

Interview 2: Is there such a thing as Swedish K-pop?

Excerpts from an interview with Jiwon Yu, assistant curator at the 11th Seoul Mediacity Biennale - One Escape at a Time by the artist Ming Wong, producer/manager of Swedish boy band C-U-T and band members Niels Engström, Aron Fogelström, Victor Fogelström, Valentin Malmgren, Caio Marques de Oliveira and Karon Nilzén. The interview took place over Zoom on 30 July 2021.

MING: I'd like to ask you, Jiwon, you've heard the song, you've seen the music video, and now you met the band. Tell us your reactions.

JIWON: K-pop is a very big umbrella term that actually invites all sorts of styles of music. In K-pop music you will see a lot of the time they mix and mash all sorts of different styles and genres, ending up with all these 3 or 4 different sounding songs packaged into one. So I think your song is really great and I really enjoyed it because it was different in a way. It sounds like one cohesive song so it's going to need a lot of convincing that it's K-pop.

In terms of music style and also the setting and the vibe, I really enjoyed it because I was feeling a lot of the BTS brotherhood vibe. Because the group dynamic is very important in K-pop groups. So I really enjoyed the vibe the song was giving.

MING: The idea of this project was to have an interpretation of what K-pop (a lot of which is crafted by Swedish songwriters and producers) could be when it's re-interpreted by our group here in Sweden. So it's not K-pop per se, but I think it's a hybrid or something like "Swedish K-pop". We were trying to aim for something which really didn't exist before.

Victor, do you want to say something about the music? Because we decided it's not going to be K-pop so what does it mean when it's "Swedish K-pop"?

VICTOR: Like you said it's not exactly like an ordinary K-pop song, but it's also not really like an ordinary Swedish pop song so I think we found a place somewhere in-between I think.

In general, the sound is probably a bit more Swedish than Korean but the performance and the dynamics are a lot more Korean.

ARON: There are two things I'm very interested to hear from your perspective, Jiwon - the artificiality of a group that is being put together in K-pop - how that is done, and then throughout their careers, what is the roles of the actual performers, because that's something we've just been discussing like how, being put together by Ming here and then finding some sort of genuine emotion in this sort of artificially put together group, and I think that's a very interesting thing that we have discovered and explored together.

Then also about something we have been wanting to address in our current music video which is the gender roles or specifically the masculinity and friendship between men or boys, and how that translates to South Korean culture. Does this fit in or blend in perfectly or how does that experience come across?

JIWON: Firstly, there is an elaborate and profitable industry behind K-pop groups, which contributes to the group's artificiality. So normally how a group is formed is there is an entertainment agency, with already dozens or hundreds of trainees, generally from age 8 to 20 and it's a very cut-throat competition among them. There are a lot of girls and boys training and there would be like a core group, like those who are ready to debut. The producer would have to choose the right people. When I say the right people, on the one hand, it's about the skills. So, you would have the singer – everyone sings, but you need to have this one person who can belt out high notes to get that impact. You need to have the dancing machine, that one person who stands out in performance. You also need the rapper, and you need the brainy member who produces music.

But what they also take into account is the personality, whether it is natural or fabricated.

The roles based on skills and the roles based on character really depend on what kind of group you're developing. So if it's like a tough boy group, you need the really masculine guy and you need the tall guy. But you also need the short and cute guy for balance. Because the merit of a group is that you can choose who you want to stan¹. So if you give like seven types of guys, girls or boys are meant to fall for at least one guy. So that's the strategy.

But what is interesting is that not everything goes as planned. So you have this group who is meant to do one thing. But as they grow and as the fan-base grows with them... because in Korea they don't only make music, they have to go on entertainment shows, they play sports and games, they go on very different platforms to show their characteristics and fans pick up on things that are not meant to be shown.

About gender roles and masculinity, this is a bit difficult to explain because there is certainly a double play. One is that in Korean K-pop boy bands, they wear makeup, they wear fancy clothes, a lot of the members are androgynous. But the groups are meant to cater to predominantly heterosexual market, which makes it very difficult to have a mixed group of boys and girls. It's either boy bands for girls or girl group for boys. However, the story doesn't end there as fans pick up on things like gestures of friendship within the group dynamic and twist it around.

