
Anarchy in the UK, Solidarity in the ROK

Punk Rock Comes to Korea

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*I am an antichrist
And I am an anarchist
Don't know what I want but I know how to get it
I wanna destroy passers-by...*
— “Anarchy in the UK,” The Sex Pistols

*Dad said to me, you've got to do
something with your life,
But if I 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*
— “Kalmaegi” (Seagull), Crying Nut

Introduction

I cull the first passage above from what is arguably the world's most famous punk rock song, “Anarchy in the UK” by The Sex Pistols. In 1977 their album, “Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols,” heralded the arrival of punk, a confrontational musical and social movement whose iconoclastic followers rebelled against the institutions of British society. That album also featured the venomous “God Save the

Queen,” a bitter attack on royalty and the government in which the snarled lyric “no future for you, no future for me” captured for many the economic despair of a generation. Espousing anarchy and nihilism to an aggressive, stripped-down rock beat, punk and its largely working-class practitioners not only changed the face of popular music but also generated a media-fed moral panic in Great Britain. Punk's musical form, its violent philosophy, and, not least, its stylistic aesthetic shocked and outraged the nation's public.

In the last few years a punk scene has emerged in South Korea (henceforth Korea) as well, but to little fanfare. A smattering of clubs clustered for the most part in Seoul's fashionable Hongik district feature punk bands who play to a small but devoted following. Unlike England in the late 1970s, Korea's economic prospects had (until the collapse of the *won* in late 1997) grown progressively brighter through the 1990s. Moreover, democracy has taken an ever firmer foothold in the nation. The second passage above presents the lyrics to “Kalmaegi” (Seagull), a song that appears on the first full-length CD by Crying Nut, Korea's most successful punk band to date. And although the song possesses an anthemic status within its own scene approaching that of “Anarchy in the UK” in England, the lyrics take a personal turn. Rather than calling for public chaos, they speak of intergenerational conflict, a desire for escape, and existential angst. Why did punk arrive in Korea in the mid-1990s and what meaning does it hold for its adherents?

Drug trip

The majority of my fieldwork took place at a club near Hongik University known as Drug, the most well known underground music venue that also most regularly features punk bands.

Although the club's name deliberately provokes, energy drinks and tobacco seem the most potent mind-altering substances ingested. Yi Sokmun, the 39-year-old owner of Drug, known to bands and club goers simply as *ajuhshi* (uncle), claims that he chose the name not to imply drug use in the club's clientele, but rather to suggest the casting off of inhibitions and the free-spirited lifestyle that drugs represent.

The minimalistic, unkempt surroundings of the club heighten one's sense of being at a truly underground venue, literally and figuratively. The composition of the audience draws my attention, as it differs from night to night: Saturday is frequently the most crowded, while Thursday witnesses a high proportion of school uniforms among those in attendance. On the night I arrived, the audience was primarily comprised of youth in their teens, some perhaps slightly older, others perhaps only twelve-years-old. A few take seats directly in front of the stage, while the rest mill about against the walls of the room, mostly in same-sex groups. The male to female ratio appears roughly equal, although usually more females are in attendance.

The first band soon takes the stage. By the time they are thirty seconds into their set, spectators are jumping up and down and singing along with the tune. Infectious enthusiasm suffuses the room, which crackles with undeniable energy; the atmosphere is friendly, the audience members seemingly unified in their love for the music. The music evokes a noticeably physical response. At times audience members pump their right fists as they chant along with particularly compelling or anthemic choruses, in a gesture identical to that found in Korean student or labor

demonstrations, but absent at Western punk shows. The hand motion often arises spontaneously among the audience, or in response to a cue from a band member, and heightens solidarity among the audience through reference to shared tropes in Korean visual discourse that imply resistance to authority.

The "mosh pit," the area spontaneously generated by slam dancers, provides an opportunity for amicable, playful aggression. Slam dancing, in fact, by virtue of bonding members in an act perhaps incomprehensible to outsiders, encourages identification and cohesion among those who participate. The function of dancing in punk music differs from that of other genres in that it encourages physical release via a full-body response to the music and generates bonds of solidarity among its participants. Those who do not abide by the implicit rules of slam dancing that prescribe limits to its aggressiveness are ostracized.

