

# ROOTS AND ROUTES

## Hip-Hop from South Korea

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### **Abstract**

With the growing success of hip-hop in South Korea, the discussions about the authenticity of this genre increase and create cleavages between the mainstream and the underground rappers. The paper intends to analyze three examples of the contemporary music scene that are representative of different positions. Taking Simon Frith's work on popular music as a means to construct identity, the paper suggests questioning the concept of authenticity ("roots") and proposes instead conceiving hip-hop in South Korea as a movement at the crossroads ("routes") of various influences and practices.

### **Keywords**

Authenticity, Identity, Music videos, Performance, R&B, Rap

### **About the Author**

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In the ongoing process of reaching out to global markets, pop music in South Korea undergoes fast changes, mainly under the influence of US-American and Western European markets, as literature on K-pop highlights (Choi and Maliangkay). John Lie dealt with the question of K-pop as music positioned between different influences:

K-pop is symptomatic of the cultural transformation of South Korea: at once the almost complete repudiation of traditional cultures—both Confucian and folk—and the repeated rhetorical stress on the continuities between the past and the present: the nearly empty signifier that is South Korean cultural-national identity. (361)

The discussion about music production in South Korea is therefore mostly seen in a field of ongoing tensions between traditional music with diverse historical influences—mainly from Japan—and the influence from the US, in particular rock, jazz, and soul genres since the post-war period. In order to grasp this complexity, one often recurs to concepts of mixture and hybridity, on the one hand, and the search for authenticity and originality in comparison to the source of inspiration, on the other. However, this paper will not deal with K-pop as such. Instead, it will talk about hip-hop in South Korea, whose popularity increased over the last ten years and around which the question of authenticity is posed regularly in relation to the African-American origins and music production in South Korea. Um has described the influence from abroad but also the tendencies that developed in South Korea from Seo Taeji's (1992) and Drunken Tiger's (1999) first albums since the 1990s. Since then, it has been a complex evolution and discussion about the merging of elements of the music genre coming from the US and Korean elements or about the appropriation of the genre in South Korea in relation to lyrics, themes, and performance. Jaeyoung Yang goes further with his overview of the beginnings of Korean hip-hop in the early 1990s with the "Big Three, Hyon Chin-Yong, Seo Taeji and Boys and Deux" talking about the evolution of "Korean Black Music" (100). Till the mid-2000s, internet communities and underground groups have developed their own crews and style (103-104), among them musicians that are still popular today like e.g. Epik High and Verbal Jint. Yang speaks of "Koreanized black music" in his summary:

Meanwhile, the Korean underground black music scene, which has risen from the bottom through online communities and clubs since the mid- to the late-1990s, helped establish the very lively "Koreanized" black culture. Although Korean hip-hop is different from the American one in terms of its attitude and its essence, it is certainly connected to a large number of domestic youth as a self-sustainable cultural expressive form. (105–106)

When Yang speaks of “Koreanized” black culture, the questions of authenticity of African-American and Korean music, respectively, resonate in his statement. However, he refers rather to the positive response of the public in South Korea to Korean hip-hop.

More than ever, hip-hop has recently gained a very peculiar position as it has reached the mainstream since 2012 with the TV show *Show me the Money*, which offered a platform for rappers to compete for a nationwide TV program. The show also increased interest on “real hip-hop,” linking it back to the US and therewith bringing up questions about authenticity, the origins of the music, as well as the conflicts between underground music versus commodified music in style and content in South Korea. The discussion is focused on the question of authenticity and roots.

Crystal Anderson suggests a different approach by focusing on the aesthetics in the discussion of African-American music in K-pop, as Korean artists “employ black musical aesthetics and meanings,” when it comes to sampling, mixing and rapping (295). She even goes one step further by stressing that hip-hop or soul music aesthetics are used by Korean artists to “express emotions rooted in Koreans’ own experience with dominance” (298).

Taking up the observations on a longer history of African-American music in South Korea and the reflections on aesthetics, this paper will analyze three examples of the contemporary hip-hop scene: Zico, the leader of boy group Block B, himself a producer and solo artist who is positioned between mainstream and claims of being close to the underground; MOBB under contract with YG Entertainment; and, finally, Minje, a musician from the alternative music scene drawing mainly on R&B while mixing different styles. The approach combines discourse analysis, with aspects from musicology and performance studies in order to get closer to the nexus of the question about the “authenticity” of hip-hop in South Korea as a “cultural expressive form” (Yang 105–106), which would lead us from the question of “roots” to the question of “routes,” the connectedness of music flows.

## 1 HIP-HOP IN SOUTH KOREA

The question of authenticity of hip-hop in South Korea is part of a larger context, in which a wide variety of realizations of hip-hop in the global expansion has been stated and recognized as part of the evolution of the genre worldwide:

Hip-hop and rap cannot be viewed simply as an expression of African American culture; it has become a vehicle for global youth affiliations and a tool for reworking local identity all over the world. Even as a universally recognized popular musical idiom, rap continues to provoke attention to local specificities. (Mitchell 1)

