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An Analog Parasite of the Hyperdigital Era?

The Reading-Aloud Wave in Contemporary Korea*

Abstract

The burgeoning popularity of downloadable audiobooks in contemporary South Korea is a fascinating cultural phenomenon. Historically, reading aloud often adopted a monotonous and soporific tone, likely due to cultural reservations about emotional expression. However, a significant shift appears to have occurred over the past few decades.

A noteworthy aspect of this trend is the emergence of YouTube influencers who teach individuals how to enhance their reading performance. Such developments prompt the question of whether they are merely a by-product of digitalization or if they represent an analog countermovement. While electronic audiobooks may be digital in a technical sense, listeners engage primarily with the “analog” voices accessible to their senses. After all, despite advances in text-to-speech technology, the audiobook industry still relies on human voice actors.

Although this topic has yet to attract academic interest, public awareness is growing regarding the significance of this new “era” or “wave” of reading aloud, as reflected by media coverage in newspapers. In view of larger concepts – such as the idea of a return to orality and aurality after decades or centuries of sight-dominance – this chapter summarizes the development, provides a tour d’horizon of the facets of this cultural phenomenon, and discusses the relevant assessments and explanations circulating in public discourse.

Keywords: reading culture, aural turn, orality, sonification, digital renaissance

Is the rise of the audiobook in Korea concomitant with the digital age? Are audiobooks thereby merely parasitizing the accomplishments of digital media? Or could this new boom be viewed, alternatively, as an analog countermovement, representing a revival or rediscovery of something that preceded the digital?

Mid of the 80s, the surge of digital watches was over, and the “classic” watch returned. This may have been the first time when a return of the analog was invoked

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in public discourse.¹ But the relation between the digital and the analog must not be seen as mutually exclusive, with the digital usually substituting the analog and the analog sometimes coming back to replace the digital usurper. It could just as well be that the digital benefits the analog. The smartphone gave wings to reading aloud via radio broadcasts, this assessment, ventured in an article published in the “JoongAng Ilbo” nine years ago,² reflected a widely shared impression.

At any rate, the “audio boom”³ has become a phenomenon that may not be a hot and big issue but is nonetheless big enough to get covered by Korean media as a phenomenon as such.⁴ In other words, there is a meta-awareness. In the same vein, Korean newspapers and many online media feature interviews with reading experts (*nangdok jeonmunga*) and those contributing to this thriving cultural industry.⁵

The Image of Reading Aloud

The image, role, and history of talking books in South Korea remains quite different from what can be seen in Europe. The big bookstores in Seoul still do not sell audio-books. For the bigger picture, also the standard concept of “good reading” seems to have been different for a long time, with *nandok* (“reading out loud”) on the radio being usually rather soporific, if not stultifyingly monotone. The effect was often exacerbated by psychedelic background music. Some piano music, at least for the start of a reading, seemed to be the absolute minimum requirement – almost reminiscent of the monotonous intonation or sing-song chanting style applied, regardless of the content, by Buddhist monks reading sutras or by women in pre-modern Korea when reading aloud vernacular fiction.

In the relatively short history of the talking book in Korea, the idea that reading must remain unobtrusive seems to have been dominant – quite probably foregrounded

¹ Charles Krauthammer, *The Joy of Analog*, “Time” May 26, 1986. Of course, in those days, a debate about analog or digital would flare up on the question LP or CD. See, e.g., Hans Fantel, *Debate about Analog vs. Digital May Be Pointless*, “New York Times” June 8, 1986.

² Ju-yeong Jang, *Seumateupon-gwa mannan dwi nalgae dan nangdok radio nangdok peuro ingido kkujun* [Having Met the Smartphone, Reading on Radio Got Wings and Reading Professionals Gain Popularity], “The JoongAng Ilbo” November 21, 2015.

³ *Der Audio-Boom geht weiter* [The Audio Boom Goes on], “Börsenblatt” October 14, 2020.

⁴ See, e.g. Ju-yeong Jang, *op. cit.*; Byung-yeul Baek, *IT Firms Dive into Audiobook Market*, “The Korea Times” August 5, 2018, [on-line:] https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2024/11/129_253298.html; *Audiobooks Attract Listeners with Wide Variety of Content*, “The Korea Times” January 26, 2023.

⁵ See, e.g., *Mal hadeut ilgeul su isseumyeon nangdog-ui darin: Nangdok jeonmunga baeu Choe Nak-cheon, Chae Guk-heui, seongu Choe Ji-hwan ssi-ege deunneun nangdog-ui gisul* [When One Can Read Just as If One Would Be Speaking Then One Is a Master of Reading Aloud: Listening to Professional Reading Experts – Actors Choe Nak-cheon and Chae-Guk-heui, Voice Actress Choe Ji-hwan – about the Skill of Reading Aloud], “The Hankyoreh” October 31, 2012.

by early conceptions of the talking book when it was considered a surrogate for vision, serving the blind, so that the “listener” would still be a “reader” in the sense that interpretations were up to him instead of being pre-chewed and spoon-fed. A reading able to satisfy this demand would be self-effacing and neutral, with the speaker serving as a mere medium: “fast and quite without expression so as to create as far as possible a complete analogy with the setting out of words on a printed page, into which the reader will put his own expression and emphasis.”⁶ On the other hand there is a dramatic reading that enhances the script. The general American public would prefer the latter, which was even the case in the early days of the genre: “Yet audiences yearned for more; they wanted a sense of intimacy felt to be missing from ink-print books.”⁷

