

The Korean Tradition of Humor in Psy's "Gangnam Style"*

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Abstract

In his carefully crafted music video, "Gangnam Style," Psy reveals an infectious positive attitude toward life, reflecting the Korean parody tradition of haehak, as opposed to the more critical pungja. Particularly, haehak's optimistic attitude toward life prioritizes group enjoyment over social criticism. Psy's video symbolizes an attempt to go through all the difficulties in life with a unique sense of humor and undaunted perseverance. He expresses his positive attitude toward life by creatively transforming the negative to the positive. At the same time, he produces a dynamic video by subverting his audience's expectations whenever he pokes fun at his characters and their situations. Psy's portrayal of himself as a "psycho" points to both his eccentricity and passion. His emphasis on eccentricity registers the paygeok spirit of haehak, particularly breaking with the conventions of the Korean music industry. His relentless pursuit of passion also registers the active attitude of haehak. As a kind of "collective sensibility," Psy's group entertainment goes beyond the negative aspects of other popular music, such as homophobia and misogyny. Psy actively partakes of the global creative adaptation of popular music. Creatively remixing East and West, the contemporary and the traditional, he produces a unique humor that alleviates people's distress during hard times across the globe.

Keywords: Psy, Gangnam Style, Korean culture, *haehak*, *pungja*, satire, parody, pastiche

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Introduction

In June 15, 2012, the Korean pop-singer, Psy, made a sensational debut on the world stage with a single music video that went viral across the internet, exceeding one billion views by the end of 2012 on YouTube.¹ On August 10, 2012 Sam Blake Hofstetter of *VH1 Tuner* reported on the overnight music sensation: “We’ve added dozens of views ourselves singing along (to the parts we understand) of the infectious song and hypnotizing video.”² With this sudden surge in popularity, Psy’s video drew much attention from many commentators.

Ever since his “Gangnam Style” broke the record as the most frequently viewed video on YouTube, Psy has been invited to the New Year’s festival at Time Square, to President Obama’s inauguration party, and to the opening show of Rio’s Carnival in 2013. However, some commentators ascribe his popularity to digital media, as a *Billboard* headline indicates, “How the K-Pop Breakout Star Harnessed the Power of YouTube, SNL and More to Become Music’s New Global Brand.”³ Other responses have simply dismissed Psy’s music video as an example of lighthearted entertainment. For example, Jerry Slaughter in the *Kpopstarz.com* report highlights this attitude: “The music video is not too serious and did a good job expressing the have-fun mentality. It is a very good content because it brings joy and laughter to people.”⁴ Yet, as a global cultural phenomenon, Psy’s “Gangnam Style”

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1. William Gruger, “PSY’s ‘Gangnam Style’ Video Hits 1 Billion Views, Unprecedented Milestone,” last modified December 21, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/biz/articles/news/1483733/psys-gangnam-style-video-hits-1-billion-views-unprecedented-milestone>.
 2. Sam Blake Hofstetter, “Who Is PSY, and Why Is His Song ‘Gangnam Style’ the Third Most Popular Video in YouTube?” last modified August 10, 2012, <http://www.vh1.com/music/tuner/2012-08-10/who-is-psy-and-why-is-his-song-gangnam-style-the-third-most-popular-video-on-youtube/August+24,+2012>.
 3. Donnie Kwak, “PSY’s ‘Gangnam Style’: The Billboard Cover Story,” last modified October 27, 2012, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/k-town/474456/psys-gangnam-style-the-billboard-cover-story>.
 4. Jerry Slaughter, “Popularity of Psy’s ‘Gangnam Style’ Analyzed Realistically,” last modified September 2, 2012, <http://www.kpopstarz.com/articles/13529/20120902/popularity-of-psy-s-gangnam-style-analyzed-realistically.htm>.

deserves more serious examination, particularly concerning its unique sense of humor. Despite a relatively large number of commentaries, only a few attempts were made to explain Psy's video within its cultural context of contemporary—particularly Korean—society. Moreover, though many have pointed out Psy's unique sense of humor, no scholarly study has examined it within the tradition of humor in Korea.

Haehak and Pungja

In order to understand Psy's "Gangnam Style" on a deeper level, it must be placed within its cultural tradition. Korean culture has two major traditional forms of humor—*haehak* and *pungja*. The Chinese characters of *haehak* 諧謔 indicate the achievement of harmony 諧 by having fun 謔, while those of *pungja* 諷刺 imply having fun 諷 by poking 刺. They both use humor, but while *haehak* employs humor for the sake of harmony, *pungja* utilizes humor for a decisively critical purpose. Yoon Byung-ryul describes *haehak* as a humorous attempt to "harmonize with the other rather than beat the person" (Yoon 2013, 6), as the example depicted in the following scene from Psy's "Gangnam Style" demonstrates.

This comic scene is a *parody* of in hip-hop music. Some people take these dance battles as an expression of masculinity and a means of survival under harsh living conditions, particularly in the world of hip-hop. As Douglas Kellner argues, "[Hip-hop] music articulated the experiences and conditions of black Americans living in violent ghetto conditions" (Kellner 2003, 176). Some rivalries have even ended in tragic death, as in Tupac Shakur's murder. Frank Hoffmann points out African-Americans' frequent "use of force to settle disputes" in their tough living conditions (Hoffmann 2006, 122). Whether interpreted as a reflection of violence or its sublimation, dance battle



Figure 1. A still image of Psy's "Gangnam Style," 2012

expresses the competitive spirit of winning over the rival. However, in Psy's parody of a dance battle, the two participants dance not to win against the other but to make fun of each other in pursuit of mutual amusement. Thus, the scene epitomizes the harmonizing humor of *haehak*, which is completely different from the aggression and seriousness of most hip-hop dance battles.

The harmonious spirit of *haehak* can be further explained by its contrast with the critical spirit of *pungja*. *Pungja* is usually used as a Korean translation for the English word *satire*, since it takes a critical stance on society for the political purpose of social improvement. In contrast, *haehak* is a difficult word to translate into English. It is closer to parody than to satire because it places emphasis on amusement rather than criticism. Yoon highlights "the positive attitude toward life" and "the magical power to overcome the tragic world view" as the main features of *haehak*, even in the face of frustrating situations (Yoon 2013, 6). Therefore, *haehak* has a connotation of perseverance, accepting all difficulties in life as aspects of reality. In *haehak*'s spirit of perseverance, Psy expresses in "Gangnam Style" his determination to plow through all of his difficulties, repeatedly singing, "Let's go all the way!"⁵ Throughout the video, Psy never loses his sense of humor, making fun of everything including his own troubles, while showing his perseverance in the face of constant frustrations.