In the same volume, Sarah Morelli describes hip-hop in South Korea as a fusion of styles as popular music will pick up themes and tastes of Koreans using some English lines and different music styles besides hip-hop on the same album. In this way, they respond to local concerns, which is characteristic of the South Korean trend from the 1990s onwards. Nevertheless, it seems as if the same questions persist: what is Korean hip-hop? Is it real? How does it refer to African-American hip-hop? Do South Korean musicians appropriate elements from the original? To which extent and in which sense is Korean hip-hop Korean? The doubts about the nature of South Korean hip-hop might also be due to the fact that hip-hop is a genre, which is changing constantly as it responds to the contexts it is used in, as Tricia Rose describes in “A Style Nobody Can Deal With”:

The tensions and contradictions shaping hip-hop culture can confound efforts at interpretation by even the most skilled critics and observers. Some analysts see hip-hop as a quintessentially postmodern practice, while others view it as a present-day successor to premodern oral traditions. Some celebrate its critique of consumer capitalism, while others condemn it for its complicity with commercialism. (342)

Hip-hop in Korea is not exempt from these tensions. On the contrary, one would have to add on top the tensions within traditional Korean culture the historical contact between American with Korean cultures in South Korea and the complex back and forth movements between the two countries, as well as—to a lesser extent—Canada and Australia, via returning immigrants that add more layers to the contact zones (Fuhr). This is the reason why hip-hop, as well as Korean pop, has been discussed from the point of view of hybridity. Choi and Maliangkay question this approach:

Given the scale of multi/transnational coproduction in K-pop, the concept of hybridity may seem well suited to the textual composition of K-pop. But one must question whether any music genre is immune from hybridization, and therefore whether the concept of hybridity adds any interpretative novelty in the analysis of global cultural affairs today. (4)

As at the core of hip-hop stands the merging of different elements (Gilroy 182–206), it is not surprising that Marina Terkourafi, for instance, approaches this question underlining first of all that the basic stylistic features of hip-hop, like “mixing,” “sampling,” “break,” and “flow,” are meant to borrow elements from diverse

backgrounds to create something new (4–5). She furthermore argues that tribute is paid to the African-American origins of hip hop, which do not only emanate from a certain social experience of a marginalized and oppressed minority in the US but in a specific style of music and words:

These five elements—non-literality, hyperbole, embellished language, an outlet for the emotions, and the notion of contest—have arguably been inherited from African-American sounding practices into hip hop as part of its lineage, making them available as a kind of “genetic inheritance” that is able to generate the ever-changing understandings of authenticity that run through and link together all of hip hop. (10)

The question about authenticity and the experience of the hardships of life that are translated into motives of street life, the gangster, etc., cannot find its only answer in limiting hip-hop to this context of the genre’s origins. Terkourafi speaks of the “fictionalized street” as well as of the use of hyperbolic procedures to offer something “bigger than life” (12). Paying tribute to the origins of the genre means respecting generic elements as a frame that can be filled with content that is—dependent on the regional, linguistic, and cultural context of production—relevant for the musicians and their public. In the same volume published by Terkourafi, Jamie Shinhee Lee approaches this question for South Korea analyzing texts and music of four prominent hip-hop groups from the perspective of glocalization. He argues that hip-hop is a global genre but always local in its performance (139). While respecting the boundaries of the genre to a certain extent, the musicians and artists fill the content with local concerns, such as respect for the elderly and the family, overwork, education, and military service. All of them refer to very specific situations and problems in South Korean society that are linked to social recognition and respect and therefore cause high social pressure in a rapidly changing society, which enters the global stage. The last point he stresses is the socio-political critique that the genre claims and also allows to deliver. Lee uses the song lyrics of one of the most successful hip-hop groups, Dynamic Duo, to illustrate that the performers name themselves pirates. The connotations are those of crossing frontiers, being free, and being daring, which turn pirates into a subversive group who questions the establishment in arts and in politics (154–155). It also implies stealing and “borrowing” of items from others, which is part of the glocalization process as well as of the “mixing” techniques of hip-hop. HaeKyung Um would speak of cultural “reterritorialization” as African-American hip-hop and rap are “reconstituted through social interaction” using “multiple selective strategies of adoption and adaptation with respect to the associated cultural, musical and linguistic components of the genre” (53). And Jaeyoung Yang underlined that hip-hop is part of a “complete cultural expressive form” (106). The repetitiveness in a genre with still slight variations to adapt it to changing contexts could also be linked to the concept of rites in the sense that Simon Frith speaks of in popular

music. In his book *Performing Rites. Evaluating Popular Music*, he underlines the construction of identity via the performing and experiencing of music. Listening to and appreciating music are a form of participation and contribution to “imagined forms of identity”:

And what makes music special in this familiar cultural process is that musical identity is both fantastic—idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits—and real: it is enacted in activity. Music making and music listening, that is to say, are bodily matters; they involve what one might call *social movements*. (274, emphasis in original)

Taking up this reflection of Frith, the performance of hip-hop in South Korea might be the performance of a rite: it allows the public to participate in the construction of an imagined identity that turns real in the shared moments of performance (by the artist and the audience). The intrinsically subversive, “authentic” value of the genre is connected with local concerns so that the performance of the rites according to the rules of hip-hop contributes to the participation in the imagined forms of identity.

The tensions between local and global as well as between a rooted genre and its ramifications will be at the center of our interest. I will discuss three examples taken from the vast field of hip-hop music in South Korea. The examples show how these tensions manifest in the contemporary Korean hip-hop scene and how they influence the evolution of hip-hop in Korea towards a performed identity.