Anyway, *nandok* (reading aloud) on Korean radio⁸ as well as the Korean reading-aloud culture in general used to stand in stark contrast to how reciting literature is typically performed in the German speaking world, where expressiveness has always been the rule. The fact that Korea had a different standard in that regard can be gleaned from the idiom *chaek ikdeusi*, which literally means “like reading a book” but in fact distills to: reading without emotion.⁹ This type of reading was considered the norm in schools, as teachers would sanction any display of individuality by students summoned to read out a part of the textbook. Conversely, one would say *chaek ikdeusi handa* about an actor performing clumsily, meaning that he or she does (acts) as if reading a book, and a director might scold the clumsy actor during a rehearsal with the words: *Neo chaek ingnya?* (“Are you reading a book?”).

⁶ Matthew Rubery, *The Untold Story of the Talking Book*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 95.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

⁸ The longest-standing South Korean radio program with literature read aloud was *Yeonsok nandok* by KBS (3Radio), on air from 2000–2021. Others are, e.g., *KBS Audiobook choego-ui keullip* (a daily program on 3Radio), the “digital podcast” *Chaek ul dutda* [Listening to Books] on MBC radio, or *Bak Sang-mi ui Nangdok ui balgyeon* [Bak Sang-mi’s The Discovery of Reading Aloud] on Gungmin Radio.

⁹ Note that those who, encouraged by South Korean public libraries, volunteered to read books for the blind – quite common before the audio book boom started to take off – were instructed to refrain from excessive emotion (*gwahan gamjeong*). As for a thread of the discourse that I will not cover here, there seems to be still a considerable skepticism in Korea regarding expressive reading, which in turn might explain a generally higher degree of tolerance towards robot reading. That said, AI is obviously on its way to transform even the synthetic “machine” reading (“text-to-speech”) into a tool that can emulate human reading to a striking degree. Given the considerable trust in and acceptance of such trends, we may predict that South Koreans will belong to the avantgarde of synthetic voice reading (see Yeong-ho Ryu, *Aepeur-ui AI dijiteol naereisyeon chulsi-wa odiobuk sijang-ui byeonhwa* [The Release of Apple’s Digital Narration through AI Technology and the Changes of the Audio Bookmarket], “Chulpan N” 2023, Volume 40, [on-line:] <https://nzine.kpipa.or.kr/>).

However, this has changed. And whether related to these deeper-sitting transformations or not, we are witnessing the ascent of a new cultural industry in Korea: electronic audio books, produced with considerable financial investments and featuring actors, voice artists and well-known media personalities. This relatively recent development may not be as eye-catching as the rise of Netflix, but it is still a cultural phenomenon of substantial size and wider implications.¹⁰ It is often explained with the emergence of “smart media” platforms and their subscription policies.¹¹ An additional explanation, regularly offered, is the increasing trend to “multitask” on the run, as befits the age of the smartphone. Thus, the return to the way of receiving stories that is even older than reading is turned paradoxically into a kind of the latest trend, exacerbated by the even trendier trend towards “speed listening.”¹²

Terms and History

“Audio book” is the general term for a book one can listen to. Alternative terms are “talking book” or “spoken word book.” The sound storage technology can be mechanical (vinyl, LP), magnetic (reel-to-reel tape, cassette tape), or optical (CD), but these days it is mostly electronic, and thus audio books are listened to via a phone, computer, tablet, or MP3 player.¹³ When computer software or eBook reader programs read out a text on screen in synthetic speech, this is called text-to-speech. The Korean word for the act of reading out loud a piece of writing in front of an audience is *nangdok*, from *balgeul* (clear) *nang* and *ilgeul* (read) *dok*. Antonyms, that is, terms

¹⁰ To put it in perspective: According to the annual report the Korean Publishers Association from 2020, the whole audiobook market had a turnover of around 30 billion Won, while the whole publishing industry grossed ca. 160 times as much (Korean Publishers Association 2021). Nonetheless, all the regular reporting about the audiobook industry highlights a remarkable increase and prospected enormous growth. A survey from 2021 indicated that out of an average adult’s total of daily reading amounting to 18.5 minutes on workdays and 25 minutes on weekends and holidays, 1.3 and 1.6 minutes respectively were covered by listening to audiobooks – the rest by reading printed editions or e-books.

¹¹ See also Heekyoung Cho, *The Platformization of Culture: Webtoon Platforms and Media Ecology in Korea and Beyond*, “The Journal of Asian Studies” 2021, Volume 80, Issue 1, pp. 1-21.

¹² As for other related trends, “spoken word” poetry slams and particularly “stage readings” proliferate. These latter – recitation plays (*nangdoggeuk*) in which actors or amateurs read scripts to an audience – have a peculiar charm and came to be an independent genre of performing arts. But it is beyond the scope of this article to cover these trends. See Megan Garber, *The Rise of Speed-Listening*, “The Atlantic” June, 2015, [on-line:] <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/06/the-rise-of-speed-listening/396740/>.