Some commentators emphasize the social criticism of *pungja* in "Gangnam Style." For example, Max Fisher discovers a social satire of Korean society. Quoting Adrian Hong, a Korean-American consultant, Fisher points out Psy's "nuanced satire" of the "ridiculousness of the materialism" in contemporary Korean society: "Koreans have been kind of caught up in this spending to look wealthy, and Gangnam has really been the leading edge of that."⁶ This criticism of materialistic aspirations is significant since

5. The English translation of verses follows "Oppa's Gangnam style," accessed January 24, 2014, <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/gangnam-style-%EA%B0%95%EB%82%A8%EC%8A%A4%ED%83%80%EC%9D%BC-gangnam-style.html#D505MEv6WrgxGhap.99>.

6. Max Fisher, "Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation," last modified August 23, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/11/south-koreas-hottest-ipo-boy-band-inc/249140/>.

many music videos are criticized for their thoughtless acceptance of rampant materialism. Kellner points out the negative aspect of African-American popular music, which often reveals "a materialism that brags of its record sales and material possessions" (Kellner 2003, 178). For example, by displaying *bling* comprised of necklaces and rings, the singers show off their money to attractive women. In contrast, Fisher stresses the subtle, dissident nature of Psy's social satire: "None of this commentary is particularly overt, which is actually what could make 'Gangnam Style' so subversive."⁷

However, some people might disagree with Fisher on Psy's social criticism since determining whether Psy's video is social satire can be difficult. For example, from an insider's perspective, Daham Chong claims that Psy is "less a master of satire than a true emblem of Gangnam elitism" because he spent his youth as a core member of "mindless Gangnam princelings."⁸ For Chong, Psy does not criticize but rather represents the extravagant lifestyle of Gangnam. Then, is it not possible to criticize the lavish Gangnam lifestyle from an insider's perspective, just as Chong himself does? Moreover, Jason Strother of PRI makes another point about the dark reality of Gangnam's glamorous lifestyle: "This Gangnam style is prompting fears of an American-style debt crisis in South Korea."⁹ In reality, many Korean families are sliding into a staggering debt through their emulation of the lavish Gangnam lifestyle. Psy betrays his awareness of this debilitating side effect from materialistic aspirations. In a CNN interview, he claims that if the music video displays any element of criticism, it is directed against the pretension of the people who emulate it, rather than the luxurious lifestyle of Gangnam itself:

People who are actually from Gangnam never proclaim that they are—

7. Max Fisher, "Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation," last modified August 23, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/11/south-koreas-hottest-ipo-boy-band-inc/249140/>.

8. Daham Chong, and Koo Se-Woong, "Psy: Less a Master of Satire than a Familiar Symbol of Privilege," last modified October 11, 2012, <http://left-flank.org/2012/10/11/special-guest-post-psy-gangnam-style-the-politics-of-satire/#sthash.kYWwIfOh.dpbs>.

9. Jason Strother, "Growing Debt Worries for South Korea," last modified September 26, 2012, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-09-26/growing-debt-worries-south-korea>.

it's only the posers and wannabes that put on these airs and say that they are 'Gangnam Style'—so this song is actually poking fun at those kinds of people who are trying so hard to be something that they are not.¹⁰

Nonetheless, another problem remains for this social satire to work. Even if Psy's video is accepted as implicit satire, its critical message is destined to fail in being fully conveyed particularly because of cultural and language barriers. Pointing out the language barrier, David Thomas of *The Telegraph* argues: "The Korean lyrics may be incomprehensible, but anyone can enjoy the irrepressibly camp energy and charm of Psy himself."¹¹ Accordingly, emotional appeal plays a more important role than social criticism for the video's popularity. Moreover, Psy clearly discloses his intent in favor of the amusement of *haehak* rather than the criticism of *pungja*. Marlow Stern of *Newsweek* reports, "Though it appears to mock the nouveau riche tackiness of the area, which is often referred to as the Beverly Hills of South Korea, Psy claims the video 'wasn't a criticism of Gangnam' and was merely intended to 'lift people's spirits.'"¹² Furthermore, in the same interview, Psy reveals that the video "was shot in 48 hours across 28 locations in the Gangnam District of Seoul as well as greater Seoul."¹³ As a result, Psy's video is less about the glamorous lifestyle of the Gangnam District than about a panoramic portrait of exotic Korean scenes, such as tattooed Korean gangsters at a sauna, people riding a duck-shaped boat, practicing yoga and walking backwards in a *gosubuji* (riverside area), *ajumma* (aged women) singing and

10. Frances Cha, "Interview: PSY on 'Gangnam Style' posers and that hysterical little boy," last modified August 17, 2012, <http://travel.cnn.com/seoul/play/interview-psy-gangnam-style-posers-and-hysterical-little-boy-285626>.

11. David Thomas, "South Korea: a Rough Guide to Gangnam style," last modified October 7, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/southkorea/9591332/South-Korea-a-rough-guide-to-Gangnam-style.html>.

12. Marlow Stern, "Psy Talks Gangnam Style, Growing Up, and His Next Single," last modified October 29, 2012, <http://www.newsweek.com/psy-talks-gangnam-style-growing-and-his-next-single-65393>.

13. Marlow Stern, "Psy Talks Gangnam Style, Growing Up, and His Next Single," last modified October 29, 2012, <http://www.newsweek.com/psy-talks-gangnam-style-growing-and-his-next-single-65393>.

dancing on a tour bus, elderly men playing *janggi* (Korean chess) on a road-side table—all against the looming backdrop of skyscrapers and apartment complexes. This humorous representation of an exotic Korea surely contributes to the success of "Gangnam Style" around the world.