## 2 THE BURDEN OF AUTHENTICITY: THE EXAMPLE OF ZICO

Rappers who enter the larger scene of the music industry feel the urge to claim the authenticity of their hip-hop style and spirit as it seems to be diluted by commodification—although this is also intrinsically part of the way of hip-hop through the 1980s until today. One striking example is Zico, who started as an underground rapper releasing mixtapes before he became known as the leader of boy group Block B, who debuted in 2009 with Stardom Entertainment and moved to Seven Seasons in 2013. The song for his solo debut, “Tough Cookie” (09/14), is about him having reached the top with Block B but, more importantly, in addition to the success in the idol industry, he became recognized as a rapper without being part of one of the big entertainment companies, challenging all the critics and the envier. The song therefore is quite “classical” for a first solo in hip-hop, claiming his position in the contested scene.

The subversive potential of the hip-hop genre lies partly in the performers who consider themselves as not being part of the mainstream that would set the regulations for style and lyrics according to selling strategies. The independence of large enterprises—and their investments—would guarantee the freedom of speech and opinion, as the music scene in the South Korean context is dominated by three large companies (SM, YG, JYP) and a well-established system of recruitment and training of young talents. The indie and hip-hop scene is much smaller and represented by companies like Brandnew, who at the same time constantly gain economic power and influence with the growing interest in hip-hop, which is also due to the successful TV show *Show me the Money* mentioned beforehand. While the show stirred interest in the music and public discussions about the question of authenticity, the latter became more virulent in the disputes between various hip-hop artists discussing questions about what is “real” and what is “commodified” hip-hop in South Korea. Therefore, the standard “diss” and claims of territory gain an additional layer of signification in this very particular context.

The song “Tough Cookie” by Zico responds to all those layers starting the song with the following statement:

Hello all you idiots who still look at me with that sour attitude  
 I’m sorry but Block B has been sweeping charts  
 Grabbing trophies without any manipulation, I made it  
 Getting recruited for concerts, being asked for a featuring  
 It’s too much to reject it all  
 Top idol rapper? Fuck I ain’t no snake’s head<sup>1</sup>

First of all, he refers to the success of Block B, which had been his first aim before he turned towards a solo career. The lawsuit that caused the change of the company could have been the end of the story for the idol group, but they succeeded, even after a longer break. The success of Block B and of Zico is recognized indirectly as the companies try to engage with them, but they prefer their independence and their success based on their own work. The refrain sets frontiers:

I’m not your friend  
 I’m not your family either  
 I’m not your colleague  
 Chew me the wrong way and your teeth might go out  
 Cause I’m a Tough Cookie, Tough Cookie, Tough Cookie<sup>2</sup>

The refrain invalidates belonging to social groups that are otherwise very important in Korean society: friends, the age group, family, the work order. All the categories, Lee has pointed out as being important for local content in

hip-hop songs, are denied as they would come along with societal expectations and limitations. The subversive power of this text is not only that it tells Zico's personal story but that he declines all value systems in order to make it to the top. At the same time, one should not forget that he fulfilled his promise to look for the success of Block B first before taking care of his solo career. He is taking care of the persons who are entrusted to him, but he rejects regulations and systems that have been transmitted and kept for the sake of tradition. So far, there is a challenge that the artist launches and fulfills in his behavior and his work using genre elements but situated in the local conditions.

When it comes to the song's music video, the question of authenticity turns virulent as hip-hop also relies massively on visual style in clothing and performing. In the arrangement of the settings, the music video follows general rules, as there are four different sets with diverse tones in the narration and visualization. The first one is a factory hall where Zico performs dressed in a working overall. The large space allows some movement and the mise-en-scène of groups of rappers or gangstas gathering in the hall or the courtyard.



Fig. 1. "Tough Cookie." Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4\\_qIDMtto](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4_qIDMtto)



This recalls the industrial settings from US-American videos, which imply working class conditions or even the loss of work and the desperate setting of a town in crisis, where industries had to close down. The scenery corresponds to the spirit of the lyrics about the hardship of his career in the beginning and about the hard work necessary to achieve success. The other settings alternately refer to motives and scenes that show places that illustrate the two extremes in the hip-hop world: hardships and poverty on one side and wealth and extravagance on the other. Alcohol, drugs, and sex accompany the status of the new rich.

One setting comes along as a kind of illustration for the refrain “I am a tough cookie” as Zico is lying in a bathtub filled with cookies.



Fig. 2. “Tough Cookie.” Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4\\_qIDMtto](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4_qIDMtto)

He looks up towards the camera positioned from a high angle. In this sequence, the performance is questionable, as the eyeliner and the hairstyle insinuate rather a boy toy than a gangster, with the quite common bathtub scene to refer to seduction. However, with the tube filled up with cookies, the scene seems to turn the reference upside down, turning the gangster into a pretty, cute boy.