¹³ According to Edward Allen, *What We Talk about When We Talk about Talking Books*, In *Sound and Literature*, ed. Anna Snaith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 211-233, some book-makers of the late nineteenth century sought to refashion their products as audiobooks in various experimental ways – not by simple recording, but to undo principles of silent reading.

for silent reading, would be *mukdok*, the “quiet” or “tacit” reading, or *simdok*, from *maeum* (mind, heart) *sim*. Another word for reading only with the eyes is *ganseo*, from *bol* (see) *gan* and *chaek* (book) *seo*.

Whether reciting (chanting) Buddhist sutras in a soothing, mellifluous rhythm or sharing vernacular fiction in pre-modern Korea, or reading out Confucian texts, be it for ritual officiating or to memorize classic texts, reading aloud used to be a standard.¹⁴ This is also reflected in some older words for reading aloud: One is *seongdok* (聲讀), meaning the traditional Korean method of cantillating Literary Chinese by *hyeonto* (懸吐), adding grammatical particles or semantic clarifications every now and then in order to aid comprehension – while retaining the Sinitic vocabulary and word order. Another is *eumdok* (from *sori* [sound] *eum*) which originally refers to an even more purist reading by voicing only the sound part of Chinese characters. (Note, however, that metonymically *eumdok* can also mean any reading aloud.)

It stands to reason, though, that reading often involved a simultaneous translation of *hanmun* (Classic Chinese, Literary Sinitic) into vernacular Korean, understandable to listeners who either did not have the fuller picture of the Chinese characters in front of them (the sound-only is ambiguous, except for the cases when the content can be anticipated) or would anyway be unable to decipher them. Just like in the West, Koreans were not fully literate in the past,¹⁵ and thus reading aloud was instrumental for any wider dissemination, especially when literature for entertainment began to flourish.¹⁶

¹⁴ In European antiquity, silent reading was not inexistent, but reading aloud was the standard: “Silent reading was known and practiced in the Roman era, but relatively uncommon compared to reading aloud. Texts were often dictated to a scribe rather than written directly, and those who could read typically did so aloud, even when in private” Jeremy Begbie, *Scripture in Sound*, In *Hearing and Doing the Word: The Drama of Evangelical Hermeneutics: In Honor of Kevin J. Vanhoozer*, ed. Daniel J. Treier, Douglas A. Sweeney, London: T&T Clark, 2023, pp. 287-301; “In the ancient world, in the Middle Ages and as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the sort of reading implicit in many texts was oralized (as was their actual reading). The ‘readers’ of those texts were listeners attentive to a reading voice.” Guglielmo Cavallo, Roger Chartier, *A History of Reading in the West*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, p. 40. See also Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; Robert W. McCutcheon, *Silent Reading in Antiquity and the Future History of the Book*, “Book History” 2015, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp. 1-32.

¹⁵ This fact is documented by a myriad of documents, surveys, and testimonies. Be referred, as a shortcut, to Insup Taylor, Martin M. Taylor, *History of Education and Literacy in Korea*, In Insup Taylor, Martin M. Taylor, *Writing and Literacy in Chinese, Korean and Japanese*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014, pp. 236-252.

¹⁶ See Yu-seung Jang [Yoo Seung Jang], *Hanmun eumdog-ui silsang-gwa byeonhwa: Joseon hugi gyeonnyeong-eul eumdog-eul jungsim-euro* [Recitation of Classical Chinese in Choson: Focused on Royal Lecture of Late Choson Period], “Hanguk hanmunhak yeongu” 2017, Volume 67, pp. 251-273.

With Literary Sinitic, it is the Chinese characters, that is, visual and visible graphemes, that contain the semantic information and represent the building blocks of meaning. This accounts for the visual being decisive for the cognitive processing of the content. By contrast, with languages written alphabetically, it is about the speech sounds, or ultimately the phonemes based on these. Of course, orthography plays a role, but in principle, it is audible phonemes that distinguish words and ultimately determine meaning.

An adage by independence fight hero An Chung-gun (An Jung-geun), “If you skip reading, be it for only one day, thorns will sprout in your mouth” (一日不讀書口中生荊棘), is sometimes referred to as a testimony of the habit of reading aloud in Old Korea. The same goes for an often-quoted excerpt from a poem by cultural hero Dasan Jeong Yak-yong: “In all the world, which sound is the clearest? / Deep in the snow-covered mountains – the sound of [someone] reading a book” (天地何聲第一清 / 雪山深處讀書聲). But these are awkward examples. Most likely they illustrate the above-mentioned *eumdok*, the phonetical recitation of the Chinese characters. This must be distinguished from reading aloud as a social act, the communal reading (*gongdongchejeok dokseo*), which naturally involved a translation into the immediately understandable vernacular.¹⁷ When vernacular novels emerged, professional readers (*jeongisu* 傳奇叟) would learn them by heart and perform them in front of audiences, making use of cliffhangers to extract money from the hooked audience.¹⁸ Oral literature was still very much alive in the earlier decades of modernization, as Homer Hulbert, this astute witness of the passing of Old Korea, insightfully remarked: “There remains here in full force that ancient custom which antedates the printing of books, of handing down stories by word of mouth.”¹⁹

The Special Merit of Reading Aloud Instead of Silent Reading

Even though radio dramas (audio theaters) became very soon – as soon as only technically feasible – “a leading international popular entertainment”²⁰ in the United States and other Western countries, the emergence of the audiobook was often “asso-

¹⁷ Jeong-hwan Cheon, *Geundae ui chaek ikgi: Dokja-ui tansaeng-gwa hanguk geundae munhak* [Reading Books in the Era of Modernity: The Birth of the Reader and Modern Korean Literature], Seoul: Pureun yeoksa, 2014, pp. 111-112.