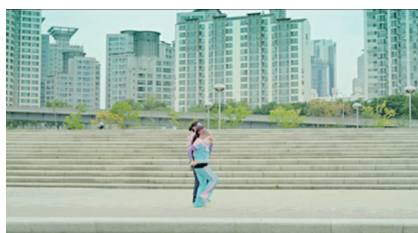
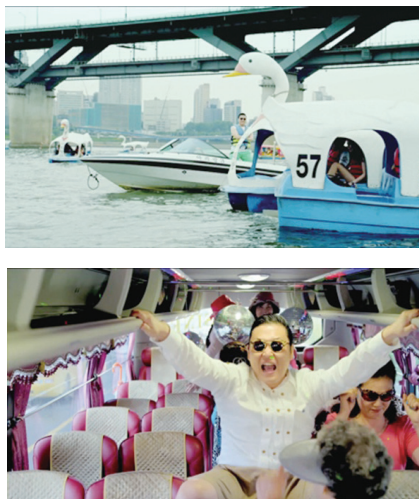


Figure 2. Still images of Psy's
"Gangnam Style," 2012

Aside from its humorous exoticization of Korea, in order to understand Psy's humor in "Gangnam Style," a distinction must be made between *haehak* and *pungja* by stressing their different attitudes toward social contradictions. Through *pungja*, people criticize social contradictions for the sake of social improvement, while through *haehak*, they accept these contradictions as part of social reality. In the positive spirit of *haehak*, a willful acknowledgement and acceptance of social contradictions is viewed as the inevitable reality of life through what Yoon calls the "magical power to overcome the tragic world view" (Yoon 2013, 6). Psy does not try to solve social contradictions or even take responsibility for them. Instead, he puts himself in the midst of these daily frustrations, such as his foiled attempts to woo women, in the music video. For this very reason, some commentators might criticize him for doing nothing socially meaningful. However, Psy takes a different path from a critical or satirical approach by using a sequence of contradictions, even so far as to make fun of himself. In one

scene, he adopts the Korean saying, “Above the running man is the flying man.” This expression refers to a universal frustration: someone else will always surpass you no matter how hard you try. However, immediately after this expression, Psy boldly declares, “I’m a guy who knows a thing or two.” The next moment, the camera closes on Psy sitting on the toilet seat with his pants down. This apparently tongue-in-cheek sequence exemplifies not only his confidence and perseverance in the face of difficulties, but also his audacity to meet frustrations in life with humor. In such an unexpected sequence of scenes, the self-deprecating subversion of “Gangnam Style” makes it difficult to determine even what its object of criticism is, if there is one.

Parody or Pastiche

Whenever Psy’s music video is discussed in critical circles, one crucial element is often neglected: the sheer pleasure of imitating “Gangnam Style.” Aristotle claims, “[Man] is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation” (Aristotle 1984, 226–227). Parody, as a *mocking imitation*, plays an important role in the humor of Psy’s video. Margaret A. Rose stresses the importance of imitation in parodies, arguing that satire “need not make itself as dependent upon [its target] for its own character as does the parody, but may simply make fun of it as a target external to itself” (Rose 1995, 82). The parody has a closer connection with the object of imitation than the satire. For Rose, the parody is a quite inclusive term, which can be “comic,” “metafictional,” “ridicule,” and “burlesque” (Rose 1995, 277). As a parody of contemporary Korean society, Psy’s video became a global success when the global audience responded to it through their own parodies. In retrospect, Psy seems to have set up a global stage where everyone could have fun imitating each other even in the face of overwhelming problems worldwide. Consequently, Psy’s video is important not only as a form of group enjoyment, but also as an example of global entertainment.

In order to understand this global phenomenon within the context of

cultural imitation, the parody videos of "Gangnam Style" should be critically examined through the lens of Fredric Jameson. Jameson distinguishes two types of imitation: parody and *pastiche*. Jameson's concept of *pastiche* helps to illuminate the music video's global success since the chain reaction of global responses produces many interesting viral replications of the video: a copy of a copy. In contrast with mere imitation, this notion of "a copy of a copy" embodies Jean Baudrillard's concept of *simulation*, which Jameson appropriates for his explanation of *pastiche* as a main feature of contemporary life. Unlike imitation, simulation undermines the meaning of the *original* by creating countless replications so that it becomes increasingly impossible to determine what is original. For example, many *wonjojip* (original restaurants) stress their *original* recipes as a reaction to the uncontrollable prevalence of copying in Korean society. This obsession with the *original* betrays an anxiety about the current phenomenon of simulation where cooks constantly *copy* recipes from one another due to the fast flow of information through the internet. In this cultural context of "simulation," Jameson characterizes *pastiche* as *blank parody*, which is "amputated of the satiric impulse" (Jameson 1991, 17). For Jameson, parody includes an element of critical satire, as opposed to the pure amusement of *pastiche*. According to this distinction, most parodic versions of Psy's video are *pastiches* produced primarily for fun. Those examples of *pastiche* in viral imitative videos are close to the Korean humor of *haehak* in that they stress amusement over criticism. However, one example stands out in particular as a well-made political *parody*, not merely a *pastiche*, for its explicit democratic cause. During the U.S. presidential election campaigns of 2012, the "Romney Style" video criticizes Mitt Romney's irresponsible lifestyle with a clear *satirical impulse*, by placing the controversy over the candidate's tax evasions within the political context of the U.S. government's soaring budget deficit, as some critics have ascribed the ever-aggravating government deficit to the tax evasions by the rich during the 2012 presidential election campaigns.

Moreover, Rose attempts to counterbalance Jameson's negative view of the *pastiche*. Adopting Ihab Hassan's idea, she argues that "image or replica may be as valid as its model," as in the "Quixote of Borges' Pierre Menard"

where Jorge Luis Borges's fictional translator, Pierre Menard, creates his own version of *Quixote*, while translating the classic *Don Quixote* (Rose 1995, 213). This notion of pastiche as a creative adaptation is exemplified by a popular Korean music video, Wonder Girls' "Nobody." In fact, the "Nobody" video utilizes the *retro* style of pastiche that Jameson explains as a kind of "nostalgia film":

[T]he nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the "past" through stylistic connotation, conveying "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image, and "1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness" by the attributes of fashion (Jameson 1991, 19).