Most critics reduce their comments about the video to the use of the word “faggot” in the lyrics and the Confederate flag on Zico’s jacket that appears twice in the video. The company and the artist had to apologize for these elements, admitting their ignorance about the signification of words and symbols, which had been taken out of their original context and just seemed to refer to the “US” as an icon,

a standardized representation of the country. This paper will not go into details about the misreading and misunderstandings in processes of cultural transfers, but we would rather like to draw the attention to Zico's statement, namely that he did serious research about hip-hop so that his first solo and the video coming along with it would be "real" and as "authentic" as possible. The visual should support the message of the lyrics that he had made it as a rapper. The result of the honest concern to be "authentic" and not just a light commercialized form of music that offers a channel to define identity is a video that looks like a list of references to iconic elements of hip-hop visual culture. The video "Tough Cookie" turned out "hyperreal" according to Baudrillard's concepts of ecstasy and inertia, which are consequences of the simulation processes. There is no origin and no "real thing," and all can be produced and repeated endlessly. Ecstasy is the response to the "overmultiplication"<sup>3</sup> which will finally end up in inertia.<sup>4</sup>

In accordance to the definitions aforementioned, the music video uses ecstasy in order to create a relationship with hip-hop: the hip-hop reality is translated into iconic elements that "continually surpass themselves." In their abundance and repetition, they turn into a hyperreality.



Fig. 3. "Tough Cookie." Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4\\_qIDMtto](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4_qIDMtto)

The video "Tough Cookie" is an example of a hyperreal hip-hop form that condemns the observer to inertia facing a visual excess of hip-hop-related iconicity. The "authentic" can therefore not be traced by going back to whatever "root," which does not even exist, but only by "routes" opening up new options that echo and respond to a concrete situation and need (Clifford; Deloughrey).

If we compare the video of “Tough Cookie,” which is based on a sort of catalogue of African-American hip-hop references, like the “grillz,” large chains, jewelry, etc., with the black and white video produced by M-Net, in which Zico performs in a box-like white space that gains depth via the work of light and shadows, we get an insight into the specificity of the music video. The M-Net video in black and white focuses on the performer who embodies and stands for the lyrics that are central to this minimalistic but impressive video, which refuses the “hyperreal” hip-hop mode and focuses on the story and therefore invites the spectators to enter the dialogue, the exchange of ideas. This video is therefore ironically closer to the artist’s objectives than the echoes of the American iconic culture, emptied of content.



Fig. 4 and 5. “Tough Cookie.” Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4\\_qIDMtto](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4_qIDMtto)

In November 2016, Zico released the song “Bermuda Triangle” featuring Dean and Crush together with a music video filmed by Tigercave. This song and the video illustrate the progress Zico—and maybe the hip-hop scene—has undergone since 2014. The title refers only indirectly to the Americas and only to the most dangerous and mystic region worldwide, the Bermuda triangle, where uncontrolled and (super)natural powers influence events. The parallel to the success of the three artists, all born in 1992 and all very successful over the last two years, form a kind of a “triumvirate” in the K-pop scene linking the pop world with the underground world. The lyrics refer again to the rise via hard work and the envy of colleagues who think they could be as successful as one of the Triangle. The self-assurance, which was gained via the references to the US scene in “Tough Cookie,” comes in “Bermuda Triangle” from the individual success stories, hard work that allows them to assert themselves in a contested field in South Korea and worldwide. The video is therefore also a good mixture of some hints to the genre in the US and to South Korea, but it directly refers to and even strengthens the individual stories and the success in the local scene. Within two years, a considerable shift took place

from the search for authentic references that help to legitimize the artist's identity towards a strong affirmation of their/his own success and a balanced mixture of references to various cultural code systems.

“Bermuda Triangle” starts in black and white, showing the three performers in a wide empty desert-like landscape, the perspectives alternating between frontal to high angle, which isolates them, underlines the uniqueness and loneliness as well as the leading positions.

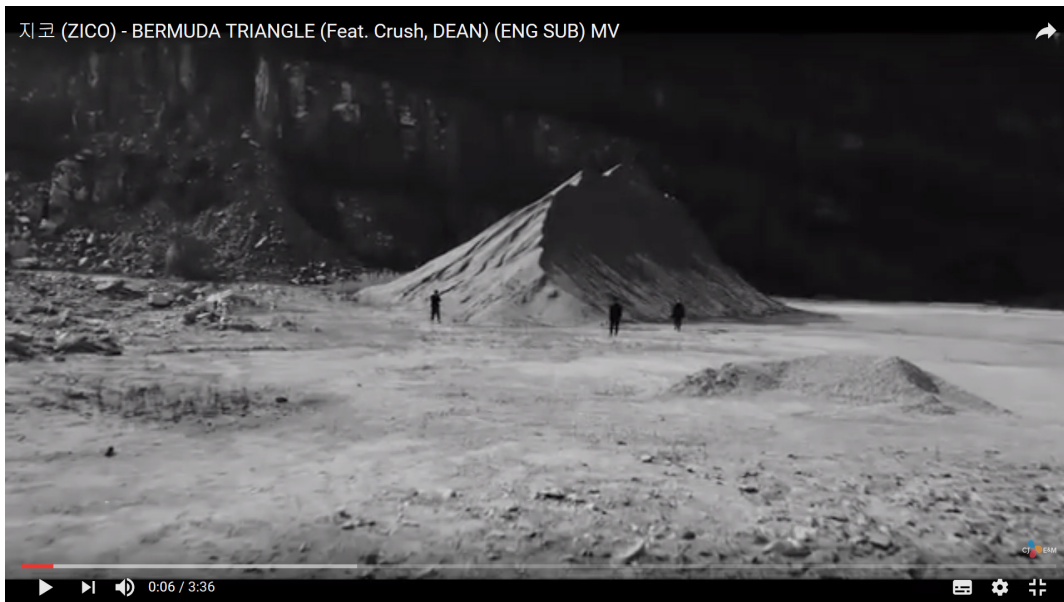


Fig. 6. “Bermuda Triangle.” Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHoLaLIL5IA>

The empty space curiously also allows creating the triangle with natural features or the movement of the artists in space. This scenery in black and white alternates with one in rather flashy colors with the artists sitting at a table, drinking, playing cards, which refers to the underground as a space of transition from the bottom to the top. Part of this first half of the video is also the blueish alley where Zico performs his rap.

