

Research on Korean History, Politics, and Culture

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Victims of Soviet-U.S. Conflict, Communism, and a Fratricidal War: The Plight of North Korean Refugees for a Southern Haven During the Korean War

A gray-haired, wrinkled mother takes into her hands the face of her equally gray-haired, wrinkled daughter and says, with a smile, “You’ve gotten so old.” An elderly man tightly embraces the wife he left in North Korea fifty years ago, while the wife that he met in South Korea and their children look on, silently crying with them. A son visits his sick mother in the hospital, with a promise to see her again tomorrow. She, however, dies that night in her sleep.

I remember sitting in the living room, with my family, watching the tapes that my mom’s older brother had recorded and sent of the three-day family reunions of North and South Koreans who had been separated by the 38th parallel for nearly five decades. Before, the concept of two Koreas was something so foreign and distant to me because it was always spoken about in history class within the complex contexts of the Cold War, the Korean War, and the conflict between communism and democracy. However, on that October evening in the year 2000, history came alive in the hundred North Koreans who had been selected to come down to Seoul, South Korea to be reunited with their families. The devastation of a divided nation became all the more personal and real to me, as I cried, laughed, and cheered them on, all the while realizing how bittersweet their visits must have been (and far too short), since it would probably be the last time they would be able to see each other (unless, in their lifetime, the two Koreas would develop friendlier relations or ideally, reunite).

These families are only a handful of “the estimated 5 million Koreans who were sundered from their families”¹ before and after the Korean War (1950-1953). Many of them had to leave their families without telling them; others lost each other en route to the south. Some, like both sides of my family, were fortunate enough to not get separated from each other. The bond that all these Koreans share, however, is the hardships and losses they had to endure as refugees, fleeing south to escape the communist-ruled north. They are the living, breathing remnants of decades of foreign and internal conflict, the survivors of which Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway, Command of the U.S. Eighth Army, called the “greatest tragedy to which Asia has ever been subjected in the course of the long history,”²

[...]

Life under a communist regime: The first wave of southern migrants

Caught in the crossfire of power struggles, foreign intervention, and much uncertainty, life for the citizens of Korea, who after years of Japanese persecution had been so hopeful for independence, changed dramatically. When the Soviets took over the northern part of Korea, they began to restrict “any exchange of visitors or merchandise” between the north and south by suspending railroad travel, cutting off all telephone and wireless exchanges, and ceasing trade.³ While these restrictions were difficult for families separated by the parallel, the infiltration of a communist regime and the rise of Kim Il Sung began to make life intolerable for those living in the north, forcing many to flee to the south.

¹ Choong Soon Kim, *Faithful Endurance: An Ethnography of Korean Family Dispersal* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press), 3.

² John W. Riley, Jr, Wilbur Schramm, & Frederick W. Williams. “Flight From Communism: A Report on Korean Refugees,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 1951), <http://www.jstor.org/> (7 April 2004), 274-286.

³ Kim, 29.

To secure his place as the “leader of the North Korean progressive forces” and later its first premier, Kim Il Sung relied heavily on his police network to “re-educate, purge, or imprison” people who seemed to be against the new regime (in other words, anti-communists).⁴ One of the first groups of people to be targeted were landlords and wealthy peasants. They were “identified as the enemy and their power [was] broken” by taking away their land and redistributing them to “poor peasants and landless labourers.”⁵ Christians were also a target because they were not only one of the “strongest opposition to the regime”⁶ (as evidenced by the numerous pastors who were imprisoned during this time period), they were considered to be pro-American since it was American missionaries who initiated the Korean Christian movement. While “Christian churches remained open until the war, and worship was allowed,” their “political activities were ruthlessly stamped out” (for example, in the town of Sinuiju, policed killed 23 Christian protestors).⁷ Other people deemed as disloyal were intellectuals,⁸ capitalists, and those who had relatives in South Korea.