When filled to capacity, Drug accommodates roughly two to three hundred people. All that separates the band and audience is a narrow metal counter on which fans occasionally leap, dance briefly and exhibitionistically. Punk, in common with other progressive artistic movements, such as the work of Berthold Brecht, the Surrealists or Andy Kaufman, breaks down barriers between audience and artist. An important aspect of punk music in Korea, to which I shall return, is that despite drawing upon international forms for meaning and authenticity, it simultaneously situates itself within indigenous paradigms of populist culture.

The music ends at 10 pm to allow fans from far-flung satellite areas to return home before the subway system shuts down for the night. I file out of the club, like many others, sweaty and exhilarated.

The Class of '97

By most informants' accounts, punk rock began in Korea in 1994. The more interesting ques-

tions, of course, revolve not around the specifics of who first played punk rock in Korea, but rather why punk began in Korea at the moment it did. What social, economic, political and cultural factors caused the emergence of punk rock in Korea almost twenty years after it first appeared in England? Many features characteristic of the emergence of punk in Britain in the 1970's do not fit Korea. The nation in 1994–1996 did not seem to be in economic decline – quite to the contrary. Indeed, in this case prosperity, rather than economic depression, and the rise of punk seem to have gone hand in hand.

One must, then, adduce several factors for the rise of punk in the mid-1990s: first, the dramatic increase in travel abroad for Koreans meant greater exposure for many to Western popular culture(s). Affluent youth who had traveled or studied abroad in the West acted as a conduit for the introduction of punk sounds into the country. Although the lifestyle of Apkujong-dong's so-called *orenjijok* (lit. "orange tribe"), a notorious youth subculture known for its conspicuous consumption, is anathema to the punk ethos, their appearance in the years immediately prior is not accidental. The emergence of youth subcultures and growing affluence (albeit largely in increased working-class spending power) had coincided in Britain in the '50s and '60s as well (Hall et al. 1976; Frith 1978).

Support for the movement's middle-class origin and audience also comes through in the Internet's role in propagating punk within Korea. A chat room and set of bulletin boards called "Our Nation *Moimbang*" offers a virtual space in which punks may gather, and acts as the single most important source of information on the punk scene. The medium here is, in itself, part of the message in two ways. On one hand, the Internet provides an inherently democratic form that allows youth all over Korea to participate as equals in a virtual punk community via computer, and thus becomes invaluable for creating a self-generated history of Korean punk

for its members that draws upon the input of multiple voices. On the other hand, to talk of true democratization may mislead. Access to the Internet is *a priori* class-restricted. Computers are relatively expensive pieces of equipment that presuppose a certain level of education, and, in the post-IMF era, this means of communication remains largely out of reach of a Korean underclass.

Furthermore, the increase in purchasing power in Korea meant not only an increase in demand for imported releases and a growing availability of Western rock music in its various subgenres, but also stimulated the local production of similar forms on independent labels. Cho Younghong, who maintains the fullest English language web site on Korean popular music, writes that the rise of independent and underground music and other arts in Korea may be inevitable, for with economic prosperity people demand more options to satisfy individual tastes. Concomitant with greater Korean exposure to the West and Western music and increasing diversity of taste was the historical accident that produced the first large-scale successes of alternative and punk music in United States in the early '90s with such bands as Nirvana. As this music penetrated ever more deeply into mainstream American culture, punk's thematic center evolved from expressing English urban working-class frustration to American suburban alienation, boredom and depression and offered Korean punk a growing variety of generic themes to draw upon.

Finally, we should also recall that, beginning in 1993, a democratically elected civilian leader not drawn from the military governed the Republic of Korea for the first time in decades. The relaxation of authoritarian control has contributed to the growth of punk and the emergence of underground rock clubs in at least one significant way: for many years military regimes had banned live music in bars as a potential source of subversion and bands simply would have had no venues in which to play.

However, official rigidity and aversion to potentially subversive behavior that is stylistically coded remain – in July of 1997 *Chosŏn ilbo* reported that the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) had decided to bar from their shows artists whose appearance might detrimentally influence youthful morality.

