Girls’ Generation? Gender, (Dis)Empowerment and K-pop

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The hottest phrase in Korea nowadays is undeniably 'girl group.' But girl group fever is more than just a trend: it's symbolic of a cultural era that is embracing the expulsion of authoritarian ideology." So reads the content blurb for a story on the rise of girl groups in the March 2010 issue of Korea, a public relations magazine published under the auspices of the Korean Culture and Information Service. Nonetheless, despite official, top-down promotion and cheerful assertions that this phenomenon is a liberating pop movement, a reading of the lyrics and visual codes of the music videos of popular contemporary Korea girl groups raises serious questions about the empowering nature of "Girl Group Fever." In this paper, we will engage in a close analysis of the music and videos of groups such as the Wonder Girls, Girls’ Generation, KARA, T-ara and the discourse that has surrounded their rise to popularity in South Korea in order to deconstruct the notion that contemporary consumer society is making a radical break from more traditional, deeply embedded power structures. We will argue that a set of recurrent tropes in the studied media and marketing presentation of Korean girl groups undercuts claims to a progressive ethos. In particular, as we hope to demonstrate, girl group videos and lyrics often fall into one of three categories: first of all, while girl group singers can express desire in potentially empowering fashion, the viewer is generally constructed as male, and expression of desire is accompanied by a coyness and feigned innocence that returns power to men (Girls’ Generation’s "Gee" and "Oh"; T-ara’s "Like the First Time"; KARA’s "Mister"). A second set of songs and videos suggests exertion of female power, but influence is wielded through recourse to the overwhelming force of feminine sexuality that either embarrasses (After School’s "AH!", which adds the tease of a forbidden relationship between teacher and student) or renders males helpless in its midst (The Wonder Girls "So Hot") and thus projects the message that narcissistic desirability is the route to redress power imbalance. Finally, a number of songs have lyrical and video narratives that depict female solidarity in wreaking revenge on callous boyfriends or threatening men (2NE1’s "I Don’t Care", The Wonder Girls’ "Irony" and "Tell Me", the latter of which has lyrics that are at odds with its visual narrative), but in doing so continue to foster the discourse of a battle between the sexes. As we will show, in noteworthy contrast to J-pop girl group videos from the dominant entertainment group Hello! Project, which emphasize the expression of youthful energy without reference to a validating or polarizing male presence, Korean popular music’s engagement with larger discursive structures has yet to break free of ideologies that pit male and female against one another.

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