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THE STALKING OF KOREAN HIP HOP SUPERSTAR DANIEL LEE



Daniel Lee, whose nom de rap is Tablo, is the frontman of the successful Korean trio Epik High. *Photo: Miko Lim*

IT WAS FRIDAY night, May 22, 2009, and one of New York City's most storied music venues, the Fillmore at Irving Plaza, was sold out. The line stretched all the way down Irving Place, turned the corner onto East 16th, and kept going. People had come from as far away as Michigan, Toronto, and Ohio, but they weren't lined up for the latest indie darlings or house music sensation. They'd come to see an improbably successful Korean trio named Epik High, which as far as anyone could tell was the first Korean hip hop act to attract a mainstream American audience.

The group was headed by a skinny 28-year-old named Dan Lee, and when he danced onto the stage that night the audience started dancing with him. Lee—whose nom de rap is Tablo—had a puckish charm, a sly grin, and a reputation as a genius. In South Korea, Lee was already a superstar. He had released four number one albums with Epik High and published a best-selling collection of short stories in both English and Korean. Talk show hosts almost always found a way to mention that he graduated from Stanford in three and a half years with both a bachelor's and master's degree in English. Though that would probably count against a rapper in the US, back home he was lionized as a symbol of success.

Now the group was building a fan base in the States. In addition to its New York show, Epik High had sold out major venues in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The crossover success was visible on iTunes, where the trio was soaring up the hip hop charts and would soon hit number one in the US, topping Kanye West and Jay-Z.

But then, at the height of the group's fame, the comments sections of articles about Epik High started filling up with anonymous messages accusing Lee of lying about his Stanford diploma. In May 2010 an antifan club formed and quickly attracted tens of thousands of members who accused him of stealing someone's identity, dodging the draft, and faking passports, diplomas, and transcripts. The accusations were accompanied by supposed evidence supplied by the online masses, who also produced slick YouTube attack videos. It was a full-fledged backlash.

By that summer, Lee's alleged fraud had become one of Korea's top news items. Death threats streamed in, and Lee found himself accosted by angry people on the street. Since his face was so recognizable, he became a virtual prisoner in his Seoul apartment. In a matter of weeks, he went from being one of the most beloved figures in the country to one of the most reviled.

But in fact Lee had not lied about his academic record. He actually did graduate from Stanford in three and a half years with two degrees. His GPA had been in the top 15 percent of his undergraduate class. The evidence marshaled against him was false. It was an online witch hunt, and last spring I set out to discover why it happened.

I first heard about Lee when editors at Stanford Magazine, a publication of the Stanford Alumni Association, called to tell me about the rapper's plight. The university's administration and the alumni association had tried their best to defend him, seemingly with little success. The editors asked if I would write an article about the controversy, and I agreed to. (I attended Stanford as an undergrad.)

I started by tracking down Lee's classmates and spoke with four who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. They felt terrible about what had happened to their friend. He was smart, they all agreed, but what set him apart was his dedication to music. He could have taken a more traditional path after graduation—law school or consulting—but instead he chose to return to Korea to start a hip hop group. “It was a risky career choice,” says Conrad Lo, a former dorm-mate and now a product manager at Google. “Koreans didn't even like hip hop back then.”

Sure enough, Lee struggled when he first returned to Korea. Epik High released two albums to little fanfare. Lee titled the third album *Swan Songs*, on the assumption that he'd have to get a real job after it failed. Instead the 2005 release was a hit and helped introduce Korean audiences to hip hop. It also turned Lee into a celebrity, and his star power only grew over the next five years.

The campaign against him took off on May 11, 2010, when someone formed an online forum titled TaJinYo, an abbreviation in Korean for the phrase “Tell the truth, Tablo.” The leader of the forum identified himself as Whatbecomes, indicated that he lived in the US, and explained that he was contacting news organizations in Korea and the States to inform them that Lee was a liar. Chief among the accusations was that Lee had fabricated his Stanford credentials.