¹⁸ Sung-hwa Kim, *Ddakjibon: Ein populärer Lesestoff in der koreanischen Moderne*, “Fabula” 2023, Volume 64, Issues 3-4, pp. 338-362.

¹⁹ Homer B. Hulbert, *The Passing of Korea*, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906, p. 312.

²⁰ See Wikipedia, s.v. “Radio drama.” For more on the boom of *bangsong soseol* [radio broadcast novels] in the late 1930s and even the early 1940s, see Jina E. Kim, *The Sonic Unconscious and*

ciated with children, the dyslexic, or the visually handicapped.”²¹ When considered a mere surrogate, the audiobook was “treated in terms of its ability to make shortcuts or overcome insufficiencies.”²² Consuming audiobooks would thus be seen as a deficient mode or derivative of reading, contrasting the “contemplative experience” of “deep reading” with the “uncritical, unreflective, and relaxed”²³ listening to an audiobook.²⁴

The audiobook offers, in fact, an “amplifier sensory range”²⁵ than the written text, complementing it holistically with many layers that the printer’s ink cannot render or disambiguate easily. In written language, graphic devices like italics are utilized to convey phrasal or prosodic stress. For example, in the sentence “I didn’t say we should kill him”, each of the seven words of this sentence can be highlighted, thereby altering the message every time, depending on which word received emphasis. However, the nuances that vocal expression can carve out are even more diverse and subtle, and the endeavor to replicate all these in print is destined to fall short.

Reading aloud thus unveils additional possible dimensions of a text. In a similar vein, that is, claiming a more holistic vantage point, the apology and promotion of audiobooks often asserts that a good reading involves the whole body (*jeonsin*).²⁶ Ultimately, this leads to the claim that reading aloud can contribute to “wellbeing” – with new gurus taking advantage of the trend and passing themselves as experts teaching secrets in layman’s terms.

the Wartime Radio Novel in Colonial Korea, In *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean Literature*, ed. Yoon Sun Yang, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 275–291; Si Nae Park, *The Korean Vernacular Story: Telling Tales of Contemporary Chosŏn in Sinographic Writing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

²¹ Iben Have, Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, *Digital Audiobooks: New Media, Users, and Experiences*, New York–London: Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁴ See *Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies*, ed. Matthew Rubery, New York: Routledge, 2011; Michael Toolan, *Audiofiction: No Time for Deep Thoughts and Feelings? On-line Proceedings of the 25th Annual Conference of the International Poetics and Linguistics Association*, 2008, [on-line:] www.pala.ac.uk/uploads/2/5/1/0/25105678/toolan2008.pdf.

²⁵ Anežka Kuzmičová, *Audiobooks and Print Narrative: Similarities in Text Experience*, In *Audionarratology: Interfaces of Sound and Narrative*, ed. Jarmila Mildorf, Till Kinzel, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, p. 223.

²⁶ See, e.g., Byeong-hun Gong, *Mom-euro jeonhaejineun nangdog-ui jaebalgyeon* [*The Rediscovery of a Reading Aloud That Communicates with the Whole Body*], “Nyuseupeipeo” November 22, 2018, [on-line:] <http://www.news-paper.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=31033>.

The Audiobook as a Parasite of the Digital Age?

South Korea's cultural industry has enjoyed enormous success. One of its many branches is now the production and distribution of electronic audio books – backed by considerable financial investments, and featuring actors, voice artists and well-known media personalities. The power of the cultural industry that exploits new technological possibilities makes associate Hallyu and the various “K-...” items. But if there is the “K-audiobook”, it does not qualify as a globally marketable “K-...” department. After all, for Korean audiobooks, everything hinges on the Korean language and thus the chances of generating revenues from export are limited. Indeed, the platforms usually do not even have an international interface and offer predominantly Korean audiobooks, be it original texts or translated into Korean. When they stock English language audiobooks, this is for domestic rather than international customers, due to Koreans' unrelenting “education fever” and the rampant “English craze.”

The platforms active in South Korea, like Audien, Audioclip, Findaway, Millie, Podbbang, Storytel, or Welaaa, have mostly launched their audio services only a few years ago, catering to a rapidly growing segment of consumption. Additionally, there are established radio broadcasters and new internet-based (e.g., Spoon Radio) and other audio content platforms (e.g., Podbbang) where talking books are made available,²⁷ wielding a large assortment of downloadable fiction as well as non-fiction. Usually, these are read with a vividness and expressiveness reminiscent of radio plays.²⁸ Indeed, the boundaries between mere reading and radio play have blurred, as the reading (that is, what is otherwise still considered a mere reading instead of a play) is often performed by more than one person, which creates a dramatization effect.