In short, the nostalgia film eclectically adopts the styles of *pastness* without conveying any actual historical content of the *past*. The "Nobody" video thus illustrates formal adoption without content in the *retro* style of the earlier music industry, clearly indicated by the singers' hairstyle and fashion as well as the out-of-date microphone. Particularly, the video's nostalgic *pastness* is underlined by the singer's performance on a black-and-white TV screen.



Figure 3. Still images of Wonder Girls' "Nobody," 2008

Furthermore, the video anachronistically includes a singer's relatively contemporary adoption of rap in the middle of the apparently old-fashioned musical performance. In this way, some music videos show the possibility of adopting past styles for artistic creativity. Thus, in contrast to Jameson's negative attitude, Rose is supportive of the *retro* style, characterizing it as an

innovative "device for the translation and reuse of other [previous] design elements" (Rose 1995, 223).

In a similar vein, Psy also actively employs pastiche for humorous effect in his video. In the *Rolling Stone* interview, he reveals his positive attitude toward pastiche, saying that he copied the spa surfacing scene from Lady Gaga's "Poker Face" video.¹⁴ Another example of pastiche is in the ending of "Gangnam Style" when Psy appropriates the final scene from the "Nobody" video. The main difference is that in "Gangnam Style" the revelation of the embarrassing scene is accompanied with a sense of audacity, rather than a sense of mortification.



Figure 4. A still image of Wonder Girls' "Nobody," 2008 (left); a still image of Psy's "Gangnam Style," 2012 (right)

This display of confidence points toward Psy's humor of *haehak* coupled with a sense of perseverance, which highlights the difference between the two similar scenes.

Accordingly, Psy's music video is a successful example of cultural adaptation in Korea. His use of pastiche can also be explained within the context of contemporary Korean music. He willingly participates in the unique Korean adaptation of hip-hop music, opening the door to both commercial and political uses. Like many other Korean music videos, Psy's video is an appropriation of American or European videos, as several commentators indicate. However, he makes every effort to create his own *eccentric style*

14. Steve Knopper, "Breaking Down Psy's 'Gangnam Style,'" last modified September 14, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/breaking-down-psys-gangnam-style-20120914>.

since cultural adaptation often takes the form of *remixing*. Dominic Strinati highlights this remixing as a major *postmodern* feature of popular music:

From the point of view of postmodern theory, the recent history of popular music can be seen to be marked by a trend towards the open and extensive mixing of styles and genres of music in very direct and self-conscious ways. This has ranged from the straightforward remixing of already recorded songs from the same or different eras on the same record, to the quoting and “tasting” of distinct musics [*sic.*], sounds and instruments in order to create new sub- and pan-cultural identities. (Strinati 2005, 221–222)

Many Korean advertisements serve as good examples of cultural remixing. For instance, a Korean construction company, Daelim, produced a commercial music video entitled “e-Pyeonhansesang” (e-comfortable world) by remixing hip-hop elements (e.g., rap, break dance, beat-boxing, and scratching) with the Baroque classic “Cannon” played on the traditional Korean musical instrument, the *gayageum*. In this example, one can easily see the *remixing* of seemingly unrelated elements (e.g., hip-hop, Baroque classical, and Korean traditional music).



Figure 5. A still image of “e-Pyeonhansesang” by Daelim, 2006

In a similar fashion, Psy creatively partakes in the global cultural activity of remixing the east and the west, the contemporary and the traditional, through his video.

Hence, remixing serves as a tool for both creativity and criticism in contemporary music. Besides its commercial use, remixing is used as a major form of cultural resis-

tance, otherwise known as “culture jamming.” For example, the “remix” video “Imagine” combines John Lennon’s famous song of world peace with destructive images of George Bush’s Iraq War. In a BBC interview, hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash claims that hip-hop was originally called “jamming” as a form of cultural resistance against the highly exclusive music of

disco, dominant in the 1970s.¹⁵ Hip-hop itself epitomizes the ingenuity of African-Americans, who created their own music of remixing out of the scraps of a dismal slum environment by utilizing discarded LPs and turntables. They also adopted the club culture of disco music with its emphasis on the leading role of the DJ. Many Korean singers frequently remix not only musical styles, such as R&B and hip-hop, but also Korean and English words in their lyrics. Psy adds another element in remixing by drawing his artistic creativity from the Korean tradition of *haehak*.

The "Twist" as a Means to Produce Humor

Psy reveals his sense of humor by frequently producing unexpected sequences of video scenes in a humorous manner. What makes "Gangnam Style" so dynamic is not just Psy's energetic performance, but also his efficient employment of unexpected reversals. In an ABC interview, Psy underlines the use of the *twist* as an essential tool for humor, arguing, "Gangnam means, it's like the Beverly Hills of Korea. But the guy doesn't look like Beverly Hills. Dance doesn't look like Beverly Hills.... So that's the point. It's sort of a twist."¹⁶ In other words, the twist is a tool that juxtaposes images that often contradict the spoken dialogue of the characters. Highlighting the humor in these reversals, Evan Ramstad of *The Wall Street Journal* presents the persona Psy depicts in his video as "a guy trying to appear cool on the dance floor of a wedding reception and not quite pulling it off."¹⁷ Within these seemingly frustrating situations, Psy adopts the positive attitude of *haehak* through his employment of a twist to create characters that are fasci-

15. *Once Upon a Time in New York: the Birth of Hip Hop, Disco and Punk*, BBC documentary, 2007.

16. Cho Joohee, and Lee Sungeun, "South Korean Rapper PSY's 'Gangnam Style' Goes Viral," last modified August 14, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Music/south-korean-rapper-psys-gangnam-style-viral/story?id=16996559>.

17. Evan Ramstad, "What's Up With the 'Gangnam Style' Video?," last modified August 3, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/korearealtime/2012/08/03/whats-up-with-the-gangnam-style-video/>.

nating in their contradictions. At the beginning of the video, Psy praises the transformation (*banjeon* twist) of an elegant lady, who relishes a cup of coffee leisurely during the daytime, into a wild woman who enjoys a passionate nightlife. Throughout the video, he repeatedly extols such transformations even in himself, that is, as someone gentle during the daytime but passionate at night.