Diploma falsification had been a sensitive topic in Korea for some time. In 2007 the chief curator of a modern art museum in Seoul was found to have fabricated a Yale PhD and was jailed for 18 months on forgery charges. The scandal prompted prosecutors to investigate at least 120 cases of diploma fraud, ensnaring celebrities, soldiers, and even a monk. “There are definitely more people out there,” one of the prosecutors told Bloomberg News. “We just can’t spot them.”

In that environment, the accusations against Lee seemed plausible. After all, it usually takes four years to complete a bachelor’s degree. A master’s normally takes another year or two. Lee had done it all in less than four. Students also typically write a thesis to attain a master’s, and yet Lee admitted that he never wrote one. (His program didn’t require a thesis.)

After entertainment gossip sites wrote about the anti-Lee site, TaJinYo’s membership swelled to more than 100,000. Not content to wait for more allegations to emerge, many forum members launched their own investigations into Lee’s past. Soon, in a birtherlike onslaught, Stanford professors and administrators were flooded with emails from people questioning Lee’s educational background. Thomas Black, the Stanford registrar, received 133 emails on the subject. Everybody wanted to know one thing: Was Lee telling the truth?

Forum members seemed to relish the digital inquisition. “We call this game <Tablo Online>,” wrote one heckler, who referred to himself as a Tablo Online player, as if it were a casual pastime to be enjoyed during work breaks. Whatbecomes expertly fanned the flames, threatening to reveal dark secrets about Lee and promising to unveil them slowly for maximum dramatic effect. It was, he said, “more fun that way.”

Whatbecomes began hinting at a broader conspiracy: The media was colluding to protect Lee, because he was part of Korea’s upper crust. But the average citizen could fight back. “By proving Tablo’s fraud this time, the deep-rooted symbiotic relationship [between the media and the rich] can be cut off,” he wrote.



Some attackers even took to the streets, displaying signs saying that he forged his diploma and evaded military service.
Photo: Newscom

Within weeks forum members began to piece together their own elaborate theory. A man named Dan Lee may have graduated from Stanford, but many questioned whether Tablo was that same Dan Lee. They argued that it was possible that Tablo had taken over Dan Lee’s identity to parlay a Stanford credential into fame and fortune. “People pay a lot of money to study overseas, and they work day and night,” one forum member told a Korean TV crew, which blurred his face during the broadcast. “Tablo didn’t study: He just did hip hop and became famous in Korea.” Barely a month after Whatbecomes created the forum, members were off on an international manhunt for the “real” Dan Lee. Dan Lees across the US were contacted and interrogated. “We think that you have been threatened by the Korean singer Tablo and completed his studies for him,” one member wrote to a Dan Lee on Facebook. “Please reveal the truth. I’m begging you.”

“What? You’ve got the wrong person,” the other Lee wrote back, explaining that his name was pretty common. More to the point, he hadn’t even attended Stanford. Another Dan Lee, who like the rapper had graduated from Stanford in 2002, was soon

besieged. “One day I started getting random messages from people in Korea who were abusively angry at me for allowing some rapper to steal my identity,” says this Dan Lee, who works at a product-design firm in Wisconsin. “I had no idea what they were talking about.”

Undaunted, Whatbecomes began to incite his mob to violence. He said his aim was to “make Tablo and his family go crazy,” and he threatened to kill all of them. “We have to beat the shit out of these swindler dogs in order to taste the truth,” he wrote, going on to encourage others to target Lee’s family. Lee’s mother began to receive threatening calls. At a family dinner, she answered her phone and heard a man’s voice. “You’re a whore,” he said. “You and your family should leave Korea.” New posts cast doubts on Lee’s brother, David, who had begun a graduate program at Columbia but left without a degree. A researcher found a web page that indicated (incorrectly) that David had completed the degree, and calls flooded into the public-broadcasting channel in Seoul where he worked. He was fired. David’s home address and phone numbers were published, and he started to receive scary phone calls too. One person threatened to stab him to death for his alleged transgressions.

Other agitators approached John Shenk, a Beverly Hills lawyer whose website mentioned that he had graduated from Stanford as an English major like Lee, but in 2001, a year ahead of the rapper. They offered Shenk \$10,000 to sign a statement swearing he had never seen Lee on campus. Shenk pointed out that he graduated in a different year, so it wasn’t surprising that he didn’t know Lee. Nonetheless, Shenk accepted the money and signed the statement, which was then touted as proof of Lee’s deception. The detractors did not mention that they had paid for the statement.

