

# EDITORIAL

## Sharon Kong-Perring and Mathieu Berbiguier

Among the newly bloomed and freshly green branches of spring, in a convention center situated along the riverbanks of San Antonio's famous walk, a French man studying in Los Angeles and a Korean-American woman studying in Great Britain suddenly realized – well, we both study the same thing. Both of us, in the throes of our doctoral research, had chosen Korean Pop Music and its fandom as our object of study. However, as we engaged in conversation about identity and narrative in the K-Pop music scene and fandom space, we realized that our identities of who we are – and how we came to “fan” – contributed to our work, respectively, in ways we neither of us imagined in each of our own silos of research. And yet, our unique perspectives and narratives made sense to one another, though it was not how either of us had initially crafted the lens of frameworks, theoretical paradigms, and personal experiences by which we channeled our own analysis. It took a conference on Popular Culture, a broadly defined field, for us, two niched scholars, to understand we worked in an ecosystem of identity and meaning that somehow intersected, and yet was uniquely assembled.

Propriospect, an anthropological term first coined by American linguist and culture researcher Ward Goodenough (1971), describes the compendium of cultural influence that each individual crafts as a result of their own personal experiences operating in and moving through cultures and subcultures. While each “lens,” as it were, is unique, there are shared cultural experiences and worlds of meaning that intersect with our own liaisons of interpretation. Here, narrative and identity are but two pieces of each author's propriospect on their respective objects and areas of study. Their own intersections of researcher positionality works intimately with the larger workings of culture, society, history, and popular music.

Initially, when we issued our call for papers dealing with music objects/subjects deriving in the Global South, we stressed that we were seeking papers that worked with these areas of study without intervention or a necessary importance that hinged on the approval or frameworks from the Global North. However, as we received abstracts and began talking to our colleagues on this edition, we realized that conversations of identity and globalization were inextricably linked in the work and psyche of how we navigate area studies in this world of digital interconnectivity and blurring boundaries. Much like our own multi-hyphenate identities and the subcultures and imagined communities of which we are a part, of course others would work in the same mixed lens ways, dissecting and digesting



Asian popular music through various narratives of identities. Perhaps what we observed here was not the leveraging of Asian popular music against or in approval of the Global North, but rather a discussion on how culture and identity cannot exist in a vacuum nor can it ignore the power paradigms or globalizing intersections within which we are all enmeshed.

Even without mentioning a preferred methodology, it was interesting to see that every piece of our special issue provides a particular type of identity archive. While some use a chronological approach to identity-making in the broader sense (Liu, Jiang, Ganguly), others work directly with the text – discography or song lyrics (Wilson, Szivák) or ethnographical data (Dahlberg-Sears, Vania) – to carefully craft this archive. This edition provides various methodologies and approaches to the idea of the global and Asia, which highlights not only an evolution in the development of our field but also a development in how we work within, through, and out of the field. In every piece, we also find testimony on how authors very consciously challenge their understanding of identity. They always question the processes that lead to the creation of the concept, whether they have been exposed to the object of study for a long period of time, or have a more personal relationship with it.

Our special issue starts with “The Name We Gave to Struggle and Pain,” where Tiara Wilson provides an insightful analysis of song lyrics from the Korean hip-hop star Tablo, and Brooklyn rapper Joey Bada\$\$\$. Using authenticity as a lens to compare Black American and Korean experiences of the urban, she establishes a framework where Tablo and Joey Bada\$\$\$ are conversing with each other.

In “Charting the Course,” Haoran Jiang takes us to the world of Taiwanese Popular Music, and provides an extended overview of the existing literature on the topic. Building on works from prominent scholars in the field, they provide a sharp analysis of the current status of the field, while expressing their hopes and aspirations for the future.

In “Performing Japaneseness, Playing with Koreanness,” Mayako Liu takes a chronological approach to identity-making and discusses the blurry limit between Japaneseness and Koreanness in the K-pop industry. Using experiences of Japanese female artists performing in Korea, Liu highlights how – despite nationalist tensions between Japan and Korea – artists manage to navigate those two identities to produce their own “gendered subjectivity.”