The First of the Mohicans

Ironically, the continuing narrowness of Korean mainstream music and the prescribed behavior associated with it may also unwittingly be playing a major role in fostering a desire for alternatives. KBS' reactionary announcement encourages a defiant backlash among those who favor banned items as apparel and raises the question of the relationship between style and specifically Korean subcultures. The ban reveals both the extent to which new stylistic markers associated with youth subcultures have been entering Korea in recent years and the level of discomfort they cause.

Although the markers exploited by self-identified punks in Korea may appear less obviously outrageous to the eyes of outside observers than those of their American or British brethren, such markers derive force not from aesthetic "absolutes" but from differentiation: even seemingly mild fashion statements may be perceived as more confrontational in Korea, because of narrowly circumscribed strictures of acceptable dress and social emphasis on conformity.

By the same token, however, certain potential stylistic punk markers have, perhaps surprisingly, become far more mainstream in Korea than one might have expected in the last few years: dyed hair, in particular, no longer possesses the shock value it held a decade ago.

Even at Drug, audience members are indistinguishable from other conventionally attired Korean teenagers seen on the streets. Many arrive at the

club in school uniforms, toting book bags, with hair trimmed neatly and glasses perched on their noses.

The Kids Are Alright

How, then, do we analyze sociologically this punk offshoot whose fans often look like model students and whose guitarists may attend the nation's top universities? Punk offers Korean youth a model ready to hand for the expression of local resistance within an internationally recognizable form. And although "a second generation's faithfulness to traditional rebellious stereotypes can come across as reactionary in its own way" (Hebdige 1979:83), the transition to a completely different context makes Korean youths who appropriate punk styles very much pioneers within their own country.

To speak of punk as a site of resistance or rebellion begs an obvious question: rebellion against what? One of the most frequent topics of songs centers on difficulties with parents; the subject scarcely arises in British punk. In Korea expressions of dissatisfaction with the educational system and social constraints take precedence over explicit political statement. Korean adherents of punk thus want temporary release from their daily lives; few call for overturning society at any deep level. Although Drug bands cover "Anarchy in the UK" frequently enough, the Korean punk movement does not espouse lawlessness as such. Personal narratives and song lyrics reveal that Korean punks, rather than engaging in political activities or even frequent confrontational displays of stylistic resistance, focus instead on the everyday, the personal, and the routine (cf Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995:204).

A striking example of Korean punk's focus on the everyday and the personal occurs in the song *Kalmaegi* (Seagull), the lyrics of which form the second epigraph for this paper. This song usually elicits an impassioned response from the crowd at Drug, a

response deriving both from its lyrics and its compelling musical form. One of the main reasons for such response is the song's inclusive nature: the first verse is sung from a male point of view, the second from a female's, and the chorus represents emotions common to both.

Kalmaegi's opening words, "Dad said to me," immediately evoke a youth's confrontation with paternal authority: although the father urges his son on to achievement, the son begs off, incapacitated by ennui. The second verse exhibits parallel structure: beginning "Mom said to me," the next lines go on to envision a young woman's conflict with her same-sex parent. The mother spurs her daughter into marriage in a good family despite the daughter's preference for her friends' company. The song thus brings youth of both sexes together in an act of solidarity against normative parental and societal expectations. In the chorus these concretely expressed vignettes yield to a vaguer desire to be free from the agony of living life falsely – "I want to throw away this me that isn't me." Yet the song derives its full power not from the lyrics but from what occurs musically here. After the first chorus, the tempo doubles, distorted guitar takes over, and the song rockets into overdrive. Audience members often form a mosh pit at this point and slam dance frantically as the refrain, with its desperate plea for escape, repeats until the end of the song.

In many Korean punk songs, yearning for freedom, rather than bleak economic prospects, motivate desire for escape. Resistance and rebellion take the form not of confronting society head on, but simply refusing to play by its rules and breaking away.