The crisis continued to build, but Woollim Entertainment, Lee’s record label, didn’t issue statements defending him until June, when it pledged to help. Lee says Woollim never followed through, and he left the label later that month.

Lee thought that the best way to counter the attacks was to present the facts, so he released his college transcript to the press. Stanford issued statements confirming his academic record. The facts, he believed, would speak for themselves and put an end to the bizarre campaign. Instead, dozens of antifans began filing complaints with the Korean National Police accusing Lee of forging his diploma and student records. The Korean authorities were obliged to investigate, and the case became the top news story in the country, overshadowing Lee’s attempt to defend himself.

Whatbecomes had succeeded in turning his vendetta into a national spectacle. Tens of thousands of TaJinYo members had made his cause their own and, in the process, ruined the life of one of Korea’s brightest stars. Lee disappeared from public view.

In July 2011, after writing the article for Stanford Magazine, I flew to South Korea to track down some of the online persecutors—and to see how Lee was faring. He was no longer performing or recording and now rarely left his apartment, in a working-class neighborhood of Seoul. He had become a hermit at age 30. I arrived in Seoul within days of the online release of my article. It emphasized the fact that Stanford had clearly confirmed Lee’s academic record and professors had vouched for him. There could be no doubt that he had attended the university and graduated exactly as he claimed. The evidence, it seemed to me, left no room for argument.

I was wrong. While in Seoul, I was barraged by outraged emails from readers who remained convinced that Lee’s diploma must somehow be a forgery. They sent detailed treatises noting how the positioning of commas and conjunctions on the document raised suspicions. If I refused to see that, many claimed, I must be part of the conspiracy. “You made a big stinky shit with your name tagged on it,” one man emailed me. “Tablo Online players never forget.”

Lee initially refused to speak with me—he believed that by publicizing his tormentors’ accusations, the media had only fed the conspiracy and recruited more members to the forum. But after I explained that I wanted to hear his story firsthand, he relented and met me in the lobby of my hotel.

When Lee walked in, he looked crazed. He was no longer a cocky hip hop star. His hair was a bushy mess. Fidgeting with an unlit cigarette, his eyes darted nervously around the room. People in the lobby were looking at him. I asked how he was feeling.

“They’re saying I’m not me, and I can’t convince them I am,” he mumbled. “It’s like I’m living in a Kafka novel.”

The reaction to my Stanford Magazine article was the latest twist. Lee took out his phone and showed me a list of the most viewed articles on one of Korea’s leading Internet portals. “The Other Daniel Lee Responds to Tablo’s Education Issue” was the headline on the site’s number one story. The author of the article had downplayed the fact that my reporting confirmed Lee’s credentials and instead fastened onto the incidental point that I had spoken with a Dan Lee who had graduated with the musician. It was at best disingenuous, at worst a deliberate distortion.

Lee asked me if I would talk to the journalist and clarify what the other Dan Lee had told me. I had to decline. My Stanford article stated the results of my research; if I spoke to someone on his behalf, I could be accused of bias. Though it felt heartless, I told him I couldn’t do it.

He seemed despondent. “There’s nothing I can do to beat this,” he said. His voice was strained, as if he were on the verge of crying. His wife had given birth to their first

child just when the TaJinYo forum was formed. He had been so excited to be a father; now he worried for his baby's safety.

Soon after the birth, he saw a chilling tweet that referenced his Twitter handle and threatened him if he stayed in Korea. When he took his newborn to the hospital for a routine checkup, he saw people looking at him coldly and he panicked. "I didn't know if the doctor putting needles in my baby was one of those people," he said. "They were all anonymous, so there was no way for me to know who was after me."

That's when he began to take the threats seriously. He hired a lawyer and filed a defamation complaint against 22 of the most egregious hecklers, including Whatbecomes. I asked if he had any thoughts about why the attacks started in 2010, five years after he had risen to stardom and three years after diploma forgery had become a hot topic in Korea.