In the optimistic spirit of *haehak*, Psy utilizes the *twist* to produce not only a transformation in character, but also a contradiction in the video's sequence. First of all, "Gangnam Style" is composed of a series of frustrations in reality, juxtaposed with the fantastic manifestations of the main character's desires. Despite this clash between desire and reality, or rather because of it, what really matters is not the fulfillment of the desire but the ability to keep daydreaming despite these frustrations. In the ABC interview, Psy insists on the significance of undaunted perseverance: "[T]he situation in the music video doesn't look like Beverly Hills. But he keeps saying I'm Beverly Hills style."¹⁸ Because his wishes are always humorously foiled,



Figure 6. Still images of Psy's "Gangnam Style," 2012

18. Cho Joohee, and Lee Sungeun, "South Korean Rapper PSY's 'Gangnam Style' Goes Viral," last modified August 14, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/Music/south-korean-rapper-psys-gangnam-style-viral/story?id=16996559>.

Psy succeeds in producing a video that is both charming and relatable. The beginning sequence depicts the typical frustration of desire, as a beautiful woman fanning him transforms into a mere reflection of his desire on his sunglasses, whereas he actually turns out to be dozing off in the middle of a children's playground.

It is not clear whether he is dreaming or awake because he wears sunglasses. However, his open mouth and outstretched arms suggest that he is not fully awake in the last scene. This beginning sequence is important, for it serves as a framework to establish the whole video as a daydream.

Another sequence tells a similar story of desire and frustration. This time, Psy humorously betrays his strong desire for the ideal woman through his gaze hidden behind the sunglasses and his posture in having his arms open helplessly.



Figure 7. Still images of Psy's "Gangnam Style," 2012

The images of his gesture indicating desire and the object of his desire rapidly flash back and forth in this sequence. Ironically, his desperate gesture is juxtaposed with a sign of his frustration. Through the tinted glass, an advertisement is revealed *subliminally*: *chwieop jeongbo* (information on getting a job), an indication of unemployment causing this frustration, particularly among young people in Korea. This prolonged issue of unemployment is simply one of many problems in contemporary society. As a result, "Gangnam Style" is a creative response to the on-going difficulties in modern life. In the CNN interview, Psy discloses his intention of producing his video as an attempt to encourage desperate people in economic difficulties: "With this new album, I just wanted to make something that was purely comedic—

something that could make people laugh like crazy even in the midst of all this global economic slowdown.”¹⁹ In addition to the global economic recession, the first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by many frustrating situations all over the world, whether it was 9/11 or the U.S. sub-prime mortgage debacle or the European economic crisis. The increasing global insecurity led to rising social unrest and heightened governmental control and surveillance, about which Sheldon Wolin warns, claiming, “[T]he nation’s economic crisis qualified as the equivalent of a state of war which justified an unprecedented expansion of state power in peacetime” (Wolin 2008, 21). Wolin’s warning emphasizes the rise of terrorism and its consequences, as well as increased state control in the face of global economic recessions.

In this context of global crisis, Psy’s *haehak* as an expression of encouragement plays a more important role than the critical spirit of *pungja*. Lee Eo-ryung points out the “creative spirit” of traditional Korean culture in turning the *negative* into the *positive*, for example, *recycling* burnt rice, otherwise a waste, for use in the traditional Korean after-meal drink *sungnyung* (Lee 2011, 26–27). Above all, Psy’s name embodies the positive spirit of *haehak* by turning its negative meaning into a positive one. According to KBS, the Korean singer gave himself the name Psy from his first album *PSY from the Psycho World*.²⁰ Thus, he endows the negative word *psycho* with a positive meaning. In Korea, the word *psycho* is usually equivalent to the word *psychotic*, otherwise expressed in Korean as *ttorai*. For Psy, the word *psycho* gains a positive meaning by embodying his eccentric character. This kind of positive adoption can be found in African-American music. Kellner, showing how African-Americans have adopted the pejorative word *nigger* in “an attempt to take a term of racist insult and to transform it into a badge of racial pride,” notes that words can undergo positive transformations in meaning (Kellner 2003, 179).

19. Frances Cha, “Interview: PSY on ‘Gangnam Style,’ posers and that hysterical little boy,” last modified August 17, 2012, <http://travel.cnn.com/seoul/play/interview-psy-gangnam-style-posers-and-hysterical-little-boy-285626>.

20. “PSY (Biography),” accessed January 24, 2014, http://rki.kbs.co.kr/english/program/program_artist_detail.htm?No=10071.

Therefore, the music video discloses an effective use of positive cultural appropriation. The title of Psy's music album also reflects the positive spirit of *haehak*. In fact, he provides a clue to understanding the power behind positive cultural creation with the following image at the end of the music video:



Figure 8. A still image of Psy's "Gangnam Style," 2012

Above all, this cartoonish image stresses his unique appearance, which Fisher characterizes as "not particularly good-looking."²¹ Unlike other tall, handsome K-pop idols, Psy is short and chubby, though endearing in his own way. In this image, Psy is dancing the now-famous *horse dance*, but he reveals his wit in the sign just under the ceiling: "싸이6부 PART I." In this particular sign, Psy is in fact giving the audience an explanation of why he made this video in the first place: he is holding a musical *party* for fun ("PARTY" i.e., party). To demonstrate his unique sense of humor, Psy changes the usual Korean expression "*yukgap* 六甲" into "6甲" as if it were the name of a subway station. The number 6 refers to the ordering of the Gangnam Style song, which was the *lead single* of his sixth studio album *PSY 6 (Six Rules), Part 1*.

Using "6甲" for "six rules," Psy expresses his positive attitude toward life. His appropriation of *yukgap* exemplifies his positive spirit of *haehak*. According to *Donga sae gugeo sajeon*, the Korean expression *yukgap* is an abbreviation of *yuksip gapja* 六十甲子.²² This is originally related to the selection of fortune combinations, particularly for traditional Korean fortune telling. *Yuksip gapja* eventually evolved through abbreviation and appropriation into the common Korean expression—(byeongsin) *yukgaphanda*—, whose literal translation would be: "(The idiot) dares to tell the fortune of others." In its daily usage, it implies that the fool is doing something out-

21. Max Fisher, "Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation," last modified August 23, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/11/south-koreas-hottest-ipo-boy-band-inc/249140/>.

