

## What's in a Hit?: South Korean Government's War on Marijuana, Decadence, and Foreign Musical Influences<sup>1</sup>

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“They asked me whom I smoked with, ... and tied me down and stuck me in water. I figured they might kill me, so I just said ‘yes,’ to all the names they listed.”<sup>2</sup> These are words from Shin Joong-hyun, who is now a household name in the history of Korean rock and roll, recalling his encounter with South Korean law enforcement in an unofficial interrogation room on December 4, 1975. According to the Korean daily newspaper *Chosun Ilbo*, the state (then under the rule of a military authoritarian regime) interrogated a total of 54 entertainers between 26 November 1975 and 20 January of the following year, and prosecuted 44 of them.<sup>3</sup> 12 networks of dealers and over a hundred smokers followed the same fate, some jailed, and others forced into mental institutions. There is a 1970 law governing habit-forming substances that regulates the use of marijuana, but the state had seldom enforced it until the marijuana scandal broke out. Musicians and lay smokers alike would casually smoke on the sidewalks without much guilt or stigma attached to it, as one would a glass of soju, says Park Kwangsoo of the rock group Shin Joong-hyun and The Men. (South Korea has no open container laws.) The headline in the December 3, 1975 issue of the *Dong-A Ilbo* reading “First *Haepi Sŭmōukŭ* Smoker to be

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the 2017 Pop Conference at the Museum of Popular Culture, Seattle, Washington, 21 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Shin Joong-hyun, personal interview, published in *Hankyoreh*, 30 November 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *The Chosun Ilbo*, 30 January 1976, quoted in Kim Somin, “*Taemacho Padong 30-nyŏn: Chŏngnyŏnmunhwa ‘Happy Smoke’eh Teda*,” [30 years since the marijuana scandal: How the “happy smoke” burnt the youth culture,] *Hankyoreh*, 30 November 2005.

Arrested,” marks the beginning of a change in policy, which would culminate in the passage of the Marijuana Regulation Act in April of the following year.<sup>4</sup>

It took the state 5 years after the law’s passage to begin cracking down on marijuana smokers, and the timing makes one suspect that the law enforcement efforts had an ulterior motive. In other words, it makes sense to assume that the government viewed marijuana smoking as a shorthand for the blossoming, decadent youth culture as a potentially vocal dissenting voice to the regime, and used marijuana as a device to regulate the culture and the ideology which it did not have any legal means to curb. In this short paper, I invite us to take a look at the regime’s war on counterculture, as well as its strategy in constructing a rhetoric that links the ideology it deemed undesirable to practices or lifestyles that it *could* regulate. The regime promoted an alternative to the “bad” culture that would propagate obedient citizenship, and these efforts have left lasting effects on Korean society today. This paper’s chronological scope extends from 1972, when President Park Chung-hee declared martial law and suspended normal functions of the democratic government, to 1987, when Park’s successor in military rule conceded to a series of citizens’ movements and civilian rule resumed.

President Park Chung-hee stated in his beginning-of-year address in 1976, “In such a high-stake time as this when our struggle against communists has our lives on the line, the marijuana use by our young people is a national threat.”<sup>5</sup> Marijuana appears in this speech as a hindrance to the administration’s authoritarian, nationalist, anti-communist trope to bring

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<sup>4</sup> *Dong-A Ilbo*, 3 December 1975, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Park Taekyun, “*Kwangbok 70-chunyŏn Tŭkpyŏl Kihwoek: Yŏnyein Taemacho Sakŏn*,” [Reviewing the 70 years since the [Korean] liberation: The celebrity marijuana scandal,] *The Kyunghyang Weekly*, 26 August 2015.

[http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?www&artid=201508262317215&code=210100](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?www&artid=201508262317215&code=210100).

together its people. The external threat of the Cold War (and, in particular, the inter-Korean conflict) made for a compelling case for state control of behavior, social conventions, and ideas. The burgeoning liberal youth culture, heavily influenced by the postwar influx of Western cultures (especially the American counterculture of the 1960s and 70s), was antithetical to such an end and had to be stopped. The rise of the South Korean “group sound,” which is a name for the earliest Korean bands, entailed the birth of an urban critical mass of listeners and co-perpetuators of anti-war, anti-establishment messages as well as foreign sounds and musical conventions, in spaces with little to no state control or oversight.<sup>6</sup> State censors cited various, often creative reasons for banning songs in a war on what it deemed a decadent culture, the object of which included foreign pop songs and songs released before the ban took effect.

