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Blooming in Fall of Korea – Deulgukhwa

Deulgukhwa, a Korean word for a wild Chrysanthemum, is a perennial that blooms in autumn, usually in ravines. This resilient flower can endure the harshest coldness and can survive through winter outdoors. The state of affairs in Korea from 1970s to 1980s were as cold and dreary as rigors of a harsh winter; the freedom and rights of people were peremptorily suppressed and the pillars of democracy, torn down. The diversity and creativity of an individual could not dare flaunt itself, for a dictatorial regime launched a cultural logging, cutting down every branch of art and plowing out every root of an expression. After the October Revitalizing Reforms of the President Park Jung hee in 1972, the National Assembly was dissolved and any kind of political activities were prohibited. The president was wielding an absolute power as he suspended a certain force of the constitution and passed the Yushin constitution, which granted him more centralized power with an indefinite presidential term (Kim 259). The music industry of Korea at the time could not avoid a subsequent crackdown as well. Under a delusive name of “Purification Policy of Performing Activities,” a pre-screening of songs became mandatory and numerous songs were censored even after releases. On a bleak field of suppression, Deulgukhwa [Wild chrysanthemum], a Korean rock band, took root in bare ground and blossomed with its song “Gugutmane Nae Saesang [Only That Is My World]” during the ongoing oppression of the president Chun Doo-hwan’s regime in 1980s. Standing unwavering in the repressive military dictatorship, Deulgukhwa’s song was referred as an anthem of Korean youths in twenties. Vehemently longing and aspiring for the bygone freedom of past era, Deulgukhwa marched together with

Korean youths in a journey out of suppression that was prevalent in the dictatorial regime with its famous song “Gugutmane Nae Saesang.”

To start with the beginning, the song “Gugutmane Nae Saesang,” released in 1985, starts with an ominous repeating piano loop with its note going gradually low, as if we are awaiting a destined fall. In a first loop of piano, a simple acoustic guitar sound joins to synchronize with the piano. Then, the same piano loop repeats but just a single pluck of a string of the guitar comes in this time to harmonize with the loop. The melody created by the piano and guitar is dreadfully simple and yet powerful, stirring up sadness. This dismal tune reflects the funereal atmosphere of Korea at the time, where the raptures over independence and hope of better future became relics of the past. The period of 1970s and 1980s saw an unprecedented bloodshed of citizens in Korean modern history. After the assassination of Park Chung Hee, the military authority led by Cheon Doo-Hwan were determined that no single faint bleats of objection to the regime will be tolerated in the southern part of Korean peninsula, the intolerance articulated in their absolute domination over government, in suspension of the National Assembly, in an indiscriminate apprehension of politicians, opposition personages, and student leaders (Kim 151). On streets of Gwangju in May 18, 1980 were numerous corpses of citizens killed by soldiers under the cloak of quelling a riot. Moreover, many of Korean university students who longed for democratic values and put such an aspiration into practice had to fall prey to a bloody suppression in various parts of the country. A large part of casualties were in fact university students as they participated in movements most ardently (Kim 200). Indeed, a reality for protesters and Korean youths was grim. Aligning with protesters against the military dictatorship, Jeon In Kwon, a vocalist of the band, sings a song on behalf of them. “Sesangeul neomuna moreundago nabogo gudaeneun yaegihaji, jogeum eun guckjungdeun nunbitseuro, jogeum eun mianhan uteumeuro [You tell me that I don’t understand this world with worrying eyes and a sorry

smile].” A voice sounding feeble and hoarse, the singer calmly speaks for people who stand against the dictatorial regime, for those who, notwithstanding an evident discrepancy in powers of themselves and the government, still fight. The vocalist points out the sad reality that those who oppose the military dictatorship are considered naïve and idealistic by those who conform. Accompanied by a drum, the song’s lyric shifts a focus from ridicules or even sympathy that people who fight receives to their still unwavering conviction. “Guerae aman saesangeul morunaba, honja eregae mun gileul tteonatnaba, hajiman huhweonun eubji ulmeoutdun modun ggum, gugutmane nae saesang [Yes, perhaps I do not know the world and took a long path alone. However, I have no regret for dreams in which I cried and laughed. Only that is my world].” Jeon In Kwon, his voice gradually gaining a power, vents his enthusiasm that he does not regret opting for protests and movements united in hope of democracy, symbolized as a long and burdensome path in the song, instead of giving in to easy conformity. When the vocalist bellows a lyric “gugutmane nae saesang [only that is my world],” which is a title of the song, his hoarse and yet impassioned vocal transforms the music into a last wailing of a dying man whose voice fails and yet still carries solemn weight because the singer’s tone is so emotional and poignant. Given the time song was written and released, the world and dreams Deulgukhwa call as its only world is the world where true democracy is settled and where people do not have to fear suppression and persecution. Amid the gloomy period of Korea, “Only That Is My World” produced frisson of liberation for the public, especially among Korean youths, and reinvigorated people to fight for the world they all longed for together by penetrating hearts of the public through a depiction of harsh reality in Korea’s 1980s. In this sense, “Gugutmane Nae Saesang” was not simply a popular music but an anthem of Korean protesters and youths.

