



LUCAS HUANG

East Asia's Pop-Music  
Industry and the Conquest  
of Creativity

IDOL

EMPIRE

**W**hen capital has conquered labor, land, and the means of subsistence, where does the blade of conquest next fall? Naturally, when all other options have been explored, it encroaches upon the workers' hours of leisure. In order to counter the slower rate of accumulation brought on by the legal shortening of the working day, the capitalist aims to monetize, and to thoroughly control, the worker outside of his employment contract. When the working day ends, money capital can no longer confront and exploit the worker, and thus commodity capital steps in to fill the void. The capitalist now redirects his aims and attempts to reclaim a portion of his variable capital, originally advanced in the worker's wages, by offering the worker an addicting, drug-like form of entertainment in exchange for the universal equivalent. As a result of imperialist cultural homogeneity abroad and increased social pressure to stay up-to-date with pop culture trends, the laborer of today has become increasingly unable to separate the pleasure of his leisure time from the expenditure of his wages. Whether his money is spent on television, on movies, on the internet, on video games, on books, on music and instruments, or on tools and materials for any number of hobbies, the money always flows back into the hands of the capitalist class.

In order to examine this phenomenon more closely, it is important to select a subject that is familiar to most, if not all, workers of the world. Since the very beginning of human history, music has always been an integral part of our social development. Whether it takes the form of banging two hollow bones together, strumming a line of sheep gut, performing an opera, or manipulating sound waves through a synthesizer, music has been a constant factor of society through every age and civilization. It logically follows that by examining music within the current structure of society, i.e. within the authority of capital, we can view the alteration of conditions as an archetype for the dialectical conflict of cultural forms under capital; we can pinpoint which aspects deteriorate and which aspects progress. Accordingly, this exploration will center upon the music industry of today. However, because of length restrictions, this article will not be covering the entirety of musical history from the onset of capital development. Instead, we will be focusing on the highest form of this industry. In other words, we will be examining the particular form that brings to light the most developed and most blatant contradictions that have arisen from a capital system; a branch of the music industry that is so wholly consumed by a rabid desire for accumulation that it discards even the lowest ethical guidelines in the name of mass appeal and profitability. We will be investigating the East Asian *idol industry*.





**A**fter the end of the Second World War, Japan began to transition from a traditionally imperialist state into a capitalist puppet nation under the strict control of the U.S. military. The dismantling of the emperor's power as well as the liberalization of the market allowed for the development of a so-called free market system. In order to promote faith in the restoration efforts, the U.S. symbolically disbanded the *Zaibatsu* corporate monopolies (which had stood at the center of the Japanese economy since the Meiji Restoration), but the system of corporate trusts persisted regardless, merely taking on the new moniker of the *Keiretsu*.<sup>1</sup> Agitation among the Japanese laboring population had already been high since the start of the 20th century, and the tumultuous changes of the 30's and 40's brought political unrest to a near breaking point. Because of Japan's history of tenacious labor movements, the U.S. began to worry about the possibility of a Japanese Communist struggle. The solidifying of Soviet influence and the approaching Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War only added fuel to the fire.

In 1950, the Korean War provided the Allies with an excuse to further increase military control in Japan, on the grounds of "[Japan's] role as a rear base for the supply and transit of soldiers and materials."<sup>2</sup> After the conclusion of the war, the military presence of allied nations (not including the U.S.) lessened, and the Japanese Prime Minister, Yoshida Shigeru, signed and ratified the Treaty of San Francisco to restore Japan's autonomy (to a certain degree). It is important to note here that Yoshida was a staunch supporter of brutal Japanese imperialism in Manchuria, as well as a proponent of *bokumin* neo-Confucian ideology in fusion with western models of governance.<sup>3</sup> It thus came as no surprise, that after signing the treaty, Yoshida agreed to the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance (known in Japan as the Anpo). The agree-

# A B R I E H I S T O F T I D O L P H E N



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# FOR THE COMMON

ment gave the U.S. the authority to maintain military bases in Japan, as well as the discretion to violently suppress any civil disturbances in the region. The agreement limited (and to this day continues to limit) Japan to little more than a neo-colonial puppet state.