*Bad songs: War on the youth culture*

The 1985 song “*Kŭgŏnmani nae sesang*” (That is my world) by Deulgukhwa is one that state censors banned on the basis of poor singing technique. Vocalist Jeon Inkwon indeed departs quite a bit from practices that many vocal coaches would deem undesirable in numerous traditions including Western art music. He refrains from using much vibrato, and often sacrifices clear communication of lyrics and evenness in volume in favor of forceful vocal exertion in the climax of the song, which helps him match the dramatic contour of the song as a whole. He is also generous with downward portamento at the end of phrases and between notes, especially in the upper vocal register. The postcolonial South Korean idea of proper music, or that which belongs to the high culture, was heavily shaped by American and other Western cultural

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<sup>6</sup> Kim Pilho, “Korean Rock’s Journey from Group Sound to Indie Rock,” in *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, edited by Shin Hyunjoon and Lee Seung-Ah (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 71–82.

traditions as music critic and historian Lee Youngmi summarizes in her book *History of Korean Popular Songs*, and the regime that initiated the ban seems to have operated on a value system in the same current.

Meanwhile, state censorship also served to silent dissenting voices. When Park Chung-hee invited Shin Joong-hyun, guitarist and songwriter who led a group named Shin Joong-hyun *kwa Yŏpjŏndŭl* (“... and the Copper Coins”), to write a propaganda song dedicated to Park, particularly praising the grandeur of the presidential palace, Shin refused. Shin instead produced something remarkably different: “*Arŭmdaun Kangsan*” (Beautiful streams and mountains), released in 1972. Although the song’s title may suggest that it subscribes to the nationalistic agenda by praising the nation, it achieved the opposite effect by directing the praise away from Park and his human achievement and toward the Korean land and the spirit of its people.<sup>7</sup> What made this song a perceived threat to the regime, however, was less its thematic content and more the circumstances of its conception. This song, defiant from its inception, remained banned throughout the Park regime’s martial law rule that lasted from 1972 to Park’s assassination in 1979, along with many others by Shin (regardless of their political implications).

The Park regime’s objective in fabricating such a celebrity marijuana scandal was to justify paralyzing dissenting voices, constrain foreign cultural influences on the increasingly “decadent” domestic culture, and solidify its political control over the people. Today’s Korean culture shows little ideological remnant of the artificial *myŏngrang* (positive, bright) culture that was designed to replace the decadent youth culture, with the exception of campy, ironic recreations of past cultural artifacts’ outward aesthetic. However, the underlying compulsion

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for lyrics.

toward good behavior and obedient citizenship, which manifested itself in the form of the marijuana scandal and other government efforts to regulate citizens' behavior, seems to linger.

*Good songs: Cultural gentrification and repressive positivity*

Among efforts to channel the ongoing urge to counter cultural decadence into musical phenomena, *kōnjōn kayo*, or wholesome songs, stand out. Those are songs that “centered on ethics, health, and nationalism towards the country,” part of the militarized ruling structure’s top-down model for communication and indoctrination.<sup>8</sup> The Cheon Doohwan military regime, which followed the Park administration after the latter’s assassination in 1979, encouraged the dissemination of these songs in order to “efficiently carry out the restoration of the society,” effectively codifying cultural fascism in an “unabashed celebration of the Republic of Korea.”<sup>9</sup> Along with censorship to exclude “bad” songs, the state mandated every approved popular music album to include at least one such “good” song, as musical propaganda. (a mandate which, according to John Lie’s ingenious analogy, amounted to “listening to a Bob Dylan record and finding a Pat Boone song at the end.”<sup>10</sup>) Lyrical themes encouraging submissive, obedient youth and citizenship pervade popular songs from this period, as do nonaggressive musical textures and sonorities. Cheerful lyrics and musical positivism masked the shadows of rapid modernization and industrialization, as well as the corruption and iron-fist rule of the very administration that fostered the growth of the musical genre.