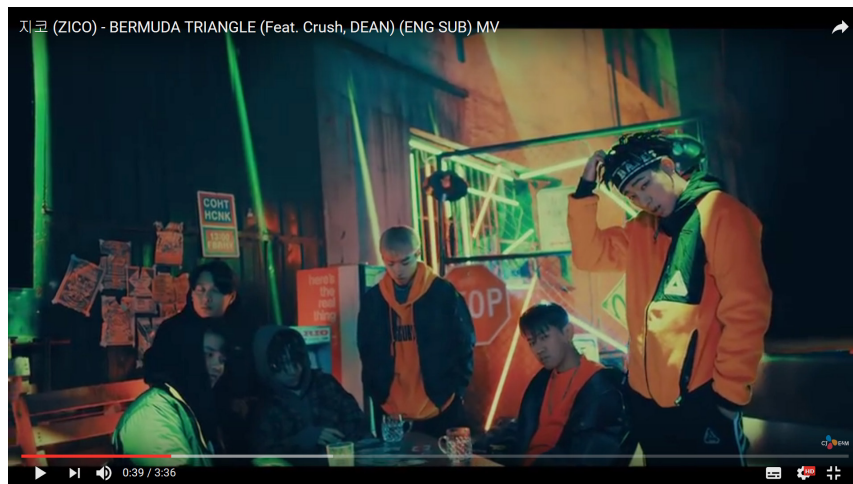


Fig. 7. "Bermuda Triangle." Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHoLaLlL5IA>



Fig. 8. "Bermuda Triangle." Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHoLaLlL5IA>

Short moments contribute to develop the storyline further, such as when he leaves the underground parking lot with a Rolls Royce and a bag full of money. In the middle of the video, the scenery changes: Zico is in a luxury apartment with a splendid view of the city, taking a bath in champagne. This set alternates with a ride in the Rolls Royce through the sleeping city while the lyrics state the success story as well as the impossibility of envious people to join the successful league.

The luxurious sceneries appear in a parallel montage with a wide-angle take of the interior of a cathedral. In contrast to the first half, the artists do not perform in a rapping style but they rather pose in the apartment and the cathedral. The latter is a classical setting in a mafia film indicating the tension between moral values and practice in life.

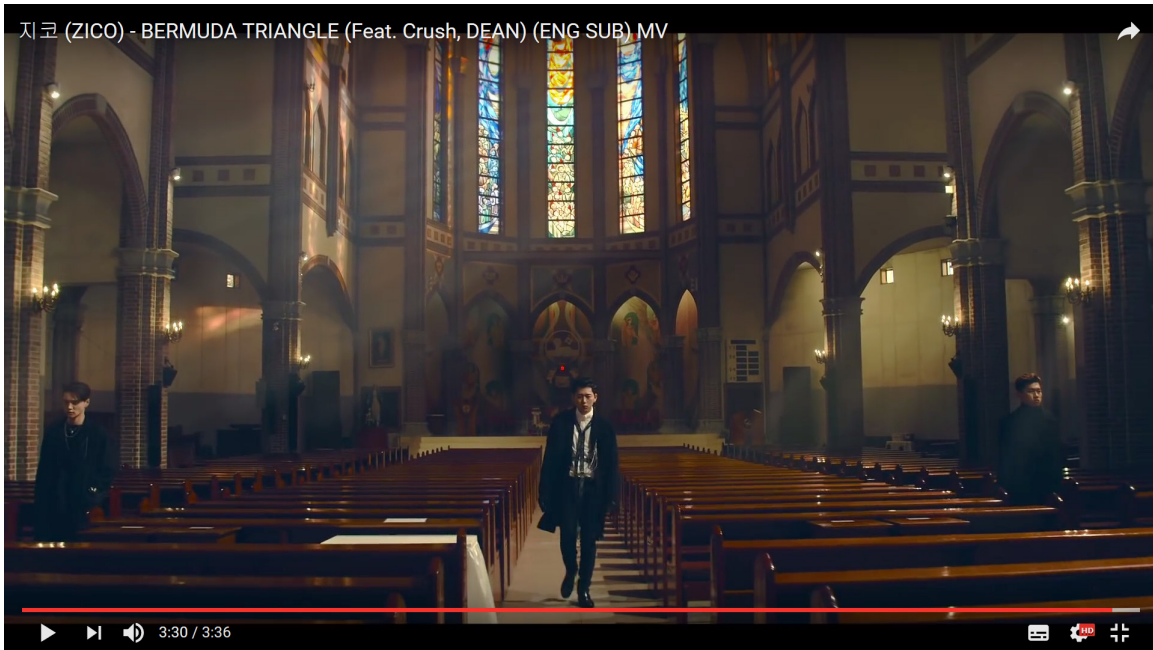


Fig. 9. "Bermuda Triangle." Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHoLaLl5lA>

The video ends with a medium long shot showing the three performers walk down the nave, taking possession of the space normally out of reach for the common people. The song as well as the images form a perfect unity that draws randomly on references to original hip-hop while developing its own narrative in the very specific context of South Korea that they are addressing overtly and directly—creating their own authentic discourse, performing identity.