"I don't want to talk about that," he said.

There must have been some reason for the sudden outbreak, I pressed. The public had known for years that Lee was a Canadian and thus exempt from the Korean draft. His marriage in late 2009 might have alienated some fans, but celebrities get married all the time without engendering a witch hunt. And Whatbecomes had, in fact, been posting scurrilous comments online for years. What made people listen to him this time? Lee avoided my gaze and asked if I liked Korean barbecue.

At a bookstore in a quiet, residential neighborhood in Seoul, I sat down at a small table with an anti-Lee crusader who has asked me to call him Stevie. A software programmer, he wore a blue blazer with corduroys and carried an iPad with a bright pink case. We ordered tea, and Stevie proceeded to explain that he worked hard at his job. When he read that Lee had lied to become successful, it made him angry. I asked him why he gave credence to the rumors. He cited some of the same accusations that had already been debunked, and then he said there was something else as well. He flipped open his iPad and showed me a compilation of blog posts. They were written by someone claiming to be Seungmin Cho, Lee's cousin.

The earliest posts predated the formation of the TaJinYo forum. One was a reaction to Lee's marriage to Hyejung Gang, a strikingly pretty film star who had acted in some of Korea's most popular movies.

"Dear Seonwoong," the blogger wrote, referring to Lee by his Korean first name. "You lie about your IQ, you were not a top student in high school, and your claim to have graduated from Stanford with a 4.0 is also all lies." The author went on to disparage Lee as a low achiever in high school ("You didn't even make it to 10th place") and ended with a stern warning: "From now on, stop exaggerating and live truthfully or people will start bad-mouthing your parents' hometown."

Stevie closed the cover. “Even this guy, who claims he’s his cousin, calls him a liar,” he said.

Across town, in a bustling café, I met another active member of the anti-Lee campaign. Keunbai Hwang was the editor of a Korean sports news site, and he seemed even more riled up. “The cousin is the most important person in this case,” Hwang said, pointing out that the accusations, coming as they did from a family member, were the first credible source in the scandal. Hwang clarified that others, like Whatbecomes, amplified the accusations and turned them into a mass movement. But, according to Hwang, it was the cousin who provided the spark.

With the help of a translator, I searched Korean bulletin boards and read more of the purported cousin’s posts. The author repeatedly accused Lee of lying about his academic achievements, and his posts triggered a heated discussion. “Don’t you think a relative would know something like this?” wrote one commentor, who uploaded a screenshot of all the posts for others to see. The accusations seemed to have a powerful effect in convincing people that Whatbecomes was right when he called Lee a liar.

“The truth is in the cousin’s comments,” someone posted.

“I rely 100 percent on his statements,” another added.

I met Lee again at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. We sat in the lounge overlooking the Han River and ordered coffee. This time I asked him about his cousin. He said he didn’t want to bring shame on his family by talking about it. But when I pointed out that someone using the name of a family member had attacked him in public, Lee finally admitted that he had read the posts and suspected they played a role in igniting the controversy.

“It started a long time ago,” Lee said wearily.

Then he started to tell me about Seungmin Cho, the cousin he grew up with. Cho was a year older than Lee, and their lives mirrored each other’s. When the boys were in grade school, both families moved to Vancouver, Canada. For high school, the families moved back to Seoul and both boys attended Seoul International School, a small English-language school.

But the similarities ended there, Lee says. Cho was a diligent student and talented violinist. He was the concertmaster in the SIS orchestra. Lee described himself as a rebel who got into fights, smoked cigarettes, and didn’t like to study. Three teachers from the school confirmed that Cho was the more conventional high achiever.

Lee’s lack of academic focus frustrated his father, who constantly pushed his son to do better and insisted that he play violin in the school orchestra like Cho. Lee rarely

practiced. In one rehearsal he segued from a Brandenburg concerto into the Jurassic Park theme, derailing the orchestra. He was exiled to the timpanis, where he only wreaked greater havoc. After dyeing his hair blue, he was suspended from school. Cho, the dedicated violinist and successful student, was embarrassed by Lee's behavior. But all of Cho's hard work paid off when he was accepted to Stanford. He had done everything right.