But when in public, when groups are in official-like presence, they will never admit to questioning gender roles. They would say that I'm a man, I like girls, I like my girl fans. They are putting on a show as heterosexual men, but in their group dynamics, or when they're in a group music video and things like that, they would throw out hints, juggling with a lot of elusive symbols, tapping on queer fantasies.

There is another layer to it when K-pop became internationally known. I think BTS is very interesting in this regard, because a decade or so ago, the general opinion of the western society toward K-pop idols was that the boys don't look like boys, and are not

¹ (slang) to exhibit fandom to an extreme or excessive degree.

Derived from the name of such a fan in the song "Stan" (2000) by the American rap artist Eminem.

masculine enough, and girls look too young and were not considered 'attractive'. But now BTS is all over the place and people are saying, they have redefined masculinity. From a Korean perspective, it's kind of weird because in Korea they are in a privileged place as heterosexual men from a relatively 'manly' boy band, but then they go out internationally and they are the symbol of marginality. Their messages come across as queer friendly, but that's always written in English. It's not meant for the Korean audience, so I think there's that double play of gender roles, gender representation, and group dynamics in Korea.

There is quite a bit of queer-baiting unfolding, but we don't see many – or *any* for that matter among popular K-pop idols –openly queer K-pop entertainers in Korea.

Currently, there are a lot of studies going on about the queer perception of K-pop within Korea. One interesting line of discourse is about how the gay community supports certain girl groups while the lesbian community supports certain boy groups, which is quite the reverse from what is expected. So there's a lot of very complex discourse currently popping up in Korea as well.

ARON: How about our video? Does it fit in quite well with the way this is communicated?

JIWON: I think you hit a right spot in that it's elusive enough. It's all about the vibes. It doesn't really say specific things. I think Korean K-pop is all about the perception, about the response, about what people do with it.

There is a fandom culture where you write stories based on the music video or based on group dynamics. So if there's like a six-member boy group and you would see two members hanging out pretty closely in a music video, a fan-fiction writer would go ahead and write a saga of gay love. There are some that are quite popular, but the boy groups and management agency would never officiate it. They will not acknowledge it, but they allow it as this is a sign of popularity.

MING: You said something really interesting, Jiwon, that about a decade ago, K-pop was already there, the aesthetic has more or less been the same, but people especially the younger generation are now demanding a change to the perceptions of gender roles. So it's actually a sign of the times that there is a kind of a shift and I think this is actually important.

KARON: Hearing your thoughts about this project, Jiwon, has in some way opened up a bit for me what we have done and where we are, and what this process has been. Working with a *concept* of making a "Swedish K-pop" boy band made us do things in like an un-normal way or un-natural way. Like for doing this song and doing this music video, it has been like taking a piece of K-pop and asking how would K-pop sound in Sweden. Like finding a place and doing something around that point more than starting from the beginning with finding our position in the band and so on. I think it makes sense now hearing you reflecting about this music and the video.

ARON: I think what Karon has pointed towards, for me, is the presence of a manager in some way, like Ming being there and sort of being an engine in some way and guiding us, like OK, we're going to make a song and we're gonna write about joy and then we're gonna meet and we have this sort of homework thing, and we have to bring our images and have our personal things that connect to joy for us and we have a discussion about that and he's sort of driving that, so that's the difference between an organically formed band and then this more artificial constellation.

NIELS: And also working towards a very specific context, which is this biennial, that we have a clear goal of sorts even though we don't know exactly what that will become but yeah, it's a specific context.

KARON: And that's something you don't have when you start a band otherwise. I think it makes like some artificial shimmer around it.

And also playing with already having a fan base in some way, I think we had thoughts about what kind of position is this band in before we even had it? Do we already think of an audience or is it something that will come? And I think we aimed for in some way already having a fan base and that's like a really strange thing to do if you've only just started playing music together.

VALENTIN: Yeah, I think we were talking about having fake Twitter accounts and all this fan fiction built up. But it would make sense like you said Jiwon, that this music video and the way it's produced, that it reminded you of a band that is already established. It kind of fits very well too with what we want out of this installation, to have like an established "Swedish K-pop" band.