Kim Il Sung’s power also relied upon the steady buildup of his military, which was called the Korean’s People’s Army (KPA). Although its formal existence did not come about until February 8, 1948, it had been slowly and skillfully built up by a close ally named Ch’oe Yong-gon since mid-1946.⁹ To supplement its numbers and fully prepare for a war against the south, the regime issued a draft for all young males. Resistance to the draft was met the same way as those who were considered to be anti-communists.

Thus, to escape communist persecution, police targets and young men who did not want to be subjected to hard labor and service in the KPA, fled to the south. By the start of the Korean War in June 1950, nearly 3.5 million people had fled, which caused enormous problems for the south.¹⁰ Because of the “Soviet blockade,” the trade of northern industrial goods and southern agricultural products had ceased,¹¹ which caused a “sagging South Korean economy” and thus, a shortage of jobs. However, with the overflowing of North Koreans into the south brought the need for more jobs, food, and educational resources for children.¹² Unfortunately, with the onset of the Korean War, the South Korean government could not deal with these problems; the more pressing matter was how to counteract a far superior North Korean army that was quickly taking over nearly the entire southern part of the peninsula.¹³

Fighting all the odds: The second wave of North Korean refugees

On September 15, 1950, the tide turned in favor of the southern and U.N. forces when General Douglas MacArthur’s troops retook Seoul and crossed the 38th parallel, forcing the northern forces to retreat. However, the advantage again see-sawed back to North Korea when the Chinese People’s Volunteers (CPV) entered the war that October and November and helped North Korea’s army push back the opposing troops.¹⁴ On December 3rd, General

⁴ Steven Hugh Lee, *The Korean War* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited), 31.

⁵ Peter Lowe, *The Origins of the Korean War* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc.), 47.

⁶ Bruce Cummings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 230.

⁷ Cummings, 230.

⁸ Kim, 30.

⁹ Cummings, 228.

¹⁰ Kim, 30.

¹¹ Ibid, 29.

¹² Ibid, 31.

¹³ Ibid, 32.

¹⁴ Ibid, 32, 33.

Walker, of the Eighth Army, ordered that Pyongyang be abandoned and evacuated.¹⁵ As the soldiers fled south in their military vehicles, they were followed by thousands of North Korean refugees, the largest number to flee at one time. John W. Riley, Jr., Wilbur Schramm, and Frederick W. Williams, social scientists who were studying “certain human factor problems in connection with the war in Korea,” described this scene as a “spectacle” with the refugees:

...overcrowding every vehicle from the oxcart to the railroad flat car, or simply proceeding on foot – the men with overloaded A-frames and the women with overwhelming head loads and babies on their backs papoose style.¹⁶

While carrying these great bundles and packages, throngs of refugees tried to cross the Taedong River. Some got across on homemade rafts and boats. Others tried to cross “the ruins of the great steel bridge that had been the main crossing point before American bombers destroyed and dropped the south span into the river.” In crossing the twisted and destroyed metal railings of the bridge with all their belongings, the refugees looked to be “performing acrobatic stunts;” tragically, many fell to their deaths. Thousands of other refugees also risked illness by finding the more shallow spots of the river and wading through the icy cold water.¹⁷

This sort of water evacuation operation was happening all over North Korea during the months of December 1950 and January 1951. Unfortunately, because of the sheer number of refugees and the limited amount of ships that the Navy could provide, many were left behind. In the town of Hungnam, for example, the refugees numbered from 91,000 to 98,000. Instead of subjecting themselves to further communist rule, some of the stranded simply drowned themselves in the sea.¹⁸

[...]

¹⁵ Roy E. Appleman. Disaster in Korea: The Chinese Confront MacArthur (Texas: Texas A & M University), 312.

¹⁶ John W. Riley, Jr, Wilbur Schramm, & Frederick W. Williams, 274.

¹⁷ Ibid, 318.

¹⁸ Kim, 33, 34.