### 3 REFERENCES IN THE KOREAN SCENES: THE EXAMPLE OF MOBB

While Zico places himself in the contested space of rap battles in a tradition of the “authentic” and at the same time in the South Korean context as being a “real” rapper, that is, someone who is not being under contract with a big company, and who finds his own way, the second example sheds light on hip-hop in the context of the big music companies in Korea. The most recent subunit of hip-hop boy groups of YG Entertainment MOBB—with two members, namely Bobby of Icon and Mino of Winner—released their first album in September 2016. Over two million spectators watched the two videos during the first two weeks after the release. The song “Full House” was analyzed on blogs that mainly drew parallels between MOBB and the elder duo of YG, namely G-Dragon and T.O.P. Interestingly, there is no reference at all to any artist outside of the Korean hip-hop scene. This indicates a shift in the perception of hip-hop, which already disposes of its own tradition of 20 years (the second generation of hip-hop after Seo Taeji, as Bigbang started in 2005/06 and Seo Taeji in 1999).

In a perfect world, where MOBB would exist in a vacuum without having to be compared to GD&TOP, I would say this is quite the debut for a sub-unit we were all waiting for. But in the real world, MOBB exists in the shadow of GD&TOP because it's just so hard to not see the similarities and think that this is good yet it's still a bit lacking. (Mark)

This reference to the elder generation of rappers—even if they are in the same company—also strikes in the visual representation of the artists in the photography that precedes and accompanies a new album or video. The posing and the style—black suits, stylish haircut—are very similar to the representation of the duo of T.O.P and G-Dragon particularly in the photo serial accompanying their first CD as a duo (2010). Therefore, the new sub-unit MOBB is a continuation in the same line as the elder duo, which, of course, is also part of a marketing strategy of YG. However, it is important that the reference system is and remains only South Korea in the case of MOBB. The music videos for the singles of Bobby and Mino have been made by a new company, Dream Perfect Regime (DPR), that bring in elements that have not been very common in older South Korean music videos and might be traced to some US-American music videos. However, most aesthetic elements are references to a Korean canon. These include the use of 2D elements, which, for instance, appeared in the very first music video with Mino “I am him” (2014), in which the 2D animate some interaction with a dog that reminds of a wolf and stir connotations of watchmen, patrols and control of violence, raising the imaginary of poorer neighborhoods in a metropolitan context. Furthermore, the glowing eyes and the cage were already used in Mino's video. Finally, the use of intensive light, which immerses the spaces in red or blue, started with the videos of the new unit

of SM, NCTU, filmed by flipevil, in which the light is used as an additional semantic layer. The changing light transmits the impression of different moods giving it a special touch that we also find in other music videos produced by DPR.



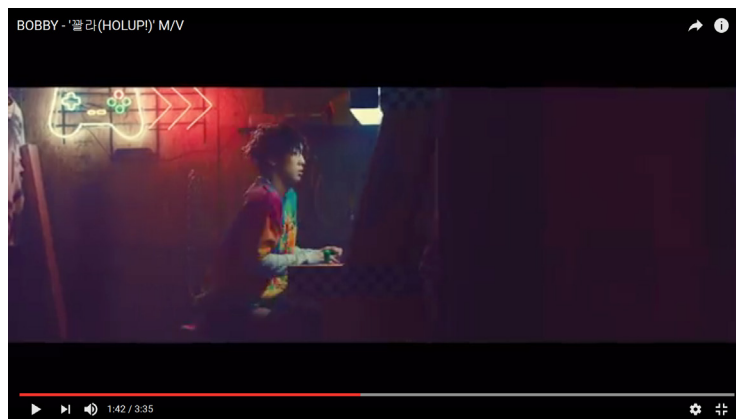
**Fig. 10.** “Full House.” Screenshot from  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMBPLGzW1UI>)

Furthermore, the video picks up some South Korean trends and aesthetic figures, like closed rooms, the travelling camera spinning around, setting all upside down, and a continuous alternation between close shots on the face and poses of the main performers, like in a fashion show. The aforementioned aesthetic elements are all part of K-pop music videos, while one set brings in a reference to the Asian context. The very common motive of a long table where the performers would gather for dining is transposed to a Japanese setting. At the top end, two armors in glass boxes and two swords placed in the middle of the room recall the glorious past of warriors. The background is a wall print of Kanagawa’s painting “The Wave.” At the low tables on both sides of the room, the dancing girls dressed in traditional clothes are eating, while Mino sits at the head or performs in the middle that turns into a stage. This sequence links the hip-hop warrior of the street and the hood with the historical one and links the global with the regional imaginary.