Audiobooks are a “digital content” (*k'ont'enč'ū*). This is how the KPIPA – the Publication Industry Promotion Agency of Korea, a state-funded organization that is supposed to help small publishers with the production of audiobooks – defines the term “audiobook.”²⁹ On the one hand, this is clearly wrong, as the audiobook is not an innovation of the digital age. It could be realized on LP or MC or other recording media as well, so digital technology is no precondition for the production or consumption of audiobooks. Also, when speaking of the “digital,” it can be assumed

²⁷ To name just a few that offer their readings via (or also on) YouTube: *Chaek ilgneun munhwagwan*, *Radio danpyeon soseol*, *KBS Radio sogseosil*, *EBS myeongpum nangdok*.

²⁸ See Beatrice YongIn Lin, *Audiobooks in Korea: Users and Service Providers, Service and Content Providers in Busy Days with Market's Growing Interest in Audiobooks*, “K-Book Trends” 2021, Volume 3, pp. 56–64, https://www.kbook-eng.or.kr/admin/data/webzine/2021_04_2106170233341_round.pdf.

²⁹ KPIPA *dijiteolbuk senteo* (<https://kaudiobook.or.kr/>).

that the CD is not considered to form part of this even though it is, strictly speaking, storage for digital audio recordings.

The development of the MP3 format, combined with easily portable, high-capacity digital audio players, made the audiobook a commodity for the masses.³⁰ Even more importantly, the shift from “possessing” to “accessing” (via virtual storage platform) caused the consumption to skyrocket. The German-speaking world³¹ may have been different, as there has been a wealth of audiobooks on offer since many decades. This peculiarity is reminiscent of the German “board-game culture,” which – puzzlingly for many Koreans with whom the author (A.S.) discussed the matter – has never been replaced by online gaming. In a way, Korea seems to have skipped a stage – just as, despite a small board-game café boom, the import of board games, and their sale in bookstores, Korea has never nurtured a significant “board-game culture”³² – although one could also say that Korea jumped over this step to spearhead now the newest avantgarde all the more, just as it has managed to do in many other areas of the cultural industry.

Korea has the advantage of a low threshold (or barrier) when it comes to entering the digital market, both for producers as well as consumers and users. Also, the infrastructure for distribution via platforms is well developed. Major European countries like Germany harbor a much bigger “traditional” market for audiobooks than Korea and have never implemented a complete and wholesale transition from the compact disc digital audio format (CDs) to those truly digital audiobooks that have no material carrier anymore but are just data files.³³ What applies to South Korea here might be true for most of the world outside of Central Europe, that recordings of long-form narrative did not become properly widespread until the recent introduction of high-capacity, and highly portable, digital audio players. It is therefore understandable that audiobooks are discussed in South Korean media and elsewhere as if they were a new or very recent innovation.

³⁰ See Matthew Rubery’s introduction to his book *Talking Books: Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 1-21).

³¹ As an Austrian, the author (A.S.) feels prompted to draw this comparison.

³² “Hangug-ui nangdok munhwa-ga jeonhyeo baldal haji mot haetta” (*Hwang Hyeon-san seon-saengnim-ui I Yuk-sa* ›Gwangya‹ haeseok, “Dokseo gaelleori” November 13, 2022, <https://gall.dcinside.com/mgallery/board/view/?id=reading&no=457320>). Author Kim Young-ha (Gim Yeong-ha) is credited with having been influential in pointing out the absence of author reading trips that he witnessed in Germany.

³³ I Yu-jin, ›Odiobug-ui Netpeullikseu‹ Seutoriter-eun wae hanguk sijang-ui ›jo danwi‹ seongjang-eul jeonmang haesseulkka [Why Did Storytel, the Netflix of the Audiobook Sector, See the Prospect of Growth by the Trillion on the Korean Market?], “Gyeonghyang sinmun” December 20, 2021.

One characteristic of the recent developments is that the line between the radio drama and the audiobook gets blurred: Audien and others produce audiobooks with several readers – different voices for the narrator as well as female and male characters.³⁴ That said, this trend is not universal, and some observers rather see a movement back from various voices to the classic one-performer reading.³⁵

Truth be told, not all Koreans subscribe to the idea that the audiobook is a digital entity. There is a significant discourse that celebrates the audiobook as a renaissance or re-discovery, or even an analog countermovement and dialectical backlash against digitalization.

Parallel or Counter?

The “unexpected comeback” of the spoken word in this increasingly digital world of ours is a counter-rotating phenomenon, so to speak, that has been fascinating cultural critics as well as entrepreneurs in the cultural industry for quite a while. It is even measured by a “Spoken Word Audio Report.”

Tellingly, the Publication Industry Promotion Agency of Korea, KPIPA, defines the audiobook outright as digital. Indeed, the rise of the audiobook in South Korea can be seen as part of the “diversification”³⁶ of the local digitized entertainment industry that evolved from the intelligent response of the music industry to digital transformation, capitalizing on the opportunities of the “subscription economy” of a “smart media platform environment.”³⁷

Exactly the opposite view holds that with reading aloud, it is the human and “analog” factor that matters: “Reading aloud must be learned individually and passed on personally. It cannot be preserved or reproduced digitally,”³⁸ says one leading figure of a joint initiative led by the German Library Association (DBV) and the Ger-

³⁴ See, e.g., *Nunmul masineun sae*, <https://audioclip.naver.com/audiobooks/21794BD307>, with 21 (!) different readers. At the same time, a recent full recording of the Korean translation of the whole Harry Potter series was produced with only one reader.