“Press Freedom” vs. “Journalistic Freedom:” The Issue of Democratic Consolidation in South Korea’s Struggle for a Free Press Pre and Post-1987

[...]

Before June 1987: The *Kwanje Ullon* (government-controlled media)¹⁹

In the years before 1987, while there were fleeting moments of an emerging democratic press, it was predominantly an era of “development journalism”²⁰ due to the authoritarian, military rule under General Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and General Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-1987), who both believed that press freedom was a privilege reserved for the economically advanced countries of the west²¹ and not a basic right. Thus, they tried to silence and control the press through repressive political measures.

Before General Park’s coup and the establishment of the Third Republic in 1961, Prime Minister Chang Myon (leader of the Second Republic during 1960-61) allowed unprecedented press freedom that was comparable to the “degree of freedom found in Western democracies.”²² The number of newspapers and magazines increased from 600 to 1,600 due to a new registration law that made it extremely easy to have a publication; as long as the editors provided “the name of the newspaper, the location of the publication, and the frequency of publication,” the publication would be considered to be registered with the government and thus, allowed to print and circulate.²³ With Chang’s overthrow by the Park-led military coup, however, this expansion and freedom came to an end. In order to modernize and jumpstart the Korean economy, General Park assumed authoritarian rule and would not stand for anyone challenging his plans, especially by the opposition party media: as Professor Yunshik Chang of the University of British Columbia notes, Park was “determined either to have the entire media on his side or to silence those not favorably inclined to the government.”²⁴

Park’s “silencing” methods included prior censorship of *all* publications (including comics, photographs and foreign news), prohibiting “fabrication and dissemination of groundless rumors,” arresting “bogus” reporters (while this group included corrupt reporters, it also included genuine reporters who the government felt the need to get rid of),²⁵ and the closing of 1,200 publications and news organizations that “allegedly [had] substandard facilities.”²⁶ In the name of national security, he also declared a state of national emergency in December 1971 and instituted Martial Law Degree No. 1 in 1972, all efforts to muzzle the press before carrying on various reforms. For Park, controlling the “free and ‘chaotic’” press (which he believed caused the “social chaos” of the prior republic) was the only way to “meet the demands of the new age and the new situation,” as he said in a speech to Korean newspapermen in April 1966.²⁷

¹⁹ Seung-Mock Yang, “Political Democratization and the News Media,” *Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea*, ed. Larry Diamond and Doh Chull Shin (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press Publication, 2000), 150.

²⁰ Kyu Ho Youm, “Democratization and the Press: The Case of South Korea,” *Communicating Democracy: The Media & Political Transitions*, ed. Patrick Oneil (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 188.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kyo Yo Youm and Michael B. Salwen, “A Free Press in South Korea: Temporary Phenomenon or Permanent Fixture?,” *Asian Survey*, March 1990 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.jstor.org>; Internet.

²³ Youm, “Democratization and the Press”, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁷ Youm & Salwen, “A Free Press,” 314.

After Park was assassinated in October 1979, the press once more went through a short period of liberalization before the civilian government was again taken over by the military in May 1980, this time led by General Chun Doo Hwan. Hwan was even more repressive than Park in his dealings with the press. In July and August of that year, he led a “purification campaign” against the media, closing down 172 periodicals and dismissing 870 print and broadcast journalists deemed incompetent or antigovernment; in November, he shut down seven daily newspapers, three private broadcasting stations, and six news agencies.

