

K-Audio: Reading aloud in Korea, or: Do talking books confirm or defy digitalization?

한국의 오디오 북: 한국에서의 소리 내어 읽기(낭독)
디지털화에 순응인가 아니면 역행인가?

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1. Introduction

The big bookstores in Seoul still do not sell audiobooks.¹ The image, role, and history of talking books in Korea is much different from what can be observed in Europe. For the bigger picture, also the standard concept of a good reading seems to have been different for a long time, with *nandok* (“reading out loud”) on radio being soporific – almost reminding of the monotonous melody applied, regardless of the content, by Buddhist monks reading sutras or by women reading aloud vernacular fiction in pre-modern Korea. The effect of this was often exacerbated by some psychedelic background music. Some piano music, at least for the start of a reading, seemed to be the absolute minimum must.

More than a quarter of a century ago, when this author started to look for Korean audiobooks, this reading culture stood in stark contrast to comparable readings in the German speaking world, where expressiveness has always been the rule. The fact that Korea had different cultural standards can be gleaned from the idiom “책 읽듯이,” which literally means “like reading a book” but in fact means: reading emotionless. It stems from a type of reading that was the norm in schools; teachers would sanction any display of individuality by students summoned to read a part of the textbook. This idiom could also be applied to an actor whose acting is clumsy “책 읽듯이 한다” (he does [acts] as if reading a book). Thus, a director who

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¹ Last verified by this author (A.S.) in person in January 2023, in various big bookstores in Seoul.

is rehearsing a play might scold the clumsy actor with the words: “너 책 읽냐?” [Do you read a book?].²

However, this has changed and whether is related to these deeper-sitting changes or not, we see a new cultural industry is on the rise in Korea: Electronic audio books, produced with considerable investment, employing 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.³

Platforms like Audien, Audioclip, Findaway, Millie, Storytel, or Welaaa, many of them having launched their audio services only a few years ago, cater to this rapidly growing segment of consumption — besides established radio broadcasters and new internet-based (e.g., Spoon Radio) and many other audio content platforms (e.g., Podbbang) where talking books are just available⁴ —, wielding a large assortment of downloadable talking books (fiction as well as non-fiction) – read with a vividness and expressiveness that reminds of radio plays (see Lin 2021). Indeed, the boundaries between the radio play and the mere reading have become blurred, as the reading (that is, what is otherwise still a mere reading and not a play) is often performed by more than one person, which creates a dramatization effect. One phenomenon accompanying this is the boom of guidance towards reading well. *Nangdok* gurus, “book tubers” and others come forward to teach on YouTube or via online *hagwon* or just via books⁵ to explain how to befriend and educate the own voice and how to hone one’s reading aloud skills — for a variety of purposes, as, e.g., to appropriate sentences one likes, so that they ultimately seem to be one’s own. 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 sidae* (“era of reading”) constitutes a compressed fast development, a veritable wave, with some frontrunners and many following suit at fast pace. One of the numerous questions provoked by this new wave is whether it stems from digitalization or whether it rather represents an analog countermovement.

“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), optical (CD) but is these days mostly electronic, and thus listened to via a phone, computer, tablet, or MP3 player. 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

² Note that those who, before the audio book boom started to take off, would read books for the blind as volunteers encouraged by public libraries, were instructed to refrain from emotional reading: “낭독 시 과한 감정이입은 삼가고 되도록 담담하게 읽는다” (어두운 곳을 빛처럼 밝혀주는 목소리, 낭독봉사 참여 후기. K(주) C&C 블로그, 2 Juni 2014, <https://blog.skcc.com/1804>). 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 fact forms a stronger basis for the acceptance of robot reading. That said, AI is obviously on its way to transform even the “machine” reading into a tool that is able to emulate a human reading. Given the high degree of trust in and acceptance of such trends, we may predict that South Koreans will belong to the avantgarde of synthetic voice reading (see Ryu 2023).

³ To put it in perspective: According to the most recent available annual report the Korean Publishers Association (from 2000), the whole audiobook market had a turnover of 300 eok, that is 30 billion Won; while the whole publishing industry made 4 jo 8036 eok, that is ca. 160 times as much (Korean Publishers Association 2021). However, all the regular reporting about the audiobook industry highlight a remarkable increase and prospected enormous growth.

⁴ To name just a few that offer their readings via (or also on) YouTube: Chaek ilgneun munhwagwan, Radio danpyeon soseol, KBS Radio Dogseosil, EBS Myeongpum nangdok.

⁵ As for a whole book that displays this spirit, see I and Gim 2015.

audience is *nangdok*, from *balgeul* (clear) *nang* and *ilgeul* (read) *dok*. Antonyms would be *mukdok*, the “silent” reading, or *simdok* (from *maeum* [heart] *sim*). Another word for reading only with the eyes is *ganseo* (from *bol* [see] *gan* and *chaek* [book] *seo*).