The lyrics of the band 18Cruk offer an interesting counterpoint to those of Crying Nut, as their worldview and demeanor has a gruffer, more confrontational edge, starting in a band name that puns on an obscenity in Korean. 18Cruk's most pointed expressions of anger challenge society rather than government and criticize especially Korean fascina-

tion with education, as exemplified in their *Nae mamdaero* (The Way I Want):

*Don't insult me if I blow my nose in front of you (oi!)
If it's stuffed, you've got to blow it (oi!)
So what if I don't study very well (oi!)
We're all people anyway*

*I'll live the way I want
Why don't you mind your own business
I'll live the way I want
No one's going to get in my way*

*Don't get down when people give you crap (oi!)
The guy who's dissing you has nothing to be proud of (oi!)
They shouldn't go thinking they're so clever (oi!)
Someday they'll be in big trouble*

Here too we find defiant assertions of equality, combined with an attack on constraining Korean customs that value a misplaced etiquette over personal comfort (blowing one's nose in public is considered a major breach of manners). And here too the song's effect also depends on how it is sung: the song clips along at a jauntily angry pace and the raucous cry "Oi!" at the end of each verse line draws upon a familiar cry from British punk that evokes rebellion.

18Cruk's declaration of autonomy, however, must not be taken as an authoritative statement of "punk values." A poster on the Internet bulletin boards (bbs) also makes a revealing distinction between the desire for freedom at Drug and the need to respect the rights of others:

Our nation (uri nara) is a place where the freedom of the individual is recognized. But for one person to enjoy freedom and to harm another, saying "I'm following my freedom, this is a free country, I'll do what I want" is self-indulgence... It's the same at Drug. No matter how free it is, you can't exceed all boundaries.

The neo-Neo-Confucian (if I may coin the phrase) sense of social responsibility expressed here, couched in terms that invoke a sense of nationalism, is a far cry from 18Cruk's assertion of the right to self-expression. "I'll live the way I want... to a point."

Where Korean punk subculture does draw baffle lines most adamantly is in cultural/musical terms, and its followers frequently express an oppositional relationship between itself and mainstream popular culture. Korean punk and other forms of underground music belong in this sense to an aesthetic counterculture. Paenjin Kong, a fanzine that has arisen to document not just punk but underground music generally in Korea, often runs articles whose anonymous authors distinguish forcefully the stultifying *oba* (overground, i.e., mainstream) culture and that of the dynamic, inventive *ondo* (underground). Punk offers an enticing mixture of individual escape and righteous group solidarity for its followers.

Nonetheless, the Korean scene is rapidly undergoing change. Because one of punk's most heartfelt credos is belief in its opposition to mainstream culture, whenever it becomes more popular in a given milieu, its proponents undergo an identity crisis. Crying Nut's CD has now sold over 25,000 copies and, even more disturbingly for those who champion punk's oppositional stance, their signature song *Mal Tallija* has found its way into an ice cream commercial. As Crying Nut gains more exposure, they inevitably attract more fans to Drug, some of whom have little knowledge of punk music as such, a fact disturbing to some fans within the scene. The most bitterly contested arguments on the *Our Nation* bbs confront issues of authenticity and whether those at Drug have the true "punk spirit." Such attitudes, however, call forth a spirited defense on the part of Yi Sok-mun: "Drug is a space for tearing down the wall between the underground and the mainstream." Some voices within punk music, then,

call not for strict opposition between the underground and the mainstream, but rapprochement.

Our Nation, Volume 1

As alluded to above, many songs in the Korean punk movement celebrate peer solidarity. Drug and the punk scene offer a youthful surrogate family, a reconstituted community of like-minded individuals who come together in opposition to mainstream culture. The terms of address used in the scene replicate kinship, but more interesting is the greater inclusivity of the Korean scene than similar movements in the West. Although CDs generally offer thanks and acknowledgements in the West as well, pride of place in Korean releases is reserved, strikingly, for expressions of thanks (in either English or Korean) to the "*turok shik'ku*" or the "Drug Family". For many, especially band members, the primary locus of identity and self-definition shifts from school or family to the subculture itself. Performance merges spontaneity and ritualized aspects, which inevitably conform to certain expectations – energetic music, noisy guitars, bodies in motion.