Then a year later Lee also gained admission to Stanford. "Dan was the boy who didn't follow the rules," says Margaret Simmons, an English teacher at SIS at the time Cho and Lee attended. Lee, she says, was preternaturally smart and creative—she wasn't surprised he was accepted at a top university. Perhaps conflict between the two young men was inevitable. Cho was the accomplished musician, while Lee was the kid who refused to practice his violin. And yet it was Lee who rose to fame as a celebrated musician.

"It was like Cain and Abel," Simmons says.



Photo: Miko Lim

In January 2010 Cho posted a video on Facebook in which he plays a passionate violin solo under the YouTube user name ViolinistAtHeart. After graduating from Stanford with a dual major in history and computer systems engineering, he started a patent consultancy in California. Not quite the glamorous life his cousin was enjoying. Simmons, who'd had no contact with Cho since she left SIS 12 years earlier, ran across the clip and posted what she thought was a compliment. Cho fired off an angry reply.

"Fake literary flair does not sit well with me whose grave mistake was letting Dan Lee into Stanford back in 1998," he wrote in an email, though Simmons' comment hadn't mentioned Lee. "Dan Lee is a true disgrace to my relatives as a rebellious individual who got an F and a suspension record from SIS," he wrote.

In a six-paragraph rant, Cho went on to accuse Lee of inflating his IQ score and falsely claiming to be a top student in high school and college. Lee, he wrote, was even a screwup as a kid and got kicked out of middle school. "For the record, this is

not jealousy,” Cho added. “I have no reason to be jealous of an individual whom I obviously despise for his lack of candor.”

Simmons didn’t respond; she was baffled that her comment had provoked such vitriol. Three days later, Cho wrote again: “One more thing, Ms. Simmons. Great people of east Asia don’t need you. We will own this century, and the next, and the next, until all non-Asians are essentially pounded to submission ... Of course, it is the mission of thought leaders like myself who will propel what will be united Korea in the meantime.”

In a phone interview, Cho willingly discussed the emails he had sent to Simmons but refused to confirm or deny the authenticity of blog posts appearing under his name. Nonetheless, those posts make many of the same heated arguments as the emails. They accuse Lee of inflating his IQ score and exaggerating his academic achievements while insisting that “this is not hatred or jealousy.” Cho acknowledged that he had commented online about his cousin but said he had stopped some time ago. (Most of the blog posts under his name are no longer online.) In a later email, he asked not to be contacted further by Wired, adding that information under his name has been “falsely and incorrectly attributed” to him.

As the campaign against Lee grew, the person writing under Cho’s name seemed to have a change of heart and rose to Lee’s defense, asserting that Lee’s academic credentials were valid. “I don’t understand why people are arguing that his diploma and transcripts are fake,” he wrote.

The online mob wasn’t buying it. “The Tablo controversy would not have intensified and grown so much if you had not spoken out against Tablo,” a blogger named Pusheke responded. “Even if these kinds of rumors were already there, it became firm because of Mr. Cho.” The agitators weren’t interested in hearing anybody contradict their point of view. They stopped citing Cho’s comments as evidence, and his role in the controversy was soon buried under an avalanche of inflammatory new accusations against Lee.

In August 2010 Sewook Seo, a cop in the cybercrime unit of the Korean National Police, began investigating the forgery accusations against Lee as well as Lee’s charges of defamation. He interrogated the star for eight hours and determined in the end that the claims against Lee were without merit.

The detective then turned his attention to Lee’s attackers, starting with Whatbecomes. Seo subpoenaed the attacker’s user data from the Korean service that hosted TaJinYo—even anonymous users are required to give their name and contact information when they register. He discovered that Whatbecomes was a 56-year-old father of two living in Chicago. His name was Eungsuk Kim.

In posts online, Kim explained that he had two daughters, one of whom had attended Johns Hopkins. Both were doctors now. In statements to the media, he took responsibility for the attacks, arguing that “those who forge degrees from prestigious schools are hurting honest young people.” It appeared that he was just a father who had gotten wildly upset at a perceived injustice.