22. *Donga sae gugeo sajeon* (Dong-A's New Korean Dictionary), 1994.

geous, far beyond his ability or social status. The empowering usage of this seemingly pejorative term is Psy's way of twisting the originally negative expression for the purpose of a positive creation. As a result, despite the crudeness and mockery of his video, it remains addictive because Psy expresses his positive attitude toward life by overturning existing Korean values. He not only turns the pejorative meaning of the word *psycho* or *yukgap* into a positive one, but also reveals his own positive attitude toward life throughout his video with his unfailing sense of humor.

Eccentricity and Passion

Besides his positive attitude, Psy's emphasis on eccentricity also reflects the Korean tradition of *haehak*. Choi Joon-sik points out the connection between the "aesthetic of *haehak*—humor" and the "aesthetic of *pagyeok*—iconoclasm" as an essential feature of traditional Korean art. He argues that traditional Korean art expresses *haehak* aesthetics in the form of "asymmetry, spontaneity, and free spirit" (Choi 2010, 161). The literal meaning of *pagyeok* 破格 is breaking with 破 conventions 格. In this sense, *haehak* is a special kind of humor produced by breaking rules, which eventually allows for contradictions in life. Choi ascribes the aesthetic features of *pagyeok* to the Korean national character, arguing: "Koreans seem to be born with an instinctive resistance to any strictly imposed system of order" (Choi 2010, 161). Korean folk painting often expresses the aesthetic spirit of freedom. In this particular painting, Kwon Jung-seo finds the *creative spirit* as well as the *humor of haehak* in such a *friendly* depiction of the fearful tiger, as if it were conversing with a magpie (Kwon 2010, 33).



Figure 9. Magpie and tiger, Korean folk painting (*Minhwa*), nineteenth century

Like the Korean folk painting, Psy faithfully follows the "aesthetic of *pagyeok*" in his video, emphasizing the importance of eccentric ideas over

physical appearances ("A guy with rugged thoughts instead of muscles"). Eccentricity is quite important for Psy, who makes every effort to distinguish himself from other Korean singers. Since his debut as a singer in 2001, he has been nicknamed the "Bizarre Singer" because of his "blunt lyrics, peculiar dance moves" and his "unconventional appearance." He succeeded in "breaking down the stereotype among music lovers that male singers have to be good-looking and be able to dance well."²³ Psy's eccentric efforts sometimes turned out to be troublesome, as Hofstetter reports, "He was fined for his first album, *PSY from the Psycho World*, for promoting inappropriate content for underage listeners and his second album was banned."²⁴ Yet, this time, Psy garnered great success in his appeal to the world audience through his humorous eccentricity.

In addition to his use of eccentricity for positive cultural creativity, Psy's use of the word *psycho* as Psy also carries a connotation of passion according to the entertaining spirit of *haehak*. Like its Korean equivalent *ttorai*, the English word "crazy" can mean either insane or passionate. Psy insists on passion in his video, where he praises a man who "really *goes crazy* when the time comes." Psy repeats similar expressions, praising a woman "whose *heart heats up* when night comes" and a man "whose *heart swells* when night comes" (italics added). Besides, Psy himself wants to be a man with passion. To use Fisher's expression, Psy takes pride in his being a "hotshot," praising in his song "a guy who downs his coffee in one gulp before it even cools down,"²⁵ though he instantly undermines this audacity in a humorous way because at the end of this boastful song, his *cool* dancing with these sexy ladies is ruined with a sudden shower of artificial snow and dust.

In fact, Psy's emphasis on passion is a manifestation of the Korean *hae-*

23. "PSY (Biography)," accessed January 24, 2014, http://rki.kbs.co.kr/english/program/program_artist_detail.htm?No=10071.

24. Sam Blake Hofstetter, "Who Is PSY, and Why Is His Song 'Gangnam Style' the Third Most Popular Video in YouTube?," last modified August 10, 2012, <http://www.vh1.com/music/tuner/2012-08-10/who-is-psy-and-why-is-his-song-gangnam-style-the-third-most-popular-video-on-youtube/August 24, 2012>.

25. Max Fisher, "Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation," last modified August 23, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/11/south-koreas-hottest-ipo-boy-band-inc/249140/>.

hak tradition. Yoon finds a “dynamic and active attitude” toward life in the Korean tradition of *haehak* (Yoon 2013, 6). The passionate aspect of Koreans was especially captured during the 2002 World Cup when millions of Koreans spontaneously poured out into the streets in order to enjoy the soccer matches together. Choi also describes this passionate feature as full of “spontaneity and free spirit” often expressed through traditional Korean art. In keeping with this passionate tradition, “Dynamic Korea” was an official motto the Korean government used for the promotion of its culture and travel industry.



Figure 10. Korea Tourism Organization, *Dynamic Korea*, 2008

Within this cultural context, how the dynamic group dance has become a trademark of K-pop is easy to understand. *Pungmul nori* in traditional Korean folk culture is a predecessor of the dynamic group dance in contemporary Korean music. Yoon traces the Korean tradition of group enjoyment back to ancient Korean tribal rites, such as Buyeo’s Yeonggo, Goguryeo’s Dongmaeng, and Ye’s Mucheon (Yoon 2013, 19). Thus, Psy’s video successfully appropriates this group enjoyment of *haehak* by prioritizing it over the social criticism of *pungja*. The following image captures Psy’s attitude toward a dynamic life in a collective form, comprising Koreans from all



Figure 11. A still image of Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” 2012

walks of life wearing different clothes:

Psy’s pursuit of passionate group amusement also gains some significance given the fragmentation and apathy of contemporary life. Jameson argues that the fragmented and apathetic life is a main feature of contemporary life. He stresses the “waning of affect” as a main feature of contemporary

life because everything is much more fragmented and a “centered self” no longer exists. Such a fragmented life leads to “not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well”

(Jameson 1991, 15). Consequently, what Georg Simmel calls the "metropolitan mentality" in contemporary society is easy to find. He explains his famous *blasé* attitude as a reaction to the overwhelming living condition of the metropolis, arguing, "A life in boundless pursuit of pleasure makes one blasé because it agitates the nerves to their strongest reactivity for such a long time that they finally cease to react at all" (Simmel 1950, 414). Simmel also explains the loss of meaning as well as that of emotion through quantification in modern society: "Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much?" (Simmel 1950, 411). Besides pointing to quantification as a main cause of meaningless and emotionless life, he also finds a close relationship between the two features of metropolitan life, quantification and desensitization, which contribute to the loss of emotion in modern society.