In addition, Chun forcibly merged TBC and DBS (Tongyang Broadcasting Company and Dong-A Broadcasting television stations) into the public, state-run KBS-TV (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, or MBC, was also forced to sell 65% of its shares to KBS²⁸), as well as combining six major private news agencies under the umbrella of the Yonhap News Agency.²⁹ These mergings were all done to control the content of media in favor of Chun and his military regime. For example, newscasts aired on KBS and MBC were required to cover Chun’s daily activities for five to ten minutes everyday, essentially becoming “pro-Chun propaganda;”³⁰ the Yonhap Agency, which was bestowed the responsibility to “censor and control the flow of foreign news” in Korea, had the power to select and produce the news *their* way, which looked a lot different from how it was portrayed by world agencies.³¹

Chun also enacted the Basic Press Act of December 1980, which outlined the rights and limitations of the press (including access to public information and the protection of news sources), as well as distinguished between a general newspaper (which covered sociopolitical issues) and a special newspaper (which covered apolitical topics such as sports, religion, and science).³² However, this act was “more restrictive than protective of press freedom” and in fact, “institutionalized the subordination of the press to political power and quickly became the symbol of the press suppression in Korea.”³³ In fact, in his seven-year rule, Chun did not register any general newspapers in his efforts to cut down coverage of any political-related activity or event and thus, discourage opposition. For the newspapers that were allowed to exist, however, “press guidelines” were sent daily by the Department of Public Information Control (DPIC) of the Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) to regulate news coverage of events; one specific example was to label and portray antigovernment protestors as “pro-Communists” in their publications and newscasts.³⁴ Another way he controlled the media was through monetary bribing: if a news organization or a journalist did what the government asked them to do (or not do), “fiscal favor” and “economic benefits” were promised and bestowed.³⁵

As a product and a reflection of the sociopolitical environment, the media during this time period was predominantly an instrument to implement and support the government’s actions; it served those in power, instead of the public, who had the right to know what was really going on. However, while Generals Park and Chun initially employed their power with the assumption that Koreans “will accept a large dose of authoritarian rule—even military suppression,

²⁸ Youm, “Democratization and the Press,” 175.

²⁹ Yang, “Political Democratization,” 153.

³⁰ Youm, “Democratization and the Press,” 175.

³¹ Ibid, “Democratization and the Press,” 177.

³² Ibid, 174.

³³ Yang, “Political Democratization,” 153.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Daeho Kim and Seok-Kyeong Hong, “The IMF, Globalization, and the Changes in the Media Power Structure in South Korea,” *Media and Globalization: Why the State Matters*, ed. Nancy Morris and Silvio Waisbord (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 84.

in times of crisis—as long as it brings them prosperity,”³⁶ this was no longer the case; as the economy improved, the rising middle class began to demand a less repressive government and the guarantee of their basic human rights. Some publications not only did their part in demanding the right of free press, but also covered the pro-democracy demonstrations and protests in order to mobilize the middle class and the opposition to put pressure on the regime. This combination, in turn, helped spur Korea’s transition into democracy.

The role of the media in Korea’s democratic transition

While most media organizations and publications chose not to bring the government’s heavy hand upon them by openly criticizing or publishing something inflammatory, there were those, during both regimes, who were brave enough to do so for the sake of press freedom. During the Park regime, in October 1974, 200 *Dong-A Ilbo* reporters staged the Free Press Movement, an open demonstration to “‘practice’ a free press...unite with strength and resolution to oppose all external interference with newspapers [and] reject...the inspection of Korean central intelligence agents.”³⁷ In dealing with these reporters, the government showed a glaring example of its unchecked power against the press by forcing businesses to stop advertising with the *Dong-A Ilbo*. By January 1975, the publication had lost nearly 98% of its advertisers and was forced to dismiss or suspend 133 reporters who had been actively involved with the movement; only then did advertising jump back to its original levels.³⁸

During Chun’s rule in September 1986, *Mal* magazine, an unregistered bimonthly published by a group of banned Korean journalists, made the public aware of the press guidelines that the DPIC sent to publications daily with the publication of 600 of those guidelines. Because the public felt that the conformist “establishment press” was not doing its job, they turned to the “grassroots press” as an “outlet,” knowing that publications like *Mal* were “anti-establishment” and acting as a “watchdog” for the *people’s* interest. In fact, the contrast between the two press establishments made the people more aware and angry that the establishment press was simply acting “like disinterested onlookers” at the “[cry] for restoration of press freedom” by “opposition parties, civic organizations, students and media critics.”³⁹ The feeling that something was very wrong with this picture spurred several people and civil organizations into action through the “citizens’ press movement.”⁴⁰ Along with demonstrating against the print media, a “television monitoring movement,” contesting the politically biased information presented on KBS and MBC, was also initiated in 1986 through “turn off the television” and “civil surveillance movement for impartial coverage of elections” campaigns.⁴¹