2. History of reading aloud in Korea

Whether reading aloud (reciting, chanting) Buddhist sutras in a soothing, mellifluous rhythm or sharing vernacular fiction in pre-modern Korea, or reading Confucian texts aloud, be it for ritual officiating or to memorize classic text: Reading aloud used to be a standard.⁶ This is also reflected in older words for reading aloud: One is *seongdok* (聲讀), meaning the traditional Korean method of cantillating Literary Chinese by *hyeonto* (懸吐), adding either grammatical particles or semantic clarifications (*pumsa*) every now and then in order to aid comprehension – while retaining the Sinitic vocabulary and word order. *Eumdok* (from *sori* [sound] *eum*) can refer an even more purist reading, that is voicing only the sound part of Chinese characters (but it can also mean just any reading aloud). *Ex negativo*, this term testifies that reading often involved a simultaneous translation of *hanmun* (Literary Chinese) into vernacular Korean, thus understandable to listeners who either did not have the fuller information of the Chinese characters in front of them – the sound only is ambiguous, except for cases when the content can be anticipated – or would anyway be unable to decipher them. Just like in the West, Koreans were not fully alphabetized in the past⁷, and thus reading aloud was of an evident use, especially when literature for entertainment began to flourish.⁸

3. Deficient or more holistic mode?

While radio dramas (audio theatres) became very soon “a leading international popular entertainment,”⁹ the emergence of the audiobook is often “associated with children, the dyslexic, or the visually handicapped” (Have and Stougaard Pedersen 2016: 2). When considered a mere surrogate, the audiobook was “treated in terms of its ability to make shortcuts or overcome insufficiencies” (ibid.). Consuming audiobooks would thus be seen as a deficient mode, contrasting the “contemplative experience” of “deep reading” with the “uncritical, unreflective, and relaxed” (ibid., 7) listening to an audiobook.¹⁰ Tellingly, the longest-standing radio program with literature read aloud was *연속낭독* by KBS, on air from 1995–2021.

Of course, one could argue that the contrary is the case, that is, that the audiobook offers in fact an “amplified sensory range” (Kuzmičová 2016: 223), complementing the written word with many layers that the printer’s ink cannot render or disambiguate easily. There are graphic means, like italics by which one could highlight phrasal or prosodic stress, as for example in the sentence: “I didn’t say we should kill him.” Each of the seven words of this sentence could be the stress. But there is much more that voice can carve out, and print would leave this ambiguous. Besides pointing out that reading aloud brings more dimensions of the text to the

⁶ In European antiquity, reading aloud seems to have been the standard as well, but there silent reading was not inexistent. See McCutcheon 2015.

⁷ This relatively trivial fact is documented by a myriad of documents, surveys, and testimonies. Discussing details is, however, not the purpose of this article. Be referred, as a shortcut, to Taylor and Taylor 2015.

⁸ See Jang 2017 and I 2022.

⁹ See Wikipedia, s.v. “Radio drama.” (All online sources for this paper last verified 30 April 2023.)

¹⁰ See also Rubery 2011a and Toolan 2008.

fore, the apology or celebration, or promotion of the audiobook often contains the claim that reading involves the whole body (*jeonsin*).¹¹

The recent rise of the audiobooks is usually explained by the emergence of “smart media” platforms and their subscription policies.¹² To some extent, it is also explained by the trend to “multitask” while being mobile, exacerbated by a trend towards “speed listening” (Garber 2015).

4. K-Audiobook?

South Korea’s cultural industry has enjoyed enormous success. One of its many branches is now the production and distribution of electronic audio books – with considerable investment, employing 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. Platforms like Audien, Audioclip, Storytel, or Welaaa cater to this small but still significant segment of consumption and wield a large assortment of downloadable talking books (fiction as well as non-fiction) – and usually these are now read with a vividness and expressiveness that reminds of radio plays. What is more: the boundaries between the radio play and the mere reading have become blurred, as the reading (that is, what is otherwise still a mere reading and not a play) is usually performed by more than one person, which creates a dramatization effect.

Audiobooks are a digital content (“k’ont’ench’ü”). 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.¹³ 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 as well – and in fact a market for this existed –, so the digital is no way a precondition. Also, when speaking of “digital” it can be assumed that the CD is not considered to form part of this even though it is, strictly speaking, storage for digital audio recordings. Still, it is very telling that even a Korean expert homepage, devised thanks to government funds to support smaller publishers with the production of audiobooks, provides such a definition. (Truth be told, not all Koreans subscribe to the idea that the audiobook is something digital. There is a significant discourse that celebrates the audiobook as a renaissance or re-discovery, or even an analog countermovement and dialectical backlash against the digital transformation of human culture.)