NIELS: I think it's interesting that you understand the video as something directed towards an already existing fan base because that is something we have been talking about throughout and as a key component of this K-pop culture that we're looking into, that the fan base is a really important part of that, so we have been sort of trying the idea of having an already existing fan base to work with although we don't.

VALENTIN: We might not have that many fans in the beginning, but we're still gonna be famous in the sense that we're in this exhibition and also our video is gonna be played on the big screen in K-pop square in Gangnam so it's gonna be the image of being famous, but without any actual fans. So I think we could act as if we're famous in some sense 'cause the way we're presented is that we're already famous.

MING: In a way, this is kind of the starting point for the project, when we were reacting to BTS for example, and looking at some of the late videos that they've been producing.

And modeling the image of the group and what and who C-U-T is, as a “Swedish K-pop” band. It’s a genre, which doesn’t really exist.

CAIO: First of all, thank you for your input. It was really interesting to get your perspective because it's something that we were really afraid of how it was going to be seen. But what I think is really interesting in this whole process is that it reminds me a lot - I am actually from Brazil but I’ve lived here for 7 years - it reminds me of the Modernist revolution that we had in art in Brazil that was kind of an anthropophagic phase of art where the artists were taking art from Europe and from other countries and they were swallowing it and putting something else out there.

Somehow I think it is really interesting to not have a completely Swedish face and not go so much towards the K-pop either because we don't know much about it or at least I didn't know much about it before, but you can see the elements in there from both cultures and somehow just putting something else out, something other than both genders if I may say.

JIWON: What I find in C-U-T’s project that’s very interesting is that popular music has always been about appropriation but appropriation is a difficult word, so maybe I can say popular cultures always learn from one another. Korean K-pop culture is really based on how Korean society was built so rapidly in the 80s and 90s, so we don't have something to call a homogeneous cultural ground, a foundation.

What is Korean culture? Korea was under Japanese colonization for more than three decades. So when we were finally on our own, we had in our hands the task of ‘modernizing’ the Korean society along with building a national identity. When it comes to popular culture throughout 60s and 70s and 80s, we have had a complex relationship with myriad of influences including American and Japanese pop culture. Depending on the regime and policies, we would find ourselves in a love-and-hate relationship with foreign influences where the people would embrace, interpret, move on from, or reject certain music styles from the US or the subculture and ‘idol’ industry from Japan.

So that's where the *mash up* comes in and we never thought it was “appropriation”, there was no way of thinking of this as an ethical issue. From jazz in the early days to the more current and popular hip-hop style, I think the spirit of K-pop is taking things you know. Take it and make it your own, or even accelerate it to make it better. So by doing a K-pop project, it's really not about understanding the Korean history and society. It could be helpful but I think it creates a very interesting dynamic where you are sort of liberated from learning the local particularities, you are really scratching the surface.

But when people say scratching the surface, it has a negative connotation, but actually surface is very important. So when you scratch on the surface, then you tap on the style, the latent history, and the cultural construct. When you pick something up from what everybody is consuming, it really tells a great deal about what your take is on the cultural dynamics. So I think it's very interesting that you chose to do a K-pop project and actually become a “Swedish K-pop” band.

ARON: Yeah, for me, it reflects this tension between are we just putting on an act or are we ourselves? I think we landed in this space between. Not being K-pop, but not being Swedish pop either. It's the between state and I think that's the interesting space, the sort of limbo state or the no man's land in international waters in some way.

JIWON: It's that kind of internal objectification and acting the part which is actually what K-pop groups are all about. They're skilled at objectifying themselves to keep the fantasy afloat. The real you, and the superficial. It's all meshed together. When you present yourself as being authentic, the authenticity becomes the product. But who is to say that the presentation of authenticity is not real? There is a very fine line between the act and the real me.

CAIO: Somehow it feels like when we thought about the name of the band, C-U-T, it's like breaking with something or breaking with some kind of tradition. I think it is like

being an artist. You can be a musician being an artist, you can be just an artist, you can be all of that.