³⁵ Dong-yong Min, »Nun-euro mot bon geot deureunikkan boyeo« ... *Gwiro ingneun odiobuk* »Nangdog-ui segye« [“Something That I Cannot See with the Eyes I Still See because I Hear It” ... *Audiobooks Read with the Ears*, “The World of Reading Aloud”], “Dong-a Ilbo” August 5, 2020.

³⁶ Jimmyn Parc, Shin Dong Kim, *The Digital Transformation of the Korean Music Industry and the Global Emergence of K-Pop*, “Sustainability” 2020, Volume 12, Issue 18, p. 7790.

³⁷ Yunhee Jeong, Kiduk Kim, *Gudok gyeongje sidae-ui odiobuk jisok seongjang-eul wihan siron-jeok yeongu* [A Study on the Continuous Growth of Audiobooks in the Subscription Economy], “Hanguk chulpanhak yeongu” 2019, Volume 45, Issue 4, pp. 151-185.

³⁸ Klaus U. Werner, *Reading Aloud as Intangible Cultural Heritage: A German Initiative to Support Literacy, Reading and Libraries – Worldwide*, IFLA WLIC, Cape Town South Africa, 2015, [on-line:] <http://library.ifla.org/1177/1/118-werner-en.pdf>.

man Reading Foundation with the goal to put reading aloud on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

In this vein, the audiobook can be seen as the revival or rediscovery (*jaebalgyeon*³⁹) of something traditional that was considered dead and lost, or at least moribund and close to extinction – in other words, the audio book represents a “digital renaissance”⁴⁰ of what had existed previously but as something genuinely analog: “The value of oral speech, which has long been relatively disparaged, has risen rapidly in the digital media era with audiobooks as the lead.”⁴¹ In this vein, one might also say that the boom of the audiobook forms part of a larger trend that is epitomized by the podcasting industry, which celebrates a meteoric growth worldwide. What is more, even on the websites of what used to be exclusively print media, a considerable portion of content is now available for listening alone, not just as an alternative to the written text. Also, it is more and more common that a machine-reading is offered by default, so listening is becoming indeed a more and more customary alternative to reading with the eyes.

Obviously, when the audio boom is seen as going against the grain, or the tide, of the digital, it also goes against the paradigm of visibility first: “It’s been decades since radios were pushed out of the living room, made obsolete by television. Nonetheless, literature and radio are now meeting to create an unexpected trend. The birth and spread of a new market: audiobooks”⁴² – this is how the popular concept of the audiobook as an aural anticyclical backlash against a growing fixation on the visual is worded in the K-lit promotion magazine *Korean Literature Now*.⁴³

Ultimately, the “sonification”⁴⁴ of something that seemed to be “visual” (that is, print to be read with your eyes) can be conceptualized seen as a countermovement to sight- and scripture-dominance, mirroring a sonic or acoustic or auditory or aural turn⁴⁵ that has, since around the beginning of the twenty-first century, engrossed

³⁹ Indeed, “the rediscovery of reading aloud” (*nangdog-ui jaebalgyeon*) has gained the status of a buzz-phrase.

⁴⁰ Iben Have, Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Gi-hong Gim [Ki Hong Kim], *Odiobuk yeongu damnon-eseo Wolteo Ong-ui gusulseong gae-nyeom-ui hwaryong-e gwanhan yeongu* [A Study on the Use of Walter Ong’s Orality in the Audio Book Research Discourse], “Inmun sahoe” 2020, Issue 4, pp. 103-118.

⁴² Byoung Jin Kim, *Nobody Killed the Radio Star*, “Korean Literature Now” 2022, Issue 59, p. 35.

⁴³ Interestingly, the success of K-pop is often attributed to the producers’ ability to “satisfy the visual appetite of consumers” (Jimmyn Parc, Shin Dong Kim, *op. cit.*) mostly by videos with elaborated choreographies and costumes, therefore sight-dominance can be regarded a major foundation of K-pop’s success.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Kramer, Jean-Sébastien Noël, *Remediatizing Visual Media as Sonic Data: Sonification and Cultural History*, “Revue d’Histoire Culturelle” 2020, Volume 1.

⁴⁵ See Hans-Joachim Braun, *An Acoustic Turn? Recent Developments and Future Perspectives of Sound Studies*, “Avant” 2017, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 75-91; Petra M. Meyer, *Acoustic Turn*,

scholars in the humanities and social sciences as well as psychology.⁴⁶ The study of Korean “sound cultures” is still a promising field with untapped areas.⁴⁷ Growing is also scholarship on the study of early radio plays⁴⁸ and of vernacular reading.⁴⁹

How “old orality” and “hearing-dominance” ultimately yielded to sight-dominance has been famously described by Walter Ong: “the shift from oral to written speech is essentially a shift from sound to visual space.”⁵⁰ Ong points out that this was a slow process, with culture remaining oral-aural even after printing was developed: “auditory processing continued for some time to dominate the visible, printed text, though it was eventually eroded away by print.”⁵¹ This spoken-word tradition also influenced the production of texts, the literary style, as reciting a text was a testimony to its value, just like in classical antiquity “a written text of any worth was meant to be and deserved to be read aloud.”⁵²

Indeed, the great novelists of the 19th century who took so much pride in constructing elaborate periodic sentences, crafted with the utmost care for effectful hypotaxis, suspense and balance of subordinate clauses, did so by speaking (reading) aloud the sentences they composed, and in fact were drawing a lot on how people speak, even if this may be hard to recognize for contemporary readers. Charles Dickens and his “spoken- and performance-oriented style” is a case in point: “the speech should not be simply skimmed over, but *orally and dramatically performed*.”⁵³

Tübingen: Fink, 2008; D.E. Wittkower, *A Preliminary Phenomenology of the Audiobook*, In *Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies*, ed. Matthew Rubery, New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 216–231.

