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“Chang Ki-ha and the Faces”: An Underground Indie Band Rockets to Unexpected Fame

The current Korean pop music scene is dominated by sexually beguiled virginal teenagers: the industry parades Lolita girl groups in racy uniforms and skinny, sexually ambiguous boy bands, bumping and grinding to recycled American hip-hop music. These girl groups breathe their lollipop-lyric love songs in erotic outfits of animal-print spandex that would put a drunken stripper to shame. The excessive exposure of sexuality is a worldwide phenomenon, particularly in the music industry. For this reason, it came as something of a shock when Chang Ki-ha and the Faces (Chang Ki-ha wa ōlguldŭl), an indie rock band from the underground music scene of the artistic Hongdae district, suddenly rocketed into immense popularity and overnight fame. Only a year after winning the 10th Ssamzie Sound Festival’s “Discover Hidden Talents” contest, the band wrapped up 2009 by grabbing the prestigious Golden Disk Award and the Korea Media Grand Prize for Newcomer Band, the Korean equivalent of the Grammys. Despite the claim that they selected the members for their “good-looking faces,” the band is comprised of twenty-something nerds from Seoul National University. The band’s attire is kitschy and reminiscent of the seventies, their lyrics are subversive, and their performance is a reinvention of seventies folk rock accompanied by a female duo of “back-up dancers”, whose dress

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comes straight out of that now-distant era. As Chang states in poker-face fashion, the band exemplifies “post-modernist concepts in music.”

The members of this self-proclaimed post-modern band are: Chang, who writes, composes, sings and plays guitar and percussion; Chŏng Chŏng-yŏb, bass; Yi Min-gi, guitar; and Kim Hyŏn-ho, drums. The Mimi sisters are the back-up vocals and dancers, but their presence is anything but background. In fact, at most live performances, the band’s bread and butter, the Mimi sisters are vital because they perk up the mood instantly. Sometimes, they outshine the band and the music they are playing, as demonstrated by the audiences who instantly roar out a welcome when the sisters arrive.

In this sense, the Mimi Sisters represent a subversive response to the current sexed-up image of the mainstream female music performers. The fashionably-plump duo, garbed in identical vintage dress, manages to excite the audience without one iota of overt sexuality or even a shred of expression, their stone faces shielded behind their sunglasses. They do not smile and never take off their black-tinted sunglasses. Their concept appears to be to remain expressionless as they dance and sing.

Chang’s songs are both provocative and subversive, but it is their cynical, comic nature which delights the listeners. In the debut single, “Cheap Coffee (Ssaguryŏ k’ ŏp’i),” a poor young guy living in a dilapidated residence observes roaches and accepts his stomach’s acid response to the cheap coffee he drinks. However, it is not the quality of the coffee that is the issue. The song is a pun aimed at Korean youths who flock to foreign brands like Starbucks and Coffee Bean just to appear “cool” even though they are in financial difficulty. Despite the expensive price of the coffee,

young people feel it necessary to keep up with the Jones's, or in this case, to appear to be financially stable enough to do so. Chang is mocking the underlying assumption that we all have someone inside us who drinks "cheap coffee."

On their second single, "I am Really Doing Great (Pyöllil öpsi sanda)," Chang exposes the secret envy that someone might feel when one of their friends is enjoying success: living a worry-free, fun-filled life, unburdened by major problems. Chang croons, "Here's some news that will surprise you/ Here's some news that will piss you off/I am doing really fine, I have no worries/ I am doing really fine, I have no problems/You would not want to believe this is for real/You would really want this to be a lie/ But here is the truth/ I am doing really fine/ I love my life, every day is happy/ I love my life. Every day brings me joy." The point here is that the singer knows that his friends feel unhappy knowing that he is living a fine life. He does not deny himself the ugly truth; he rather puts it out on the table and laughs along with the audience at the foibles of human nature.

Most mainstream bands in Korea have management companies or corporate-owned music labels to represent them. The majority of K-pop singers are organized by these management companies, which seek to control all the musical aspects of their careers and even their personal lives. In contrast, Chang and the Faces started as an indie rock band in 2008. The band played in the underground music venues around Hongdae, fast gaining popularity. Chang's record label is a small indie-music-only company under the slightly odd name of "Boonga Boonga." Chang and the Faces were first televised in November 2008 on the Educational Broadcast System (EBS)'s Space Empathy Hello show program as winner of "Discover Rookie Indie Musician Project." Despite their unconventional stage performance and subversive lyrics, or

rather, because of their “grotesque post-modern” performances, they became wildly popular. They now perch precariously at the opposite end to most mainstream artists on the K-pop music seesaw. A striking exception in the music market; the band reached stardom without a management company and even before they were televised.

Some critics have pointed out, however, that Chang and the Faces became popular due more to their subversive performances and lyrics rather than because of their music. Some are skeptical. They suggest that the group is just a comic musical performance group, rather than a real music band. They are doubtful whether their music is powerful enough to last. For these critics, Chang and the Faces are more like a musical “protest” band using a rock & roll style, not a genuine rock music band. The suggestion is made that the audience likes the human and social issues Chang expresses and the strangeness of the Mimi girls, but they might not really remember the music very well. In this case, Chang and the Faces could perhaps be just another category of appearance-focused K-pop performers. Instead of cashing in on sexuality, the group relies on the appeal of being part comedy act and part protest vehicle.

So far, Chang and the Faces have only released one album. Because they are so young, it might be worthwhile to be patient and see what happens. Will the band evolve or fade away? If they survive, will this be largely thanks to their comedy—or because they have found a way to create genuinely quality music?