The video for the single “Holup” (09/2016) by Bobby can serve as a further example, as the lyrics obviously are part of the rap genre with the classical challenge to other rappers and affirming one’s own success in the hip hop scene. The music video



is very similar in its aesthetics to “Full house” (09/2016), strengthening the sense of belonging to a group and the recognizable style of a company. Some elements are nevertheless striking as being different from the music videos made for the same album but which link “Holup” to others in the Korean music scene. One of the sets refers to video games, which has been an important reference in many music videos over the last decade, as in “Two Mari” (2013) by Baechigi, “Rockstar” (2013) by Icon, “Video Game” (2014) by Boys’ Republic (2014), “Catch me” (2015) by UP10TION, etc. In the very beginning, the camera is spinning around Bobby. There are flashes in a dark room and animated lines appearing sporadically. It is reminiscent of the presentation of avatars in video games, when the options for the



**Fig. 11.** "Holup." Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Tap\\_zZdkYA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Tap_zZdkYA)



**Fig. 12.** "Holup." Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Tap\\_zZdkYA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Tap_zZdkYA)

figures a player can choose are displayed. This is picked up (1min27) when a giant remote control serves as a lamp fixed on the wall in the background and indicates the start of the game in the music video. The next sequence shows Bobby in a 3D setting of animated white and blue graphics, endless lines of numbers as in the *Matrix* film or flickering lights.

Next, he sits in front of a screen, and the camera spins to the right showing a set of a traditional house where two martial arts fighters face each other. The rapid montage of short sequences that show Bobby playing in front of the screen and the fighters blurs the lines between the “real” life and the game reality. The 3D elements recall music videos like that for the song “Meerae” (2016) for Don Mills filmed by Namsanfilm. Another frequent element is the frame in the frame, as various screens (TV, computer, cellphone) are “flickering,” thus creating a link with video games, particularly with a setting that uses an artificially created 3D background. They are all rather blueish or black and white with white geometric figures flashing. These elements contribute to linking the loose line of sets and small narrative elements that are part of the main storyline of the big party and the effects of getting high.

In general, it is difficult to tell where the origin of the aesthetic elements lies, but there are trends following rhizomic routes that flow into music videos and enlarge the spectrum of visual representation of hip-hop in South Korea while leaving the mere references to classics of American pop or rap aside. Therefore, we can state that there is a considerable shift in the reference system that would allow us to speak of a tendency towards the evolution of a specific South Korean way of hip-hop, which has turned into a referee. The question about authenticity in South Korean hip-hop is no longer a search for the roots of the genre that would link songs back to the American genre and its performance. It would rather turn towards models in the Korean scene, which indicates that over the last two decades, Korean artists have developed their own style in wording, in narratives, and in visual representation. If we turn back to Terkourafi’s reflections on hip-hop style using hyperbolic and fictionalizing strategies, the video for “Full House” could also be understood from this perspective. The song and the video use elements of the hip-hop genre (like parties, alcohol, sex) and fictionalize the “real elements” in creating a gangster-like environment and putting it into extreme light, which turns the narrative elements into a stage for their performance underlying the fictionality. By referring to the Korean rapper duo G-Dragon and T.O.P., the video opens up its own referentiality, which presents Korean rap as the authentic and the roots’ version for the younger ones. Paying tribute to the origins of the genre means respecting generic elements as a frame filled with content that is—dependent on the regional, linguistic, cultural context of production—relevant for the musicians and their public.

#### 4 “SCULPT YOUR BLACK”: THE EXAMPLE OF MINJE

Another way of getting to the “real” Korean hip-hop is an overt reflection on the multitude of crossing lines in the history of cultural exchange, the history of music in South Korea in this case. The music agency Stone Ship is a good example as they support artists who come with an individual story and style. On their website, one finds the motto “sculpt your black,” which is meant to transmit the idea of independent music that respects the artist. One of the most recent newcomers under this label is Minje, who is presented as an alternative R&B artist. He released his first album *Mojo* and a mixtape “freesms,” both in 2016. Having played in a band as a teenager, he used to perform a large variety of music genres, while he preferred Western musicians like Stevie Wonder or Prince, who would always bring up something new, something different to express their feelings or the feelings of a decade. Furthermore, Minje’s models are African-American icons of music history: Stevie Wonder stands for R&B, while Prince stands for a large spectrum of music styles and for performance and fashion. Besides this, Minje acknowledges some influence from early Korean rock musicians of the 1960s and 1970s, like Shin Jung Hyun, or from Japanese composers whose music set trends over decades, such as Sakamoto Syuichi or Hisaishi Joe. Having a profound knowledge of the context in which he has grown as a musician, influences are a question of the conscious perception of a multitude of trends and flows that inspire and also connect individuals via and with music. He uses the metaphor of the wave to describe the interconnectedness that is in constant movement, always changing and yet still the same. It is therefore not surprising that in the music video for “Do,” the river is a very dominant motif. The video is held in reddish light that turns sometimes to violet and blue and plunges the whole video into a dreamlike atmosphere, without clear borders, floating in time and space. The wave also stands for life, which is in an ongoing, never-ending flow connected with everything everywhere. This state of mind—or, rather, “flow of mind”—influences the music that integrates elements from genres, stories from elsewhere but still expressing the experience of the artist’s life. One of the main objectives is to create music that offers an alternative perspective, an alternative experience via the music he creates. Minje strives for being a South Korean artist who embraces all streams, all tendencies to create music that appeals to the public who gets inspired by the same “wave-length.” Music would therefore convey the experience of the artist in all its vibes and fibers.