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<sup>8</sup> Shin Hyunjoon and Lee Seung-Ah, Introduction to *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> John Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 2014), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

One widely circulated example, “*Ah! Taehanminguk*” (Ah! The Republic of Korea), first appeared as recorded by Cheong Sura and Chang Jaehyeon in the 1983 state-commissioned compilation album with the same title, consisting entirely of wholesome songs. The chord progressions used in the song consist of simple triads, and fails to provide any substantial harmonic complication, instability, or drama. In other words, the song’s timbral and harmonic language stays refined and clean, perhaps too clean—and hardly introduces any hint of tension.

Its lyrical content, too, remains consistent with its praises of serenity, freedom, and promised-land-ness of the nation, to the point of monotony. The land of Korea that this song depicts is all bright and cheerful, which of course is far from the truth even if one were to acknowledge the mostly material progress its people achieved during the decades following the Korean War. The material richness of the era came with an increasing wealth gap, urban development devoid of organization or planning, neglect for workers’ and women’s rights, authoritarian abuse of the young democratic structure, bureaucracy, political corruption, the birth of the rural poor, dependence on foreign powers (and diplomatic exploitation by them), and the resulting heightening of tension between the two Koreas. The latter of these even resulted in the Soviet Union shooting down Korean Air Lines flight 007, the North Korean attempt to assassinate South Korean president Cheon Doohwan in Burma, and the discovery of a series of underground tunnels near the North Korean border for sneak military attack, all between the years of 1983 and 84, but the resulting tension only fueled the wide popular appeal of the song as a form of musical escapism and idealism.

Many wholesome songs feature stylistic elements found in Western parlor songs and jazz-influenced standard pop tunes, and their performances exhibit the vocal performance practices that Western traditions regard as desirable, as I mentioned earlier. The “good” music, to

put it simply, also was far from native to Korea or representative of its culture, and the virtue it represented remained likewise far removed from the experience of many of its people. In essence, the supposedly nationalist, culturally protectionist motive behind the crackdown on foreign musical styles was marred by its veneration of another set of foreign musical characteristics—one that the Park regime and those that followed it deemed less threatening or offensive.

*The post-high: Repercussions of the Korean counterculture and the wholesome song culture*

Today's Korean popular culture bears lasting marks of those legal restraints, which have since been lifted. The aforementioned culture of artificial positivity helped create an obsession with the well-behaved youth and patriotic, obedient citizenship. During the few years following the fall of military regimes, the state abolished the legal devices of censorship and wholesome song requirement on the grounds of freedom of expression under the new constitution. However, individual mass media outlets as well as the recording industry still maintain policies for blacklisting artists or songs. Because Korea's popular culture economy revolves heavily around dissemination by television and other centralized media vehicles, a major TV station's blacklist practically amounts to a statewide ban on publicity and distribution. Moreover, the music industry policies for self-censorship actually depend on the Korea Communications Standards Commission, an independent government agency. State control over mass dissemination of media contents therefore remains in place. Moreover, the state-designed standard curriculum for primary- and secondary-school students includes a few units per week of ethics, which institutionally encourages young Koreans to internalize the ruling moral codes.

This compulsive moralism may help explain a number of South Korean musicians' career-defining moments. Singer Park Jiyeon, a teenage idol singer, found her career at risk when her 2000 song "*Sönginshik*" (coming of age), in both its lyrics and its music video, depicted a girl's coming of age and sexual awakening. This version of her stood at odds with her previously pure, unadulterated adolescent persona, and the now sexually self-aware woman met a mixed public reception. PSY, now known to most audiences outside of Korea for his 2012 single "Gangnam Style," almost had a marijuana violation end his career in 2001, and spent most of the next year following the release of his second album away from the public eye.<sup>11</sup> In large part because strict social norms and expectations demand South Korean celebrities walk the fine, perhaps nonexistent, line between the deviant and the morally impeccable, the scandal had much more severe repercussions than something comparable would have in other countries such as the United States, where such events rarely jeopardize one's entire public career. Fortunately for him, the patriotic craze before and during the country's co-hosting of the 2002 FIFA World Cup allowed him an opportunity to subscribe to it in the form of the song "Champion," whose lyrics praise the socially and politically active youngsters' cherishment of their youth while remaining within the boundaries of social norms. The cheerful anthem both carried him out of the post-scandal slump and afforded him the performative concept of a "soundly deviant" entertainer—a status whose internal contradiction encapsulates the dilemma that many South Korean celebrities face.