It was not just for press freedom, however. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s under Park, college students began to protest the authoritarian regime and demand democratic reforms and basic civil rights; consequently, they had their campuses shut down annually for at least one month. In the 1980s, these demonstrations happened very frequently and got “better organized and more violent” as “suppression by the Chun regime intensified” and police suppression became

³⁶ Youm, “Democratization and the Press, 171.

³⁷ Ibid, 179.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 180.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 188.

⁴¹ Kim and Hong, “IMF,” 85.

increasingly brutal.⁴² In the midst of these happenings was the grassroots press, who covered the actions taken by both sides and “conveyed some of the students’ demands for political reforms to a broader segment of Korean society;” in other words, to the rising middle class.⁴³ As the economy improved and as people began to feel secure and stable and were becoming educated, the middle class read about these demonstrations and began to sympathize with and support the students, realizing that as a modernizing, maturing country, South Korea needed to return to civilian rule, have democratic elections, and guarantee its people basic civil liberties and rights. The students, in turn, also realized that their “political effectiveness depended on the support of the reform-minded middle class.”⁴⁴

As police brutality culminated in the torture killing of Seoul National University and student activist Park Jong-Chul in January 1987, and the “newspapers [continued to cover] the growing middle-class support of the student demonstrations,” members of the opposition party, the New Korean Democratic Party (NKDP), mobilized and joined the students, press, and the public “in criticism of and opposition to the authoritarian regime” to bring about political change.⁴⁵ This tension between the two sides erupted when “President Chun announced a moratorium on constitutional debates and sought to postpone presidential elections until his term expired in February 1988” and a June 10 convention nominated DJP presidential candidate Roh Tae Woo so that he “could win without a properly contested election.”⁴⁶ However, a compromise was eventually met when Roh officially marked Korea’s transition into democracy with his June 29 Declaration which broke the “cycle of authoritarian rule”⁴⁷ and began to initiate democratic reforms.

The press that had helped bring about this transition was finally promised autonomy on June 1987 with Roh’s declaration that “the government cannot control the media, nor should it attempt to do so.”⁴⁸ With the October constitutional revisions, censorship was prohibited and the freedom of expression was guaranteed. A month later, the Basic Press Act of 1980 was abolished and replaced with the Act Relating to Registration of Periodicals, which laid out the groundwork for registration and made it more difficult for the MOCI to close down publications arbitrarily.

As a consequence of this law, an “explosive expansion of the media industry”⁴⁹ occurred with the influx of new publications wanting to register with the government (whereas during the period of authoritarian rule, few applicants tried to register because they were sure they would get rejected). The significance of this act was illustrated by the registration of *Han-kyoreh Shinmun* in December, which was openly critical of Roh and his government and is currently “touted as the ‘most critical above-ground’ newspaper in Korea.”⁵⁰

During that same month, the Broadcast Act was also passed, which opened up the broadcast media market. If the Periodicals Act expanded print media, it was this act that expanded broadcast media with numerous, specialized FM radio stations going on air by 1990 and SBS (a private TV/radio station) going on air a year later. [...]

⁴² Tun-Jen Cheng and Eun Mee Kim, “Making Democracy: Generalizing the South Korean Case,” *The Politics of Democratization: Generalizing the East Asian Experience*, ed. Edward Freidman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 134.

⁴³ Youm, “Democratization and the Press,” 185.

⁴⁴ Cheng and Kim, “Making Democracy,” 134.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁷ Yang, “Political Democratization,” 155.