Another music video recently released with the title “fxxked up,” is a coproduction with Soma. The video was directed by flipevil in close cooperation with Minje who brought in his inspiration coming from the work of the Korean video artist Nam June Paik, who is known for his works with screens and videos getting close to paintings and sculptures alike. The song “fxxked up” does have a smooth melody, a trance-like flow with some upheavals that come along with a video that captures

the feeling of being lost in a megalopolis like Seoul with its complex time-space-continuities. Two young men are wandering through streets, across bridges, and the sequences' flow is punctuated by flickering images that indicate the disruption of the flow, which really stops only once for the insert of the song title, before the flow of images with the strolling of lonely figures continues, endlessly. The music and the images join magically to transmit the spirit of the city, of the young generation caught in between the burden of the past and the promises of an uncertain future, inscribed in the silhouettes of the glimmering city.



**Fig. 13.** “fxxked up.” Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1esNieMK7Q>



**Fig. 14.** “fxxked up.” Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1esNieMK7Q>

These two examples illustrate Minje's style, which is close to R&B but also draws on a multitude of sources of inspiration. His music tells his stories as they are linked to the world, so that all—music, images, feelings—are in a continuous flow that can connect those who are willing to listen to the music. This example shows that the question of authenticity of South Korean music that uses African-American elements is not necessarily a question of “roots.” Minje sees the production of music first as a contribution to artists' creative discourses and an ongoing dialogue between different voices and positions. The main concern is more about “routes,” or being interconnected in an ongoing exchange, than a question about roots, or being closely linked to authenticity, which comes along with procedures of exclusion.

The most recent example for the importance of “routes” is the teaser made by flipevil for Minje's new album released in January 2017. The short clip for the song “Our City” stars Minje in New York City. The spectator can recognize some characteristic sites, but, aside from those short impressions, the video stresses more the aesthetic work picking up some of the elements of “fxxked up,” such as the play on blurring images. The opening sequence captures a river by night that could be the link between Han River in “fxxked up” and the Hudson River in New York in “Our City.” The short minute-and-a-half clip turns out to be an impressionist meta-discourse on the relationship between the two countries, as the South Korean flag on the cap is set next to the flag of the US in an extreme close shot, questioning the relationship between the two countries. Towards the end, the blurring of images



Fig. 15. “Our City.” Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCGt8WJmw0I>

turn into the slides of a film roll, showing the holes of the negative allowing to forward the roll in a photo camera.

After the endless takes of the roll had filled up the screen referring to the making of film and to what cutting and framing means to the representation of reality, the clip ends with a take of Minje in a hotel room that turns at an angle of 90 degrees. This seems to question directions and linkages again, compelling the spectator to doubt the positioning of perspectives.



**Fig. 16.** “Our City.” Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCGt8WJmw0I>

The very short clip visualizes that a trip to the US, to the assumed roots of all R&B and hip-hop, will not give any authenticity to the South Korean music lending some elements from American music but instead will link it in multiple ways with the ongoing evolution of music.

## CONCLUSION

Over the last two decades, hip-hop has developed intrinsically new forms in South Korea with their own narrations that respond to a lived social reality. I would like to come back to Simon Frith who states that identity is always an “ideal,” and listening to music means to participate in a “social movement” (274).

For Frith, a certain “traditional” music is one narrative that a social—and cultural and historical—community has found to answer questions on the construction of social life. This form necessarily will undergo changes in time and space according to the needs of the members of the community.

“Transcendence” is as much part of the popular as of the serious music aesthetic, but in pop transcendence articulates not music’s independence of social forces but a kind of alternative experience of them. [...] Music constructs our sense of identity through the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives. (275)

The fact that young hip-hop musicians in South Korea refer to African-American as well as other South Korean musicians should not only be seen as a conflict between authentic—that is, American—hip-hop and hybrid or appropriated forms in South Korea, but it could also be understood as part of an ongoing process of the construction of identity via music. The musicians who opt for a specific genre also opt for a certain narrative, as Frith underlines:

[D]ifferent musical genres offer different narrative solutions to the recurring pop tensions between authenticity and artifice, sentimentality and realism, the spiritual and the sensual, the serious and the fun. Different musical genres articulate differently the central values of pop aesthetic—spectacle and emotion, presence and absence, belonging and difference. (276)

Following the suggestions of Frith, the examples discussed could therefore be understood as narrative options of hip-hop music that respond to questions about authenticity and artifice in South Korea. This is the case in, for instance, “Tough Cookie” and “Bermuda Triangle” by Zico, which both are evolving narratives in this line between those two poles. The songs and music videos by MOBB do rather respond to the poles of spectacle and emotion as well as to belonging and difference as they react towards the former narratives of G-Dragon and T.O.P. And the last example of Minje could also be understood in the light of Frith’s notion of “transcendence,” which captures the search for musical expression of alternative forms of experience that are nevertheless still linked with the imaginary and auditive archive of music narratives from diverse horizons. They all share the same act of striving for finding modes of expression of local culture using the genre of hip-hop. They perform identity by using procedures that allow them to imagine something “bigger than life” on the way from roots to routes (Terkourafi 12).

## Notes

1. “Zico – Tough Cookie Lyrics.” Kpop Lyrics. <http://www.kpoplyrics.net/zico-tough-cookie-lyrics-english-romanized.html>.
2. “Zico – Tough Cookie Lyrics.” Kpop Lyrics. <http://www.kpoplyrics.net/zico-tough-cookie-lyrics-english-romanized.html>.
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*. Edited and introduced by Marc Forster. Stanford University Press, 1988. See the chapter 8, “Fatal Strategies, 185–206, 187.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* 185–206.



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