Furthermore, technological advancement in contemporary society has aggravated this loss of emotion. Therefore, Psy's music video is a humorous response to the contemporary life that is often deprived of meaning and emotion. Thanks to its dependence on advanced digital technology, everyday life runs at a dizzying pace through a fragmentation and combination of digital images. Moreover, Baudrillard explains how genetic engineering has achieved an unprecedented control over life through digital technology as an extended form of calculation, which has the strange feature of "abolishing in itself the mortality of the living in favor of the immortality of the dead" (Baudrillard 1994, 84). As a result, zombies, the "living dead" without meaning or emotion, can be easily found in TV dramas and films nowadays. The ultimate irony in Baudrillard's argument is that no difference exists any longer between them (zombies) and us (humans); we already have become zombies through desensitization and calculation. To employ a poetic expression, the zombie-like life in contemporary society can be portrayed as the modern man. Once "an etherized patient upon a table," as T. S. Eliot described him in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he has now become an emotionless patient, whose existence is simply prolonged by a life-support machine. Accordingly, Baudrillard points out a paradox of contemporary life where the ever-increasing tempo robs people of their meaning

(*aims*) and passion (*hearts*) due to technology's "apparent mobility and acceleration" (Baudrillard 1994, 42).

As a result, Psy's video responds to the loss of meaning and feeling in contemporary society by making fun of the absurdity, while constantly advocating a passionate life. In a contemporary society of fast changes under the overwhelming influence of digital images, people have difficulty finding either meaning or passion; they live under the sway of a flickering desire for consumer goods instead of any lasting meaning or passion. By using the term "fluidity," Zygmunt Bauman sums up the fleeting desire of contemporary life, which he characterizes as a consumption-centered life, "guided by seduction, ever rising desires and volatile wishes—no longer by normative regulation" (Bauman 2000, 76). Contemporary life consists of insatiable yearnings for consumer goods without achieving any lasting satisfaction. In this context, the contemporary malaise of emotionless life is alleviated by Psy's amusing presentation of group entertainment accompanied by his passionate performance, at least for the time being.

Collective Sensibility

Above all, the global sharing of Psy's music video has a special social implication in this highly atomized and fragmented contemporary life. The very idea of Jimmy Wales's Wikipedia as a source of global knowledge represents what Pierre Lévy calls "collective intelligence," the sharing of knowledge all over the world through digital technology. Lévy explains collective intelligence as "a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (*italics in original*) (Lévy 1999, 131). For him, this egalitarian idea has created a highly democratic form of intelligence collectively contributed and distributed far beyond all existing social barriers and hierarchies. The overwhelming responses to Psy's video are an example of what would be called "collective sensibility." Kellner stresses the emotional appeal African-American music makes in the construction of political consciousness, maintaining that it becomes "a powerful vehicle for political expression, articulating

the rage of African-Americans facing growing oppression and declining opportunities for advancement" (Kellner 2003, 176). Hoffmann also points out the affective side of African-American music, which tends to "offend mainstream sensibilities due to its blatant sexuality, off-color language, spoken lyrics devoid of traditional singing" (Hoffmann 2006, 122). Particularly, because of its social origin, African-American music often provides people with a chance to express their frustration and anger in a negative form through "the glorification of misogyny, lawless behavior, and the use of force to settle disputes" (Hoffmann 2006, 122). In contrast, within this global cultural context, Psy's video stands out as an example of positive emotional expression for group entertainment.

This uplifting form of group entertainment plays another positive role in the context of global economic recession. Psy's video provides a worldwide audience with an opportunity to enjoy singing and dancing together, particularly during recent harsh economic conditions. In contemporary society, people tend to swing like a pendulum between a loss of passion and explosion of rage. For example, rage rock (or rap metal) is a form of underground music popular predominantly among lower-class white males, providing them with an emotional outlet under difficult living conditions. Frequently criticized for its homophobia and sexism, as represented by Limp Bizkit and ICP (Insane Clown Posse), the lyrics are full of crude curse words completely unsavory for a mainstream audience. Such music tends to provoke rather than allay the rage of the lower-class youths, which has a significant social implication, particularly in the context of repeated outrageous rampages in the United States. Whether such music is an artistic reflection of violent society or a mere promotion of social violence is a controversy. While expressing his frustrations, Eminem presents an interesting case of mixing rage and empathy. He releases his frustration and anger at slum life in his lyrics. At the same time, he gains empathy from his fans by disclosing his personal experience of being bullied as a slum child in his music. Though she is from a well-to-do family, Lady Gaga also confesses her nightmarish experience as a victim of school bullying, thus, becoming the *mother* of her fans, the *little monsters*, who share her experience of being bullied as social outcasts. As an example, in her "Born This Way" video she

gains enthusiastic support from her fans when she boosts their self-esteem by promoting their individuality.

Unlike Eminem and Lady Gaga, who use their personal experiences of being bullied, Psy is unique in his employment of group entertainment in a humorous way. In the popular music industry, to experience enjoyment together often involves sexism and materialism, particularly in African-American music, employing “the terms ‘bitches’ and ‘ho’s,’ used to describe women in a derogatory fashion” (Kellner 2003, 179). Rage rock has a similar problem with misogyny and hyper-masculinity of lower-class white males. Sexism and homophobia are regarded as an overreaction to the tough living conditions of the slum life, which triggers a basic survival instinct through the exaggerated emphasis on muscular masculinity, as opposed to sexualized femininity. As a result, many videos are often oriented toward party music full of naked female bodies and liquor. However, while Psy’s video uses sexy female dancers, it often makes fun of their sexualized presentation, even suggesting reversed sexual roles of dominance. In the following scenes, the apparently sexy and elegant ladies are ridiculed, and men are crawling below women’s legs, as if they were horses.