⁴⁸ Youm, “Democratization and the Press,” 180.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Kimchi Phenomenon

[...] First, the process of making kimchi illustrates the importance of kinship and social relationships in Korean culture. Since kimchi making is time-consuming and labor-intensive, one or two people cannot do everything by themselves. Instead, it becomes an annual social event where immediate family and neighbors, both men and women, come together for two to three days to go through hundreds of cabbage and make enough kimchi for the year for everyone.

While this practice is not as common with the younger generation living in the big cities and towns, many of their parents and/or grandparents are still living in the rural areas and keeping the tradition alive. Consequently, this becomes another example of maintaining kinship through gift-giving. When parents go visit their children in the cities (or vice versa with the children visiting their relatives in the countryside), the children are usually given a jar of kimchi. As a Korean saying goes, “the taste of kimchi is the taste of your mother’s fingertips.” The children appreciate this gift as not only something homemade and delicious, but as a token of their mother or grandmother’s love and hard work. This gift-giving is not just limited to close family. It is considered to be a great honor if a friend or neighbor gives one a jar of kimchi that is made by a secret family recipe.

Second, the versatility of kimchi extends into its pattern of changing with the times while still maintaining its core elements and identity. Kimchi first started out as a food ate by the king and his court⁵¹; it later spread to all the classes, with each region altering it to suit its tastes, preferences, and available resources. Today, with the influence of Westernization, kimchi has gone through some transformations to accommodate the younger generation’s changing tastes by appearing on pizza, cheeseburgers, sandwiches, fried foods, etc.⁵² In addition, in the age of mass production and new technology, the process of making kimchi has also slightly changed. Instead of storing jars of kimchi underground, factories now have huge coolers and people in the cities have special refrigerators specifically for kimchi in order to emulate the ideal natural setting for fermentation. However, the process of using all natural ingredients is still very much in practice today.

Korean culture too has gone through changes in the wake of globalization and Westernization; however, the old traditions, holidays, rituals, myths, etc. are still an important part of its citizens’ lives. This is why kimchi, as the previous example shows, is such an effective symbol.

Furthermore, kimchi is a symbol of the surviving nature of a country that has faced incredible odds. When Korea’s primary mode of production was agriculture, kimchi was the primary source of food. Its ability to remain preserved for almost a year made it ideal in a country where natural resources are relatively scarce (due to the small size of the country) and the winters are cold, bitter, and long.⁵³

Kimchi also kept Koreans alive during times of foreign occupation. Korea’s tragic history is full of bigger, more powerful nations such as England, China, and Japan coming into Korea and hindering the peace and national identity. When soldiers would come around to snatch away their possessions, Koreans still had their means to survive with their

⁵¹ Martin J. Gannon, *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys Through 28 Nations, Clusters of Nations, and Continents* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2004), 124.

⁵² Life in Asia, Inc, “Kimchi-Korea’s Food,” 1997-2004 [available on-line]; available from: <http://www.lifeinkorea.com/culture/kimchi/kimchi.cfm>.

⁵³ Gannon, *Understanding*, 124.

hidden, buried kimchi that they could eat after the soldiers had left.⁵⁴ Thus historically, Koreans didn't look at kimchi as simply food; it was the means to survive and gave them the hope and sustenance to face another day.

With its adaptability to changing times and vital role in the historical survival of its people, kimchi is a source of great national pride. In light of controversy with Japan, however, the government (under the guise of "national pride") has utilized kimchi to serve economic and political means. In other words, kimchi has become more than culture; it also serves an ideological purpose.

Ever since the introduction of kimchi to foreigners during the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul, kimchi has steadily developed an avid world market. In the year 2000 alone, exports increased sixty-three percent from the previous year, with ninety percent of production going to Japan.⁵⁵ However, problems arose when it became apparent that a copycat kimchi that Japan was producing was getting confused with the authentic Korean kimchi. The copycat tasted nothing like the real thing for instead of using all natural flavors and the process of fermentation, Japanese "kimchi" had sour artificial flavoring, which consisted of citric acid and gum.⁵⁶ The problem was that instead of naming it something different, Japanese producers opted to just stick the "kimchi" label on it.