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<sup>11</sup> *AllKPop.com*, "PSY Opens up about His Past Marijuana Scandal," 13 August 2012. <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2012/08/psy-opens-up-about-his-past-marijuana-scandal>.

South Korea's popular culture and entertainment industry, following the 1975 marijuana scandal and the 1995 lifting of explicit state censorship laws, still exhibits numerous symptoms of the moral and ethical no-tolerance policy of the era of military rule. The marijuana scandal constituted not only the enforcement of legal codes and exertion of political power, but also a manifestation of a more deep-seated social norm of moralism and moral perfectionism, especially expected of public figures. The marijuana scandal aimed to uproot the burgeoning youth culture and replace it with a government-manufactured culture that fabricates positivity and happiness, fostering a kind of citizenship less likely to vocalize dissent or protest the regime's agenda. Its remnants still linger in the nation's popular culture today, an era of civilian rule and free expression.



Appendix C. Shin Joong-hyun, “*Arūmdaun Kangsan*” (Beautiful streams and mountains), 1972

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|---|--|
| <i>Hanūrūn parake, kurūmūn hayake</i><br><i>Shil paramdo purōwa pupurūn nae maūm</i>  | The sky is blue, clouds are white<br>A breeze comes through; my heart is elated                                |
| <i>Namunnip purūgeh, kangmuldo purūgeh</i><br><i>Arūmdaun e goseh naega ikko nega inne</i>                                      | Leaves are fresh, and streams are too<br>In this beautiful land live you and I                                 |
| <i>Son chapko ka poja</i><br><i>Tallyō poja, chō kwangyaro</i><br><i>Uridūl moyōsō mal haeboja, sae heemang-ūl</i>              | Let’s join hands and go<br>Run into the open fields<br>Let’s gather and talk about new hopes                   |
| <i>Hanūrūn parake, ...</i><br>...<br><i>Kū ōlmana choūnga, uri sanūn e goseh</i><br><i>Saranghanūn kūdaewa noraehari</i><br>... | The sky is blue, ...<br>...<br>How good is this: in this land of ours<br>I shall sing with you, my love<br>... |

Appendix D. Park Konho/Kim Jaeil, “*Ah! Taehanminguk*” (Ah! The Republic of Korea), 1983

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|---|---|
| <i>Hanūren chogak kurūm ttō ikko</i><br><i>Kangmuren yuramsōni ttō ikko</i><br><i>Chōmada nuryōya hal haengbogi</i><br><i>Ōnjena chayouroun kot</i>   | Clouds float in the sky<br>Water taxis float on the river<br>Each with freedom to pursue<br>The happiness they deserve  |
| <i>Tturyōtan sakyejōri ikkieh</i><br><i>Polsurok chōngi tūnūn sankwa tūl</i><br><i>Urie maūmsoge isang-i</i><br><i>Kkūdopshi pyōlchōjinūn kot</i><br>...<br><i>*Wonhanūn kōsūn muōshidūn</i><br><i>Ōdūl su ikko</i><br><i>Ttūtanūn kōsūn mushigōn</i><br><i>Twelsuga issō</i><br><i>Irōke urinūn ūnhyeroun e ttangūl wihae</i><br><i>Irōke urinūn e kangsanūl norae purūne</i><br><i>Ah uri taehanminguk, ah uri choguk</i><br><i>Ah yōngwōntorok sarang harira</i> | The four seasons accentuate<br>The charm of the mountains and fields<br>The ideals in our minds<br>Are realized in this land<br>...<br>*Whatever one wants<br>Can be gained<br>Whatever one wills<br>Can be realized<br>So for this land of grace, we<br>Sing of the beauty of this land<br>Ah, the Republic of Korea, our motherland<br>I shall love forevermore |