What initially drew my attention to Korean punk, and perhaps most fascinates one familiar with the genre in other contexts, is its own consciousness of and desire to proclaim a specifically Korean identity. The first punk CD to appear in Korea possessed an English title: *Our Nation, Vol. 1*. My initial reaction was that this title was surely ironic, punk being punk. I now believe that when Korean punk invokes the term "Our Nation" – and chooses to do so in English rather than using the Korean *Uri nara* – it becomes neither simply a patriotic expression, nor an ironic comment on Korean nationalism. Rather, punks appropriate Korean discourse – and in this sense one may indeed regard it as a nationalistic movement – in

order to re-create the Korean nation, to create a new place for Korean youth to stand, one in which they can be proud and feel comfortable.

Han Kyong-rok, the bass player of Crying Nut, frequently wears T-shirts that display on the front a colorized photo of a local band such as No Brain, together with its name (scripted in English). Lettering on the back reads “*Chosŏn punk*” (*Han’gŭl*, then the Roman alphabet) underneath the symbol for anarchy, the red letter “A” embedded in a circle. Such T-shirts, visual icons of hybridization and amalgamation, virtually demand reading statements of values about the intersection of globalization and nationalism in Korea. The melange of scripts asserts a mixed identity, as “*Chosŏn punk*” cuts in two directions: declaration of alliance with a foreign genre, but also intense pride in being Korean. Moreover, the choice of *Chosŏn* to represent “Korea” is itself significant. Eschewing the use of *Hangŭk*, the regularly employed term for Korea in South Korean discourse, their choice of *Chosŏn* to represent the nation, as does, e.g., the student protest movement, looks back to the *Chosŏn* kingdom and forward to a reunified Korea (*Chosŏn*, it should be noted, is still employed by North Korea) and makes a simultaneously archaizing and progressive political statement. The symbol for anarchy nods in the direction of rebellion, but stands as both complement and contrast to this assertion of nationalist but non-hegemonic sentiment.

More than ever Korean youth are positioned between two worlds and feel the twin tugs of globalization and nationalism. Although the Korean punk musicians I interviewed expressed anxiety about their ability to make a truly indigenous musical and performance style, they agreed unanimously that Korean punk had its own flavor and believed they were engaged in a collective project to create a punk rock of their own. They felt that in assimilating new musical forms they

were participating in an international youth culture, but remaining uniquely Korean at the same time.

Even if there is a global culture, one cannot assert that it retains the same meaning in different localities. Those who think that the world is becoming standardized and unified via Westernization overrate homogeneity and overlook indigenization and the culturally mixed character of many forms. Globalization is instead producing hybridization. Although much in the strictly musical form of punk is shared between Great Britain and Korea, the meaning and practice of the genre differs significantly in each context.

What is the ultimate significance of Korean punk rock? Korean punk permits its adherents to assert new modes of being Korean, and offers a redefinition of Korean identities – to be proudly Korean, one need not follow the hegemonic directives of mainstream popular culture. Too often Korea is portrayed – and portrays itself, encouraged by a government that finds it in its own interest to promote an ideology of unity – as culturally monolithic, and indeed, Korea remains among the most ethnically homogenous nations in the world. Punk testifies, though, to increasing social and cultural diversity in Korea. In the end, too, punk reveals that Korean youth have maintained agency and autonomy in the face of the normalizing pressures of school, home and the state, on the one hand, and the encroaching influence of international culture, on the other. To take aboard a form that emanates originally from the West need not be evidence of post-colonial bewitchment or domination. In closing, we should listen closely to what 18Cruk have to say in their song *Taehanmin’guk Punk Kid* (Republic of Korea Punk Kid):

*Okay, we look like we’re good-for-nothings
Walking down the street
Everybody gives us dirty looks
And tries to push us away*

*There's one thing I've got
All I've got is an old guitar
We don't have anything but
We're Republic of Korea punk kids who refuse to
grovel
ROK punk kids, ROK punk kids
We've got no regrets, we've got no regrets
I don't have any regrets in life
We've got no regrets, we've got no regrets
I don't have any regrets about the road I'm taking.*

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