⁴⁶ For the latter, see, e.g., Nina Kraus, *Of Sound Mind: How Our Brain Constructs a Meaningful Sonic World*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021. Otherwise see, e.g., Viktoria Tkaczyk, *Thinking with Sound: A New Program in the Sciences and Humanities around 1900*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. It would exceed the scope of this article to contrast this with the proclamation (mostly in the 1990s) of an “iconic,” “imagic,” “pictorial,” or “visualistic” turn. What matters here is that these are rather anti-textual and anti-scriptural trends and thus not conceptualized as reactions to an increased attention to the acoustic and aural.

⁴⁷ See *Asian Sound Cultures*, ed. Iris Haukamp, Christin Hoene, Martyn Smith, London–New York: Routledge, 2022.

⁴⁸ Jina E. Kim, *The Sonic Unconscious and the Wartime Radio Novel in Colonial Korea*, In *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean Literature*, ed. Yoon Sun Yang, London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 275–291.

⁴⁹ Si Nae Park, *The Korean Vernacular Story: Telling Tales of Contemporary Chosŏn in Sinographic Writing*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

⁵⁰ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London–New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 116.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁵³ Tammy Lai-ming Ho, *Reading Aloud in Dickens’ Novels*, “Oral Tradition” 2008, Volume 23, Issue 2, p. 195.

The implicit reader's reading is thus not envisioned by the author as a fully silent activity. Rather, the reading is envisioned as a re-oralization of the written words – crafted by an author who tests his words by uttering them aloud when composing the text. Ultimately, “the written word is perceived as having voice, a voice that is vocalized in the act of reading.”⁵⁴

Reading Aloud As a Skill, Enhancing Wellbeing

In the wake of the audio boom, we see also a boom of guidance towards reading well, targeting explicitly those who aim to use reading ability (*sillyeok*) and techniques (*gisul*) for professional purposes. *Nangdok* gurus come forward and find a niche here. Their teachings on YouTube are mostly rather trivial, but in order to sell, these pundits, of course, promise an awful lot, e.g., the secret of how to avoid *odeok* (misreadings). Some go indeed go through the text by what could be called a close reading – usually, however, not based on philological training but on more or less good intuition. At the same time, we see the emergence of “book-tubers,” who set out to answer almost philosophical questions like: How should we read a book?, How can we read well?, etc.

Reading is acknowledged as a kind of *studium generale*, as is the claim by the successful book *Nangdok eun immunhak ida* [Reading aloud is humanities].⁵⁵ The book relates the travails of a “chorus,” that is, a study group that cooperates by reading books together, with its various members reading in turn.⁵⁶ Such reading groups or choruses are in fact branded a new “community trend.”⁵⁷ In the case of this specific chorus, however, the group read mostly non-fiction.

Many new trends in South Korea are compressed, and a sudden new wave can hit with extreme force because of a generally higher degree of conformity in behavior.⁵⁸ The shift to remote communication during the Covid-19 pandemic was certainly an-

⁵⁴ Holly Hearon, *The Interplay between Written and Spoken Word in the Second Testament as Background to the Emergence of Written Gospels*, “Oral Tradition” 2010, Volume 25, Issue 1, p. 58.

⁵⁵ Bo-gyeong Gim, *Nangdok eun immunhak ida*, Seoul: Hyeonja ui maeul, 2014. This book draws on the experiences of a reading group that stayed together for almost five years.

⁵⁶ See also a documentary on this “chorus” aired by SBS on September 22, 2013: *Hamkke ingneun dokseoui mat* [The taste of reading together] <https://programs.sbs.co.kr/culture/sbsdocum/vod/52256/22000084696?type=tv&cooper=nhn>.

⁵⁷ This phenomenon is recognized, but far from mainstream: “Nangdog-eul mokjeog-euro ha-neun seuteodi geurub-i sori eopsi hwaksan doego itda [Study groups that meet to read aloud are spreading without much noise]” (Yun-hwan Gim, *Dasi nangdog-ui sidaero*, “Yeonggwang doseo” December 1, 2016).

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Jiang Yi, Bong Mimi, Sung-il Kim, *Conformity of Korean Adolescents in Their Perceptions of Social Relationships and Academic Motivation*, “Learning and Individual Differences” 2015, Volume 40, Issue 2, pp. 41-54.

other factor in having raised even more awareness for voice as something marketable (there is frequent mention of this explanation). Courses are offered, and not cheap at all, to use the solitary time “in the corner of one’s room” to train *nangdok*.⁵⁹ But then again, *nangdok* is not taught alone for the individual’s private purposes: voice and reading training is offered as a “know-how that enables people to participate in the world of social media confidently.”⁶⁰

The boom of guidance towards reading is a remarkable phenomenon. When the *nangdok* gurus teach their followers, on YouTube or via online *hagwon* or just via books⁶¹, how to befriend and train one’s own voice and hone reading-aloud skills, the purported benefits are said to be manifold. Oft advertised is the ability to appropriate (others’) sentences one likes, so that they ultimately seem to be our own (quite obviously this is a double-edged sword). Much more than ever before, one’s voice is considered an asset these days, and every now and then the new awareness regarding the merits of *nangdok* becomes the object of meta-reflection in Korean media and among Korean intellectuals.

