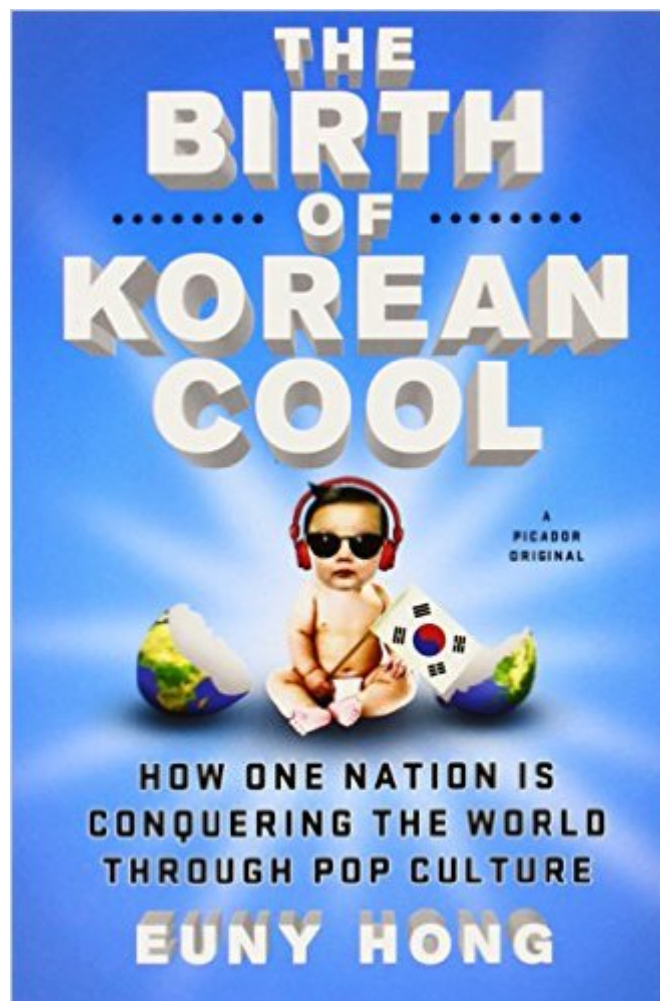


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# The Birth Of Korean Cool: How One Nation Is Conquering The World Through Pop Culture



## Synopsis

A FRESH, FUNNY, UP-CLOSE LOOK AT HOW SOUTH KOREA REMADE ITSELF AS THE WORLD'S POP CULTURE POWERHOUSE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY By now, everyone in the world knows the song "Gangnam Style" and Psy, an instantly recognizable star. But the song's international popularity is no passing fad. "Gangnam Style" is only one tool in South Korea's extraordinarily elaborate and effective strategy to become a major world superpower by first becoming the world's number one pop culture exporter. As a child, Euny Hong moved from America to the Gangnam neighbourhood in Seoul. She was a witness to the most accelerated part of South Korea's economic development, during which time it leapfrogged from third-world military dictatorship to first-world liberal democracy on the cutting edge of global technology. Euny Hong recounts how South Korea vaulted itself into the twenty-first century, becoming a global leader in business, technology, education, and pop culture. Featuring lively, in-depth reporting and numerous interviews with Koreans working in all areas of government and society, *The Birth of Korean Cool* reveals how a really uncool country became cool, and how a nation that once banned miniskirts, long hair on men, and rock 'n' roll could come to mass produce boy bands, soap operas, and the world's most important smart phone.

## Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Picador (August 5, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1250045118

ISBN-13: 978-1250045119

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (91 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #119,643 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in [Books > History > Asia > Korea > South](#) #32 in [Books > Business & Money > Industries > Sports & Entertainment > Entertainment](#) #57 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Asian American Studies](#)

## Customer Reviews

Interesting book covering the remarkable transformation of Korea from relative poverty (in the 1980's) to a major Asian economy now. The author is a Korean American who moved back to

Korea with her parents in 1985, to the (in)famous Gangnam neighborhood of Seoul. Her main thesis is that 'han' (a Korean term roughly meaning the collective fury against fate) and national shame are the two biggest factors in transforming Korea. These two qualities compelled the government to function as a giant corporation with 50 million employees (as she puts it) to consciously rebrand Korea's image abroad. Consequently it invested money in pop culture, actively encouraging formation and dissemination of K-pop acts, Korean soap operas, and Korean films, all of which enjoy very high popularity in Japan, Europe and parts of Asia today. Samsung, today an international tech giant, was once reviled as 'Samsuck' and also made a herculean effort to improve the quality of its products. I learned some pretty cool new info from the book. For e.g.: way before Psy became an international icon on the heels of 'Gangnam Style', a trio of sisters called the Kim sisters were highly successful entertainers in the 1960's, appearing in Vegas and on the Ed Sullivan show dozens of times. The author criticizes Korean culture, mainly for what she sees as repression of originality and putting undue emphasis on hierarchy and elaborate rituals. But she also acknowledges that this 'voluntary coercion' has probably made the country's rise easier. Of course with a book that makes bold claims such as these, you are bound to find tenuous arguments and strawmen. If you remind yourself that this is not a serious treatise but an entertaining book that offers good socio-cultural commentary, you will find it enjoyable.

This book is fun and informative for those who know little about contemporary Korea, but it's by no means a masterpiece of pop culture writing. Euny Hong's book is well written and a breeze to read, it takes maybe 6 hours to get through the 250 or so pages. The reason it's so easy to read is because there really isn't a whole lot going on in the book besides a statement of facts. Hong's writing is clean and palatable, but the book lacks any real analysis besides "the Korean government is behind many trends that appear to be spontaneous creative efforts." This is a dangerous argument, and Hong is careful to mostly claim a correlation between government involvement and industrial success in Korea and not always causation. Still, this questionable claim (William Easterly and other state-led development dissidents would have a series problem with Hong's portrayal of the Korean economic miracle) is the only thing approaching an argument or catharsis, and it's pretty half-assed. Overall, the book seems rushed. It came out right after Gangnam Style became the number one video on Youtube, and talks about Psy extensively. Clearly the writing process was not a drawn-out affair full of revisions. This becomes obvious when one notices the frequent small errors that could have been corrected with a quick Google search. For example: Hong says that Kim Jong-Un was the number one buy of Hennessy whiskey. Hennessy only makes cognac, not

whiskey. Hong says that Eminem is the only American artist who made a song about their parents. A quick google search of "mama song" or "mom song" and "rapper" would come up with results by Kanye West or Tupac that are not dissimilar to Psy's "Father." Hong says Starcraft 2 is a role-playing game. It's a real time strategy game. These problems, among others, are obviously not serious but they are indicative a general problem of a serious lack of factual and academic scrutiny. This is a non-fiction book of about 250 pages, yet there are less than 100 notations in the back, most of them online articles. Eunyoung Hong is a good writer and can clearly produce good work, but this book was clearly churned out way too quick. However, this is a good book for those who want to quickly gain an understanding of the importance and spread of Korean culture in a way that is enjoyable to read.

As someone who isn't Korean but has lived in Korea, eats their food, reads their literature, watches their movies and dramas this book held so many great surprises and information. This is what I wanted to know about Korea but didn't know to ask. After finishing this book I'm hooked on Kpop too. Hong does a fantastic job of weaving relevant history and Korean culture with the new wave of Korean entertainment industry that has swept Asia and is now creeping onto the shores of the US. A must read for anyone interested in Korea.

I was very surprised to find out the author was born in 1973 - the style, vocabulary, sentence structure and 'depth' of this book are more appropriate for a teenager. It's not so much the eye-rolling claims ("Korean culture dominates Asia" - is India not part of Asia?), as the overall shallowness of the whole project that put me off. Good for the author that she has found her 'Zion' (in her own words), but if you are looking for a thoughtful analysis of Korean popular culture and its influence around the world, you'll have to search elsewhere.

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