Moreover, aside from a political scene, Deulgukhwa also triggered a return of rock n’ roll culture in Korea that had been cracked down by the government. A simple development

of a piano's tune emphasizes a stark sound of an acoustic guitar in the song. It is so poignant that the melody carries a tinge of nostalgia, which would make this haunting tune appropriate background music for any recollection scene of a movie. A striking presence of the guitar and nostalgic melody are shards of Korean youths' nostalgia for past in which music was not shackled. Unlike suppressed and stagnant 1970s and 1980s, 1960s was a cataclysm for Korean music culture. Moving away from trot, Korea was departing from a traditionally "bbongjjak" oriented music culture, which was influenced by Japanese Enka during Japanese colonial era. Two fathers of Korean rock, Hanh Daesoo and Shin Jung Hyun heralded a rise of new vibrant youth culture in Korea. Hahn Daesoo, a folk sing-a-song writer, released his first album in 1974 and his long hair and guitar introduced Hippie culture to Korea. Shin Jung Hyun organized the first rock n' roll band in Korea, Add 4 (Lee). These two musicians served as a driving force of the new culture that was starkly different from the original bbongjjak dominant culture. Characterized by modern melodies, unornamented sounds and freewheeling messages, this new music culture was passionately welcomed by young Koreans who were tired of gaudy costumes and melodramatic singing style of trot. Images of Hippie culture such as long hair and a guitar strapped on the back grew into a symbol of a new trend, leading a guitar fever in Korea. Guitars became an essential item for university students and long hair was a symbol of "coolness" for young Korean men. Such a revolutionary shift to rock among youths, however, did not last long. Entering the regime of Park Jung hee and Cheon Doo-hwan, the government started to see the culture subversive and decadent. Guitars were confiscated and long hairs were clamped down. Thus, Korean music industry reverted to its previous state in which trot mainly prevailed. In fact, the pre-screening procedure even scrutinized the use of a guitar sound in songs. Deulgukhwa, notwithstanding the crackdown, introduces an acoustic guitar riff right in the beginning of the music after the first piano loop. The sound of an acoustic guitar stands out in a simple and stark composition with a piano. In

this sense, if one listens to a nostalgic melody with meaning of a guitar at that time in Korea, the music suddenly sounds very bold, courageously challenging the norm set by the government in nostalgia for suppressed culture. The band intentionally emphasized a guitar to resist the regime because in 2013 remastered version of the same song, the guitar riff in the beginning is removed, for rock n' roll culture is no longer oppressed. Furthermore, a prolonged electric guitar solo that explodes at a climax of the song is not simply an imitation of conventional rock music. An entire minute dedicated to the guitar solo is as compelling as that of the vocal. Powerfulness and fervor with which a guitarist Choi Sung Won plays his guitar create the impression that the guitar is wailing as if the instrument is venting its spite. A guitar roars fiercely, declaring that it will be restricted by the government no longer.

“Gugutmane nae saesang” was a medium through which Korean youths shared all the sorrows and angers at loss of their culture and freedom, which united people and subsequently re-cultivated a soil of once suppressed Korean rock. The song inspired Korean artists and listeners to actively defy a restriction the government unrightfully imposed upon fledging Korean rock culture in 1960s. Therefore, the lineage of Shin Jung Hyun who tried to merge conventional elements of western rock with Korean musical elements to create what is uniquely Korean was succeeded by Deulgukhwa who beautifully reflected Korea's struggle in its rock music, imbuing the song with profound emotions that only Koreans can truly understand (Im). In 1986, a year after Deulgukhwa's release of the song, Korean rock started putting down roots as now-respected rock bands including Sinawe, Baekdusan, H20 debuted and fully bloomed after the ministry of culture and communication lifted most of bans on popular music after 1987 June movement (Kim). Deulgukhwa's courageous rebellion precluded the regime's scheme to exploit a music industry as a puppet that manipulates the consciousness of the public. The regime not only censored and banned songs but also required singers to include a “wholesome song” in their albums, songs that should only talk about

bright future and praise the authority (Hwang). Thus, “Gugutmane Nae Saesang” holds a strong meaning for Korean music. It was a struggle to both reclaim the rock culture of Korea and thwart a government’s plan to abuse art as a tool of maintaining an absolute power. Despite the fact that the song was indeed banned from performing by the government for arousing a discontent at the status quo, to Deulgukhwa, singing the forbidden against the unwarranted dictatorship was a resistance, freedom, and democracy.

Therefore, the band’s name, Deulgukhwa, translated into a wild chrysanthemum, holds a symbolic meaning in various senses. In Korean culture, white chrysanthemums are sent to funeral homes to express sorrow and lamentation. Thus, the band was laying down a chrysanthemum upon the death of democracy and freedom in Korea through its song. Deulgukhwa, however, did not stop there. The band gave life to rock of new sensibility, fusing its musicianship and contemporary sentiment of Korea into “Korean rock.” Korean youths and people under the repressive regime could identify with the song, be comforted and reinvigorated in their journey out of a dictatorship, for Deulgukhwa was not simply emulating rock of the United States but rather keenly incorporated the harsh reality of Korea in 1980s into rock music. Having laid the cornerstone of a house falling apart called Korean rock, Deulgukhwa is acclaimed even in modern times by fellow artists. For instance, well-known rock band YB mentioned several times that every member of the band likes and respects Deulgukhwa for its role in establishing Korean rock. The respect Deulgukhwa garners extends to different genres of music as even “worldwide celebrity” Psy openly posted on his Twitter that he was honored to work with Jeon In Kwon in his 7th album. Deulgukhwa was able to draw such esteem from fellow artists because its influence on Korean music and furthermore Korean society was substantial. The band cried out for democracy and rock culture the dictatorial regime deprived Korea of. Bloomed in fall of Korea, Deulgukhwa persevered through harsh weathers and uplifted the spirits of Korean youths who stood

against the regime.

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