In “Raja Kumari: The Bridge?,” Júlia Szivák, in the same vein as Wilson, uses song lyrics from Raja Kumari to take us to the universe of underground hip-hop. In her piece, she argues that Raja Kumari, while replicating the codes of global hip-hop, also expresses her own understanding of Hindu culture. Ultimately, Szivák sees Kumari’s emphasis on authenticity as a replication of Orientalising discourse.

Still in the theme of contradictions, Robert Dahlberg-Sears brings us on a fieldwork trip to Japan. His piece – “Listening to What Is/n’t,” a product of several years spent observing the Japanese Punk scene – addresses the debate around legitimacy and positionality when it comes to assessing and defining a space. He illustrates his semantical inquiry with ethnographic vignettes.

Back to India with “Namaste Hallyu,” in which Sneha Ganguly provides an informative account of the development of the Korean Wave – or Hallyu – in India through the example of BTS and its fandom, ARMY. While there are many existing accounts on the Korean Wave focusing on other regions of

the globe, Ganguly tells us how Desimys (Indian fans of BTS) conjugate their identity both as Indian and as ARMY.

Finally, we end our special issue with a rising star in the scholarship of popular music, Clementine Vania. Interested in the perception of Authenticity in K-pop fandom, Vania tells us about the “Kwangya Paradox.” Her piece is a deep dive into the Kwangya universe, a concept created by the K-pop entertainment company SM Entertainment. Building on the paradox between K-pop being perceived as (in)authentic, Vania provides an extremely refreshing argument on cultural essentialism in fandom.

Even though this special edition covers a large swatch of geography and represents a diverse roster of methodologies, the overarching linkage is one of how identity contributes to an archive, in some way, shape, or form, of Asian popular music. Much like propriospect and the individual lens by which we all view the world, each of our authors’ identities, conversations on identity, and unique approaches to their subjects proves a piece of the lens by which Asian popular music is viewed today. This special edition of *Riffs* is, then, the culmination of our excited ruminations on identity, K-Pop, aca-fanning, and coffee. Lots of coffee.

**Sharon Kong-Perring** is in her final year as a PhD candidate in Media and Cultural Studies at Birmingham City University (UK). A Korean-American historian-turned-contemporary media researcher, Sharon has worked extensively in education, collections, and curatorial departments of museums and now writes as a freelance journalist on topics of history, culture, design, and travel. For Sharon, K-Pop and Hallyu inspired her to reconcile her diasporic identity, and her ethnographic work deals with Anglophone performances of K-Pop fandom subculture and diasporic Korean engagement in fandom. Sharon is an editor of the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Gender in Popular Music Studies*, for expected release in 2026.

**Dr Mathieu Berbiguier** is a visiting assistant professor in Korean Studies at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA (US). A longtime K-pop fan-turned-academic, his research focuses on the dynamics between domestic and international K-pop fans, particularly their heated debate on the online sphere. His current book project delves into the concept of authenticity, exploring how its varying interpretations within K-pop fandom(s) create intersections between K-pop and other fields of study. Through his work, he aims to establish K-pop’s broader relevance within Korean Studies.



This special issue of *Riffs* features Ning-Ning Li as our front cover artist, captured by the super talented Ian Davies (<http://iandaviesphoto.com/>). Ning-Ning is a violinist and DJ based in Birmingham (UK). She has toured internationally with a number of artists and as a member of musical collective The Folk Ensemble. She has played at the 2023 Silverstone Grand Prix and at Cheltenham and Manchester Jazz Festivals and recorded a music video for rising artist Siph0, for his single, "Arms". Ning-Ning Li's most recent performances blend live violin with DJing. You can find out more on her website (<https://www.ningningli.com/>) and on Instagram (@ningningli).

Whilst now run by an international editorial team, *Riffs* continues to pay homage to our origin city – Birmingham – and to support the city's talented creatives.

Sarah Raine, Co-Managing Editor, *Riffs*



*Ning-Ning Li – SoundCloud*