In response, the Korean government "petitioned the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization's Codex Alimentarius commission to establish an international standard that would require products using the name kimchi to be fermented according to the Korean tradition."⁵⁷ In doing this, the government was manipulating this "affront" to Korea's national heritage in order to push their own agenda. First, it was an issue over profit and international trade. Japanese exports of their own copycat kimchi had actually started to exceed Korea's and because the process was shorter, Japanese kimchi was also less expensive. By establishing an international standard, the government hoped to take over the lucrative Japanese kimchi market.

Second, it was also a political issue. After a history filled with foreign invaders, the long-standing reputation of being a "hermit nation," and the ominous presence of American soldiers at the 38th parallel, Korea wanted to finally establish its own identity in the international community. The growing popularity of kimchi was putting Korea on the map, so having its image tied up with Japan was not an ideal situation. Thus, the government used the resentment that many Korean people still had towards the Japanese and their occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945 to gain sympathy for Korea and portray Japan as a type of "invader" once more. Their efforts paid off later in 2000 when the Commission formally established the Korean way of making kimchi as the international standard. [...]

⁵⁴ Gannon, 127.

⁵⁵ Calvin Sims, "Cabbage is Cabbage? Not to Kimchi Lovers; Koreans Take Issue with Rendition Of Their National Dish Made in Japan," *New York Times*, 5 February 2000, C1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

“Choson Punk”: East Meets West

Known as the Hermit Kingdom (because of its isolationist ways) and for its traditional, conservative culture, the 1990s in Korea were marked by the liberalization of restrictions on rock music, nightclubs, and foreign travel, as well as the rise of the Internet and Napster. For the first time, Korean youth were exposed to foreign music. As Tim Tangherlini, a UCLA folklorist professor states, “They got all of punk rock history at once — the Sex Pistols, the Ramones and Nirvana. It was like being in London or New York in 1978 and Seattle in the mid-80s, all at the same time.”



With these influences, Korean punk bands like Crying Nut and 18Cruk played in a smattering of clubs in Seoul's fashionable Hongdae district to a small, but devoted following of high school and university students. “Drug” was not only one of the most popular clubs, it also became an independent music label for punk bands to put out compilation albums on.



As a musical form, Korean punk is similar to Great Britain's with its one or two guitars, bass, and drums; a 4/4 beat; and preference for songs with minimal chord changes. However, Korean bands have taken something foreign and Western, and indigenized it to redefine their own position in Korean society. In looking at the lyrics, one can get a sense of the difference: Unlike the Sex Pistols' bitter denunciation of England, Korean punk actually shows pride in being Korean. What was going on in society probably played a major part in this, as England was going through economic

despair, while Korea was experiencing a growing economy and the rise of democracy. As Kim Ju-Han, a Korean sociologist states, unlike their working-class counterparts in the West, “The kids that are talking about rebellion, how should I say, they're spoiled.”

Korean punk was instead about freedom from everyday life, instead of overturning society at any deeper level. Students went to punk clubs like “Drug” to relieve especially their *kyoyukjokin pulman* (교육적인 불만) which translates into “educational discontent” by moshing, pogoing, and listening to loud music. What is this educational discontent? In Korea, the pressure to get into college is enormous. In the U.S., even if someone didn't do so well on the SAT's or get good grades in high school, they can still get a college education and a good job. In Korea, one's future is determined by an all-day college entrance exam that determines where one can go to college, which then determines one's career. If one doesn't pass, they have to study another year to take it again. So Korean parents are a bit notorious for pressuring their children to do well.