Only the development of MP3 and high-capacity digital audio players that are easily portable made the audiobook a commodity for the masses.¹⁴ Even more importantly, the shift from “possessing” to “accessing” (via virtual storage platform) multiplied consumption. The German-speaking world may have been different, as there was a wealth of audiobooks on CD on offer since the 90. Maybe this is a peculiarity like the “German boardgame” culture that was — difficult to understand and to accept for many Koreans with whom this author (A.S.) discussed the matter — never replaced by online gaming. In a way, it seems that Korea has missed a stage (just as in fact it never had, despite a small boardgame café boom and boardgames getting imported and sold in bookstores, a significant “German boardgame”

¹¹ See, e.g., Gong 2018.

¹² See also Cho 2021.

¹³ KPIPA *tijit’ölbuk sent’ö* (<https://kaudiobook.or.kr/>).

¹⁴ See Rubery 2011b.

culture),¹⁵ but one could also say that it jumped over one to spearhead now the newest avantgarde all the more — just as it has managed to do in many areas of the cultural industry. Korea has the advantage of a low threshold (barrier) when it comes to entering the digital market, both for producers as well as consumers (“users”). Also, the infrastructure for distribution is well developed. Thus, while Germany has a much bigger “traditional” market for audiobooks than Korea, it displays a slow transition from CDs to (“fully”) digital audiobooks that have no material form but are just data files (I 2021). For South Korea applies what might be true for most of the world outside of Central Europe, that is, that recordings of long-form narrative did not become properly widespread until the recent introduction of high-capacity, and highly portable, digital audio players.¹⁶ It is therefore natural that audiobooks are debated as if they were an innovation of today or only very recently.

One characteristic of the recent developments is that the border between the radio drama and the audiobook gets blurred: Audien, Audioclip, Storytel, Welaaa, and others produce audiobooks that come across almost like a radio drama / radio play: several readers, different voices for narrator, women, men.¹⁷ That said, this trend is not universal, and some observers rather see a movement back from various voices to the classic one-performer reading (Min 2020).

5. Bigger picture: The Sonic Turn and other relevant contexts

Is the rise of the audiobook just concomitant with the digital age or rather an analogue countermovement? As for the first view, we saw above an example (the Publication Industry Promotion Agency of Korea, KPIPA, defining the audiobook outrightly as something digital). Indeed, the rise of the audiobook in South Korea can arguably be seen as part of the “diversification” (Parc and Kim 2020) of the local digitized entertainment industry that evolved from the intelligent response of the music industry to digital transformation, capitalizing on the chances of the “subscription economy” of a “smart media platform environment” (Jeong and Kim 2019). In this view, the production and distribution of audiobooks in South Korea constitutes another “K-” item, that is, the “K-audiobook.” A major difference to many other of the other “K-” departments is that audiobooks produced in Korea are really down to Korean, so that the export is limited. The platforms offer mostly Korean, be it original Korean or translated Korean. They distribute, however, much English content, catering to Koreans unrelenting education fever and “English craze” (*Korea Times*, 10 May 2007).

The alternative 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” (Werner 2015), says one leading figure of a joint initiative led by the German Library Association (DBV) and the German Reading Foundation with the goal to put reading aloud on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

A third way to look at it is that the audiobook is the revival or rediscovery 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” (Have and Stougaard Pedersen 2016: 4): “The value of oral speech, which has long been relatively disparaged, has risen

¹⁵ “한국의 낭독 문화가 전혀 발달하지 못했다” (N.N.: 황현산 선생님의 이육사 <광야> 해석. 독서 갤러리 13 November 2022 (<https://gall.dcinside.com/mgallery/board/view/?id=reading&no=457320>). Author Kim Young-ha is credited with having been influential in pointing out the absence of author reading trips that he witnessed in Germany.

¹⁶ See Rubery 2011b.

¹⁷ 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 Harry Potter series was produced with only one reader.

rapidly in the digital media era with audiobooks as the lead” (Gim 2020: 103). In this vein, one might also say that the boom of the audiobook forms part of a larger reading-aloud trend: podcasts are ubiquitous. What is more, even on the websites of what used to be (exclusively) print media, a considerable portion of medial content is now available for listening alone, not just as an alternative to the written form. Also, it is more and more common that a machine-reading is offered just by default, so that listening is indeed an alternative to reading.

Ultimately, the trend towards reading aloud can be seen as a countermovement to sight-dominance, mirroring the sonic or acoustic or auditory or aural ‘turn’¹⁸ that has, since around the beginning of the twenty-first century, informed scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, but also psychology.¹⁹ The study of Korean “sound cultures” is still a promising field with untapped areas (see Haugkamp 2022, Gim JE 2020).