Less directly utilitarian is the link established between reading aloud and wellbeing as promoted by various emerging gurus. When reading involves the whole body,⁶² it is not too far-fetched to consider it as a means to enhance health and happiness: “Reading a good work aloud means first and foremost that you read kindly to yourself. And through it, we can experience a broader self, a deeper self, and the sense of community even when we are alone, hearing the voices of others that we normally are not aware of. Reading aloud is one of the simplest forms of psychotherapy in the world whereby you can heal yourself on your own.”⁶³

⁵⁹ *Korona sidae, bangguseok nangdog-euro norabogi* [In Corona Times, Enjoying Reading aloud at Home in a Corner of One’s Room], [on-line:] <https://humanitas.khan.co.kr/lecture/12>. The trainer charged a fee of 200 000 Won for six two-hour sessions, offered from April to May 2021.

⁶⁰ “SNS sesang-eseo Dangdang hage jasin-eul deureo naegi wihan sumaneun nohaudeuri damgyeo itda” (book promotion of Gim Hyeong-suk, *Gim Hyeong-sug-i nangdok sidae mogsori 1-in keurieiteo-ga sesang-ul bakkunda*, Seoul: Deaegyeong bugseu, 2022).

⁶¹ As for a whole book that displays this spirit, see Jin-suk I, Heui-seon Gim, *Odiobuk-gwa nangdok*, Seoul: Communication Books, 2015.

⁶² Byeong-hun Gong, *op. cit.*

⁶³ Yeo-ul Yeong, *Sori naeeo ingneun jeulgeoum: Salm-eul bakkuneun ›urimal nangdok‹ ui him* [The Pleasure of Reading by Uttering Sounds: The Life-Changing Power of “Reading Aloud Our Own Language”], Seoul: Hongik, 2016.

In a similar vein, the basic idea that reading must be “selfish rather than social”⁶⁴ is variegated by these teachings: Even if you read for charity, you have to like it yourself first.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Worldwide, electronic audio books, produced with considerable investment, are on an ascending trajectory. South Korea displays an especially fast development in this field. The speed may not be as high as in some other sectors of the booming industry that boasts some globally marketed branches of “K-” culture, but the surge of the audiobook in South Korea is still a phenomenon of substantial size and wider implications.

For the bigger picture, the boom of the audiobook in Korea mirrors a change from the standard concept of reading aloud well. For a long time, reading aloud was rather expected to be monotonous, bordering on the soporific. It is up to speculation whether this stemmed from general reservations regarding the expression of strong feelings, or whether it can be related to the various pre-modern traditions of reading aloud that preferred rhythm over expressiveness (be it when reading aloud Buddhist sutras or the Thousand Character Classic or vernacular fiction) in pre-modern Korea. But things have changed dramatically, and concomitant with the audiobook boom, we see a boom of guidance towards reading well. *Nangdok* gurus come forward to teach on YouTube how to befriend and train one’s own voice and hone reading-aloud skills. Much more than ever before, one’s voice is considered an asset these days, and every now and then the new awareness regarding the merits of *nangdok* becomes the object of meta-reflection in Korean media and among Korean intellectuals. Like other new trends, the sudden transition into what has been dubbed a *nangdok si-dae* (“era of reading”) constitutes a compressed rapid development, a veritable wave, with some frontrunners and many followers keeping up at a fast pace.

The question provoked by this new wave is whether it is indeed only a by-product, a “parasite,” of digitalization or whether it represents an analog countermove-ment. Aspects of both are recognizable. However, it is certainly misleading to call the audiobook a feat of the digital age. Despite the progress of AI, readings for audiobooks are still mostly done by humans. Besides, we usually do not consider the digitally recorded and transmitted sound a digital entity. We simply receive it as a sound.

⁶⁴ “Ultimately we read ... in order to strengthen the self, and to learn its authentic interests. ... The pleasures of reading indeed are selfish rather than social. ... I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good” (Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, New York: Scribner, 2020, p. 21).

⁶⁵ Hye-jeong Seo, Jeong-hui Song, *Na-ege, nangdok: Nae maeum-e deullyeo juneun moksori*, Seoul: Peipeo Taigeo, 2021, pp. 89-90.

On reflection, when we speak of the digital, we ultimately do not always truly mean it. To employ an analogy: “the digital image is, at the beginning and end of the day, an *image*, an analog presentation. Unless we are programmers, we are not really interested in the digits in the digital image.”⁶⁶ Thus, the audiobook is arguably not even a truly “digital” content for the consumer: “The virtual, as such, is inaccessible to the senses.”⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Back to the Drawing Board: Architecture, Sculpture, and the Digital Image*, In *Die Realität des Imaginären Architektur und das digitale Bild*, ed. Jörg H. Gleiter, Norbert Korker, Gerd Zimmermann, 10. Internationales Bauhaus-Kolloquium, Weimar 2007, p. 14.

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