

Cultural Daily

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South Korean Hip Hop's Success Starts at the Bottom

Daniel Hwang · Friday, July 17th, 2020

The value of manifesting “hard work” is another core value that is traditionally instilled in many South Korean households. Demonstrating hard work is an expected value that people must adapt to because in South Korea, where economics and education are extremely prestigious, Korean hip-hop is alternatively perceived with a negative image because they feel as if they are not contributing to the society. Jamie Shinhee Lee, author of “Glocalizing Keepin’ it Real: South Korean Hip-Hop Playas,” (year) emphasizes the importance of developing strong work habit skills, “In pursuit of successful music careers, these artists often emphasize how important it is to persevere, not to go give up hopes and dreams, and to compromise their artistic vision and integrity (Lee, p. 148). Evidently, understanding that quitting is an improbable answer in most South Korean household, the determination and will to fight through the struggles is what creates an overarching arc where rappers end up overachieving. Especially for veteran Korean rappers such as The Quiett, Simon Dominic, Deepflow, Paloalto and Yumdda, all relate to one another because they were considered the outliers in the music industry because their music never made it onto the top 10 Korean Melon Music Chart because hip-hop was not the dominant form of music in South Korea. Initially, as years progresses with their name invisible in the streaming charts, their determination progressed. In 2010, that was when they all – minus Yumdda, became a CO-CEO or CEO of their profound independent labels. In the case of Yumdda, he rose to fame around 2019 when he started his own label with the partnership of a South Korean pop culture YouTube channel called, “Dingo.” Once he made his name present, Yumdda wanted to resume a project that was planned years ago with The Quiett, Simon Dominic, Paloalto and Deepflow but failed because everyone was doing their own work. This is where the phrase from Lee’s statement about rappers “compromise their artistic vision” becomes vital. The project Yumdda wanted to hold was a project titled, “Damoim.” In English translation, Damoim means “Gatherings.” Yumdda’s intention with Damoim was to reunite and reconnect with The Quiett, Simon Dominic, Deepflow, and Paloalto because they were all born in 1984. Besides the unification, their other main goal was to make four songs because they rarely got to collaborate due to the management of their peers. This next portion in my thesis will be a music video analysis of Damoim’s first song called, “Forever 84.” This music video analysis will be critically analyzed in relation to the value of hard work.



The analysis to “Forever 84” begins with the Damoim members saddled up inside a private plane as an indicator that they all have succeeded from the many struggles they faced either as an underground rapper or a rapper that was strictly unknown. From the private plane till the end of the

video, all five members stick close to one another signifying that even though they are not biological brothers, they all succeeded in their own rights to get to where they are at. Even the clothing the artists' wear is not excessive except for Yumdda. The fashion symbolizes how modest they are because in most hip-hop music videos in the United States, rappers are seen with non-essential 500k chains and lavished in luxury. Throughout the entirety of the video, all five members are seen as a surrogate family and as a tourist because the activities they partake such as riding a moped around the city of Taiwan, exploring the nightlife of Taiwanese street market eating snacks, and most importantly, they accompany one another at their Airbnb and remain inclusive. The main purpose of the music video is to demonstrate that while they are rewarding themselves for all the hard work they have achieved, they never fail to address that once the crew heads back to South Korea, work is resumed. Furthermore, this music video was supposed to be a vacation but paradoxically, the artists are always at work and preparing for their second song in the Damoim project. Ultimately, while the colorful aesthetics enhance the video to be appealing, the refreshing display of lighting in the foreground that shines around the members is a testament that their road to success is just a start and the value of strong work ethic will persist.

Conclusion: Ultimately, as much as the contemporary South Korean hip-hop culture has a smaller audience in terms of the size against the massive K-pop companies and the constant criticisms they face, the Korean rap culture's primary success is predicated on maintaining the balance of freedom. Whether the success is built through the establishments of independent labels, delivering compelling lyrics to a wide range of audience and using media to clear discouraging stereotypes, these Korean rappers are ultimately part of the same society that just happens to make music. Despite having a language barrier within their music, their authentic personality is what drives their culture to be consumed by the masses because since they know how conservative the country is, the consistent level of maturity shows their longevity success as a rapper. In the end, they all contribute in doing the same thing of showing respect, maintaining responsibility, working hard every day, and most importantly, the contemporary South Korean hip hop culture gives back to people regardless the support is non-present or present.

Source: Lee, Shinlee Jamie. "Glocalizing Keepin' It Real: South Korean Hip-Hop Playas" (2012), Ed. Marina Terkourafi. *The Languages of Global Hip Hop*. Pbk. ed., Continuum, 2012. Print.

(This is an excerpt from a much longer paper which the author presented as his senior thesis.)

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