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” (Ong 2002: 116). Ong points out that this was a slow process, with culture remaining oral-aural “well after printing was developed, auditory processing continued for some time to dominate the visible, printed text, though it was eventually eroded away by print” (ibid., 117). This also influenced the production of texts, 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” (ibid., 112).

Interestingly, the success of K-pop is often attributed to the producers being able to “satisfy the visual appetite of consumers” (Parc and Kim 2020), mostly by videos with elaborated choreographies and costumes, so that in this case it is sight-dominance that can be seen as a main factor.

At any rate, the “audio boom”²⁰ has become a phenomenon that may be not a hot and big issue but is nonetheless big enough to get covered by Korean media (see, e.g. N.N. 2023). In other words, there is a meta-awareness, discussing the whole range of positions described above. In the same vein, Korean newspapers and many online media bring interviews with “nangdok jeonmunga” (reading experts) and those contributing to this thriving cultural industry.

6. Reading as a skill, the voice as an asset

In the wake of the audio boom, we see also a boom of guidance towards reading well. *Nangdok* gurus come forward and find a niche here. Their teachings are, at times, rather trivial but some really go through the text by close reading, based on more or less good intuition. Of course, a philological analysis of complex sentences is not offered. At the same time, there is the emergence of “book-tubers”, who answer, among others, very general and 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] (Gim 2014).²¹ The reading “chorus”

¹⁸ See Braun 2017, Meyer 2008, and Wittkower 2011.

¹⁹ For the latter, see, e.g., Kraus 2021. Otherwise see, e.g., Tkaczyk 2023.

²⁰ “Der Audio-Boom geht weiter [The audio boom goes on].” *Börsenblatt*, 14. Oktober 2020

²¹ This book draws on the experiences of a reading group that stayed together for almost five years.

(branded a new “community trend”²²) on which this book is based²³ is simply a study group that studies book by reading them in turn. 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.²⁴ But also Covid-19 may have been a factor in raising even more awareness for voice as something marketable. Courses are offered, not cheap at all, to use the lonely time “in the corner of one’s room” to train *nangdok*.²⁵ That the voice is considered an asset exactly because of social media could appear as a somewhat paradoxical development, but of course YouTube is not a visual medium alone, and recognizing this, voice and reading training is offered as a “know-how that enables people to participate with self-esteem in the world of social media.”²⁶

7. Conclusion

Electronic audio books, produced with considerable investment, are on the rise. This relatively recent development may not be as other sectors of Korea’s booming cultural industry, but it is still a phenomenon of substantial size and wider implications. For the bigger picture, the emergence of audiobooks mirrors a change from the standard concept of reading aloud well. For a long time, reading aloud was rather supposed to be monotonous, bordering to the soporific. It is up to speculation whether this stemmed from general reservations regarding feelings, or whether it can be related to the various pre-modern traditions of reading aloud that preferred rhythm over expressiveness (be it reading Buddhist sutras or reading aloud vernacular fiction) in pre-modern Korea. But this has changed dramatically, and we see, concomitant with the audiobook boom, a boom of guidance towards reading well. *Nangdok* gurus come forward to teach on YouTube how to befriend and educate the own voice and how to hone one’s 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 sidae* (“era of reading”) constitutes a compressed fast development, a veritable wave, with some frontrunners and many following suits at fast pace. One question provoked by this new wave is whether it is indeed just a product of digitalization or whether it rather represents an analog countermovement. There can be no definitive answer.

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²² This phenomenon is of course recognized, but of course nothing for the mainstream: “낭독을 목적으로 하는 스터디 그룹이 소리 없이 확산되고 있다. [Study groups that meet to read aloud are spreading without much noise].” (김윤환: “김윤환의 삶과 생각, 제40회: 다시 낭독의 시대로.” *Yeonggwang doseo*, 1 December 2016. https://www.ykbook.com/bbs/board.php?bo_table=column5&wr_id=40&page=5)

²³ See also a documentary on this “chorus” (described in Gim 2014), aired by SBS on 22 September 2013: “249회 특집 다큐멘터리: 함께 읽는 독서의 맛”

<https://programs.sbs.co.kr/culture/sbsdocum/vod/52256/22000084696?type=tv&cooper=nhn>

²⁴ See, e.g., Yi, Bong, and Kim 2015.

²⁵ 코로나 시대, 방구석 낭독으로 놀아보기 (<https://humanitas.khan.co.kr/lecture/12>). The trainer charged a fee of 200 000 Won for six two-hour sessions, offered from 22 April to 27 May 2021 (always 14:00 to 16:00).

²⁶ “SNS 세상에서 당당하게 자신을 드러내기 위한 수많은 노하우들이 담겨 있다” (according to the book promotion of Gim 2022).

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