“Dad said to me, you've got to do something with your life, / But if you think about it, I can't do anything / In this tiny room of mine

Mom, Mom said to me, you've got to marry into a good family, / I like the place where my friends are better / The rich boy I met yesterday doesn't suit me

I want, I want to leave this place, I've got to get away / I want to throw away this me that isn't me / Now I want to leave, now I've got to get away”

- Crying Nut's 'Kalmaegi'

“아빠는 내게 말했지 / 난 무언갈 이루어야 해 /
이제와 생각해보니 / 난 할 수 있는게 하나도
없는데 / 이 좁은 나의 방에서

엄마는, 엄마는 내게 말했지 / 난 좋은 데 시집가야해
/ 난 내 친구들이 더 좋은데 / 어제 만난 부잣집
남자 / 내게는 안 어울리는 걸

난 원해 / 난 여길 떠나고 싶어 / 난 여길 떠나가야해
/ 내가 아닌 날 버리고 / 이제는 떠나고 싶어 / 난
여길 떠나가야 해”

- Crying Nut의 '갈매기'

In reading these lyrics from Crying Nut's “Seagull,” one can see how Korean punk bands focused on “the everyday, the personal, and the routine” instead of being political. This particular song is especially interesting because the first verse is sung from a guy's perspective, the second is from a girl's perspective, and the chorus represents emotions common to both, bringing the youth of both sexes together in solidarity against parental and societal expectations. As Stephen Epstein, a professor at the Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand states, “Resistance and rebellion take the form not of confronting society head on, but simply refusing to play by its rules and breaking away.”

Another characteristic of Korean punk is that while it shows a sense of Korean nationalism, there is also the sense of being a part of an international punk community. While amongst the adults there existed a sort of anti-Western, anti-American sentiment, Korean punks see themselves as both Koreans and embracing Westernization. And they do this in post-modernist ways according to the research from Stephen Epstein's article “Nationalism and Globalization in Korean Underground Music: Our Nation, Volume One.”



The first punk CD to appear in Korea was “Our Nation, Volume 1.” The title is in English and not in Korean. In Korean culture, nationalistic rhetoric is everywhere – *uri nala, uri mal, uri minjok* (우리 나라, 우리 말, 우리 민족) – which translates to our nation, our language, our race. Everything is modified by the “our” possessive. So the title, being in English, can be seen as ironic – taking nationalistic rhetoric and putting it into a foreign tongue. By doing this, punks are showing how their parents and society have not created a *uri nala*, so these youth had to create one for themselves by turning to western punk music.

Choson punk is the Korean version of the punk genre. South Korea usually calls itself *Hanguk*, but Choson goes back to the Choson dynasty which is when the two Koreas were united and how North Korea sometimes calls itself, making a political statement to the future of the two Koreas. The cover is of Admiral Yi Sun-Sin, posed like the famous statue in the very heart of downtown Seoul. Instead of wielding a sword, however, he’s holding an electric guitar. Again, Korean punk is subverting Korean nationalism while still being a part of it since in history, Yi Sun-Sin was revered as protecting Korea from Japanese invasions in the late 16th century. Now, he’s a symbol of challenging authority and welcoming “external influence and invasion, heralding the proud appropriation of a Western genre.”

While definitely a Western genre, bands like Crying Nut have made it “Korean-ized” by incorporating traditional Korean instruments and rhythms, including from their 2001 “Love Songs from the Sewer” CD which incorporated traditional percussion instruments of Korean farmer bands. They’ve also incorporated Celtic music, jazz, and heavy metal. Han Kyong-rok, the bassist for Crying Nut, would often wear T-shirts that display on the front a colorized photo of a local band like No Brain together with its name scripted in English. In the back, would be Choson punk (with choson being in Korean and punk being in English) underneath the red letter ‘A’ embedded in a circle (the symbol for anarchy), which again showed the mixing of Korean nationalism and globalization.

Reference:

Stephen Epstein, “Nationalism and Globalization in Korean Underground Music: Our Nation, Volume One,” *Asian Nationalisms in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Roy Starrs. (Richmond, Curzon Press, 2001), 374-387.