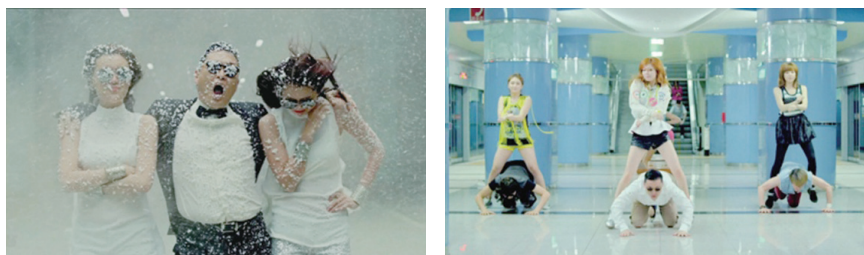


Figure 12. Still images of Psy’s “Gangnam Style,” 2012

Moreover, Psy’s video is at least free from nudity, liquor, and drugs, providing a relatively *clean* way to have fun as a group, even allowing the inclusion of children and elderly people according to the *haehak* spirit of group enjoyment.

This group entertainment of Psy’s music video becomes conspicuous when it is contrasted with its female version, “Oppan ttak nae seutail” (Big

Brother, You Are Exactly My [Favorite] Style!). In Psy's video, the woman is praised as "sexy" for her capability to "go crazy" during the night. In this sense, her sexiness depends not only on her passionate life, but also on her good sense of timing ("when the moment strikes"). Psy also deliberately downplays her body when he claims that she can be sexy by simply letting "her hair down," even "without showing much skin." In this way, "Gangnam Style" attempts to avoid the trap of displaying the sexism of many other music videos. In contrast, its female counterpart explicitly presents Hyun-a, a popular K-pop singer, as the sex icon of the video. Unlike Psy's video, it does not reflect the group entertainment of *haehak* because it focuses exclusively on Hyun-a's sexy image. Her wrinkle-free mannequin-like face maximizes her digital image while she contorts herself into a sexy posture. Thus, this highly sexualized image reflects the social reality of Korea as a global leader in plastic surgery.

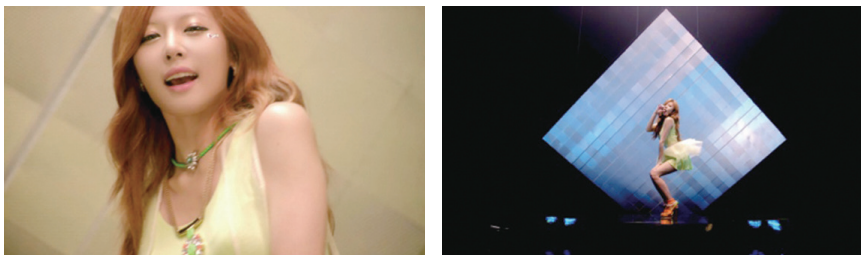


Figure 13. Still images of Hyun-a's "Oppan ttak nae seutail," 2012

Likewise, Wolin points out how "continuous technological advances" have encouraged the "elaborate fantasies of individual prowess, eternal youthfulness, beauty through surgery" (Wolin 2008, 18). That Korea is a leader of both the IT and plastic surgery industries—where many people utilize advanced technology in order to actively *improve* their "quality of life"—is not a coincidence.

Furthermore, in highly fragmented contemporary society, it has become increasingly difficult to experience enjoyment in a large group. Nevertheless, Psy relentlessly pursues group amusement even to the extent that his humor pokes fun at himself, rather than others. Sometimes, popu-

lar music contributes to the construction of a group identity. For example, Kellner regards rap as an important vehicle of self-assertion for African-Americans as a social group struggling in a hostile living environment:

The frequently collective nature of rap groups, on one hand, decenters individualism for group identity, but often affirms both the individual and group identity, as individual rappers call attention to themselves as distinct voices, but then resubmerge themselves into groups (Kellner 2003, 178).

The African-American music of rap fulfills its constructive function not only on the individual, but also on the collective level for the marginalized social group. In contrast, Psy's video goes beyond a specific social group to reach out to the world audience. Several commentators compare the video with similar group-dance videos, such as LMFAO's "Party Rock Anthem," Los del Río's "Macarena," and Baha Men's "Who Let the Dogs Out?" The main difference is that Psy's video encourages the audience not only to have fun together, but also presents a parody of contemporary life without losing its positive sense of perseverance in the face of the contemporary global crisis of political conflict and economic difficulty.

As a global sensation, Psy's "Gangnam Style" merits serious scholarly study. Despite the increasing number of commentaries, this video has never been analyzed within its unique tradition of Korean humor, particularly *haehak* and *pungja*. Above all, Psy's emphasis on eccentricity captures the *pagyeok* spirit of *haehak*, particularly by breaking with the conventions of the Korean music industry. In the video, *haehak* plays a more dominant role than *pungja* when Psy reveals his positive attitude toward life, which prioritizes group enjoyment over social criticism. In order to promote the group enjoyment of *haehak*, he constantly makes fun of characters and situations in humorous ways, which does not necessarily mean that Psy's video was so readily embraced by the world audience because of his uniquely Korean humor. Rather, considering the language and cultural barriers, he garnered his unexpected success because of the positive humor the Korean tradition of *haehak* expresses through tongue-in-cheek visual images and upbeat dance music.

Moreover, when examined in a contemporary cultural context, Psy's video is exemplary as a positive force for contemporary life, which suffers from a loss of both emotion and meaning due to advanced digital technology, let alone the modern tendency toward quantification and desensitization. Even though Psy cannot provide any profound solution to the problem of a passionless and meaningless life, his relentless pursuit of passion in the form of group entertainment and the global response to the video set an example of "collective sensibility" as a positive expression of group enjoyment, his affective counterpart to "collective intelligence." Psy's video has also made a contribution to the popular music industry, which is often steeped in the negative emotions of homophobia and misogyny, especially in hip-hop and rage rock. As Psy himself indicates in his interviews, he cannot solve various social problems. Instead, he simply tries to alleviate people's distress in the face of difficulties through his humorous video. During recent hard times, audiences all over the world welcome an opportunity to enjoy this passionate performance without reservation, as Psy presents a new form of group entertainment by actively remixing East and West, the traditional and the contemporary, with his unique sense of humor.

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