In January 2011 the Korean National Police announced that Lee’s defamation complaint should proceed. The authorities charged 11 people with participating in the online attacks, and an extradition request for Kim was filed with the US. The defamation case is pending in Seoul.

At the end of 2011, I emailed Kim to ask about the attacks. He declined to talk to me on the phone and challenged me to go to Stanford and check whether Lee had graduated. I explained that I had and found no grounds for doubt. Then I asked Kim if the online postings attributed to Cho played a role in the uproar about Lee.

“You know better than me,” Kim wrote and told me not to contact him again.

“I believe the controversy surrounding Dan is his own responsibility,” Cho says when I call him at the patent consultancy he runs in Santa Clara. “He made a lot of money in Korea by being famous and in large part by being a Stanford grad and marketing very effectively.”

Cho insists that Lee exaggerated his academic accomplishments but is quick to confirm that Lee attended Stanford and graduated with both bachelor’s and master’s degrees. When I press him to describe the exaggerations, he says that English majors have it easy. The classes aren’t hard, and there’s a lot of grade inflation. “I had two majors, but that’s not relevant” he says. “What is relevant is that it’s one thing to say ‘I had As’ and another to say ‘I’m a super-mega genius.’”

I ask him whether he regrets writing online about his cousin, given that his posts were cited by Tablo’s online harassers.

“I’m a big free speech believer,” he says and adds that nothing he said was “materially incorrect or materially malicious.” More important, he argues, he can’t be responsible for what other people did with his comments. “It’s just like, if you tweet something, you don’t control that information.”

When I ask when he last spoke to Lee, Cho says that his cousin stopped responding to his emails after he became famous. (Lee says he changed email addresses and never received any messages from Cho.) Cho says he got in touch “just to say hi, but he wouldn’t respond.”

They’d known each other most of their lives and had gone to the same schools, Cho explains. But then everything changed. “Tablo never refers to me, he never talks about

me, he never talks about his cousin at Stanford, and the truth is he's probably very scared," he says. "He's got some weaknesses he needs to cover. And the best way to do that is never to touch me, and I think we already know that very well."

I ask Cho to elaborate. What was the dark secret he had about his cousin?

It traces back to high school, Cho says. Cho was a grade ahead, and when he applied to Stanford, he wrote his application essay about his father. A year later, Lee wrote an essay about his own father. Cho didn't appreciate the choice. "He knew I wrote about my dad, and he knew that played a part in my admission," Cho says.

He explains that a big reason Lee got into Stanford was because he, Cho, had created such a favorable impression there. And he argues that Lee's Stanford degree was a major factor in his rise to pop stardom in Korea. But Lee not only never thanked him, he wouldn't even respond when Cho tried to get in touch. "He got into trouble only because of his own actions," Cho says. "And that's how I feel as an upperclassman."

Lee spent much of 2011 huddled in a small room in his apartment, which barely had space for a bookshelf and an upright piano. His Stanford diploma was hidden behind some cleaning supplies on the top shelf. For months he wrote dark, despairing songs and sang them to himself. There was little else to do. He had given up hope of performing again. "My life was over," he says.

But then his wife set up a meeting with her management company, YG Entertainment. The firm decided to take a chance and paid for studio time. On October 21, 2011, it released the first half of a 10-track double album that Lee titled *Fever's End*. Lee's debut as a solo artist is a lush, captivating explosion of pain, anger, and defiance and was met with an outpouring of positive notices. "This album is proof that his merit can't be attributed to the halo effect of his academic credentials," wrote prominent music reviewer Jinmo Lim; another reviewer added that the album had moved him to tears. Jungbae, a reviewer on Hellokpop.com, wrote, "In terms of emotional impact and expression, *Fever's End* blows [his earlier] albums away—and recall that those were some of Korean hip hop's best albums." The response was equally emphatic internationally: MTV called it one of the world's best five debut albums in 2011. *Fever's End* rose to the top of the charts, both in Korea and overseas. It reached number two on the Billboard World Albums chart and hit number one on the iTunes hip hop charts in the US and Canada. It no longer seemed to matter where Lee had gone to school. The music spoke for itself.