized by groovy electronic beats and heavy bass, electro is often played in parties and night clubs where many young people gather. *Gangnam Style* seems to have caught this trend, attracting the young generation of all nations, even those for whom the lyrics is a just a jumble of strange syllables.

---

6 LMAO, Steve Aoki, and Skillrex are electro artists that most young men and women would recognize today
The song’s second major appeal seems to stem from its choreography, in which Psy hops around as if he is jockeying a horse. His dance moves have been absolutely viral; coupled with Psy’s image as a short, fat Asian man, the humorous choreography has created a massive fan base that attempts to copy his moves. The simplicity of the choreography makes it easy for fans to follow; as a result, people of all sorts of background, from college students to professional dancers, have replicated Psy’s dance and have posted their work online on YouTube. Moreover, as a byproduct of such phenomenon, Gangnam Style flash mobs have spread like wild fire across colleges in the US, with YouTube videos documenting each and every incident.

**The Message behind Gangnam Style**

Although the song is characterized by its hip beats and humorous dance moves, the underlying message to its audience may be quite heavy. Gangnam is the name of Seoul’s southern district. The name literally means “River South,” or south of the Hangang River that runs directly through the middle of Seoul. The area is populated by the highest income class in Korea, the embodiment of Korea’s one-percent. And though high income does not necessarily equate excessive materialism, residents of Gangnam and ostentatious spending habits often go hand-in-hand in Korean society today.

Within that context, Psy seems to subtly ridicule Gangnam’s materialism through his music. During the video production’s behind-the-scenes interview, Psy is quoted, "Human society is so hollow, and even while filming I felt pathetic. Each frame by frame was hollow." *Gangnam Style* suggests that people in Gangnam are very “hollow,” luxurious on the surface but lacking substance within. Right at the start of the video, the suggestion satirically reveals itself: the audience first sees Psy tanning under a beach parasol, presumably at a beach. The camera then zooms out to reveal that
he is actually just in the middle of a local playground sandlot. Luxurious on the surface, pitiful underneath.  

Furthermore, one can recognize Psy’s subtle message during the first verse of the song:

A girl who is warm and congenial during the day  
A classy girl who knows how to enjoy the value of a cup of coffee  
A girl whose heart gets hotter when the night comes  
A girl with that kind of twist

In the verse, Psy professes that he likes a woman who can enjoy a cup of coffee during the day. His confession may seem trivial, but one should consider its context to understand the song’s true message. The number of cafés, like Starbucks and Café Bene, has recently grown exponentially in Gangnam. A Korean blogger Jea Kim writes, "In Korea, there's a joke poking fun at women who eat 2,000-won \(^9\) ramen for lunch and then spend 6,000 won on Starbucks coffee." Max Fisher, a writer for the Atlantic, further details, “They're called Doenjangnyeo, or ‘soybean paste women’ for their propensity to crimp on essentials so they can over-spend on conspicuous luxuries, of which coffee is, believe it or not, one of the most common.”

The irony begins here: what is interesting to note about the song’s exceptional rise into stardom is that many Korean international students, a majority of who come from very wealthy families in Gangnam, are immensely proud of the song’s popularity in the US. One can feel the sense of national pride among these students, as they are happy to finally find their American classmates appreciate, rather than ignore, their pop culture. Such sentiment reveals

---

7 Christine Lee, in her piece The Hallyu Wave Finally Arrives in America, also points out Psy’s criticism of the wealthy and continues that the criticism is not only reserved for Koreans, but also for Americans, noting parallels between similar extravagant features of the music videos between Psy’s and Lady Gaga’s. I could also see that Psy may have extended his criticism to all excessive materialism, not just the one in Korea.

8 Roughly translated by the author

9 About $2USD
itself very obviously through the torrent of parodies and flash mob videos online that these students produced on their respective American campuses: Berkley Style, UPenn Style, Cornell Style, etc. A particularly well-made parody video\(^\text{10}\) by two Korean MIT students, Richard Yoon and Eddie Ha, has garnered over 4 million views on its own, a feat that could well be attributed to cameos done by two world-renowned scholars, Noam Chomsky and Eric Lander. Well-produced videos take a lot of time to make; Ha testifies that, for the six weeks leading up to its release, the MIT video was the only thing that he worked on amidst all his schoolwork. Flash mobs and productions like Ha’s show that the Korean international students very willing to put in the work to spread *Gangnam Style* on their campuses.

While I love that so many Korean international students enthusiastically share a part of their culture with their American community, there is an uncomfortable reflection that may need to take place among these students. To be more specific, most of these Korean international students realize that humor is a key reason that the song is so popular in the US, but what they do not seem to acknowledge is that the joke may ironically be on them. As a Korean international student who lived in Gangnam the past two summers for internships, I can testify that the Korean international students (some, not all) are among the worst culprits of the “hollow” spending habits that Psy highlights. My Duke friends and I have no reliable source of income other than our parents, but I have been to coffee shops where we spent over fifteen dollars per drink, to restaurants where we paid over forty dollars per dish, and to clubs where I found a group of four kids barely out of high school drop a thousand dollars for a VIP table in Gangnam’s hottest club, Octagon. And just when I thought I had seen it all, my experience with the extravagant lifestyle of Gangnam reached its climax when one of my friends booked a thousand dollar karaoke room for his birthday party. The song seems to subtly criticize how

\(^\text{10}\) \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjtHNEDrnY}
people like the international students handle wealth. Yet they swim in national pride, enamored with its popularity and blissfully unaware of its underlying message.

Appreciation for popular music and the sense of national pride are fine. In fact, I am very glad that my Korean colleagues and I can proudly share a part of our culture with our American community. The song, however, calls for these students, along with the rest of Gangnam residents (for two summers, including yours truly), to at least reflect on some questionable facets of their lives. Gangnam is suffering from one of the world’s worst debt to income ratio, and extravagant spending habits seem to be the culprit. Therefore, Psy’s *Gangnam Style* is not just a song that these students should enjoy and take pride in; it is also a sonorous calling for them to look back on their behavior and ask what they can do to change its “hollow” reality.