As the 1950's progressed into the 1960's, the remilitarization of Japan continued at a fervent pace. In 1954, the transformation of the National Police Reserve into the JSDF (Japan Self-Defense Forces) gave Japan a new military in all but name, and prompted the development of a new brand of controlled nationalism. At the same time, the U.S. started pumping an exorbitant amount of economic stimulus into the country to accelerate the colonization process, creating an "economic miracle" (in the same manner that gavage-based foie gras creates a "culinary miracle"). Within the context of the burgeoning Cold War, Japan was to be a barrier against Soviet and Chinese influence in Asia, and accordingly, any left-leaning tendencies among the Japanese people could not be tolerated. Rampant consumerism began to rise, and the *American Way of Life*<sup>TM</sup> took over. It is in this arena that the first young Japanese pop singers began to flourish, and where the first seeds of idol pop were sown. At the inception of the contemporary Japanese music industry, many singers performed for American soldiers stationed in the country. Due to the lack of a proper music market, these performances provided up-and-coming pop stars with an avenue to success. In fact, they were so lucrative that "control of access channels to performing on those U.S. military bases meant control of the pop industry."<sup>4</sup>



In 1964, the term idol (*aidoru*) first appeared after the French film, *Cherchez l'idole* (*Aidoru o Sagase* in Japan), introduced Japanese audiences to singer Sylvie Vartan. Vartan's youth, musical talent, and cute appearance were unbelievably popular, garnering the sale of over a million copies of her single "La plus belle pour aller danser."<sup>5</sup> Similar artists began to take on the moniker of "idol," eventually allowing the term to grow out of the confines of a musical genre, and into a cultural phenomenon.

Thanks mostly to the popularization of television, the 1970's brought an explosive increase in the volume of idol media. Nippon Television launched a new series called *Star Tanjou!* (*A Star is Born!*) that introduced a broadcasted audition system for the scouting of idol talents,<sup>6</sup> bringing the dreams of stardom and fame ever closer to a disillusioned populace. From this point on, the idol industry began to garner profits that attracted the capitalists of other nations, spreading the idol model outside of Japan. Most notably, idol bands took root in South Korea and eventually expanded into a global phenomenon during the *hallyu* "Korean wave" of the 1990's.<sup>7</sup> The main difference between the Japanese and South Korean idol industry was, and remains, the Japanese tendency to produce primarily for the domestic market, and the South Korean tendency to produce primarily for export.<sup>8</sup>

Through the 80's and 90's the idol phenomenon continued to expand,<sup>9</sup> and so did the capital of the industry. In order to ramp up accumulation, the process had to evolve. Previously, idols had been limited to mostly single artists, or small trios and duets of singers. In the 80's, the success of large idol "groups" like *Onyanko Club* (which had a total of 52 rotating member-

s<sup>10</sup>) created a new dynamic for increasing the amount of labor available for idol companies. Today, groups like AKB48, Morning Musume, and Girls' Generation carry on this legacy. In order to solidify the labor pool, a number of entertainment corporations also began to set up idol training facilities. Companies like S.M. Entertainment, JYP Entertainment Co., Y.G. Entertainment, Amuse Inc., and Yoshimoto Kogyo all introduced idol, or pop-star, "schools" that would accept young children and mold them into monetizable personas through a series of multi-year contracts. In recent years, the idol industry has conquered large sectors of the music market, even outside of East Asia. Japan has become the second largest music industry outside of the U.S.,<sup>11</sup> and Korea has risen to the sixth largest.<sup>12</sup> Although idol music does not account for the entirety of sales in these countries' music industries, a large percentage of their revenues stem from the idol-like tradition of selling exclusive merchandise and idol promoted products at exorbitant prices alongside physical and digital copies of their music.<sup>13</sup>

# THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS



The background of the page is a faded, high-contrast image of a person's face, likely a K-pop idol, looking upwards. The image is in shades of red and white, creating a textured, almost stencil-like effect. The person's features are partially obscured by the text and the large drop cap letter.

he first public audition processes allowed independent members of the populace to put forth their own material, and could sometimes yield a performer who outpaced the control of their employers. Yamaguchi Momoe is a perfect example. After being recruited at age 13 from a *Star Tanjou!* audition in 1972, Yamaguchi exploded into popularity in the following years, giving her the ability to bargain with her employers over her pay, her songwriters, and the genre of her music.<sup>14</sup> In addition to this disadvantageous power dynamic for employers, the original audition system consumed large portions of productive capital in the process of searching for satisfactory talents. In order to reduce these costs, idol agencies developed the “in-house” system. Instead of going to the public to find matured talents, agencies would have the public come to them with “raw materials”. Accordingly, the age of recruits was decreased from an already low standard, and financially unstable households began to pour their children into the market for a chance at becoming famous and wealthy. The system placed all factors of idol production under one corporate unit. By taking

total control of the child's life and development, and by slowly shaping the child into a satisfactory form, agencies could construct performing groups from the most profitable trainees. SM Entertainment's founder, Lee Soo Man, is often credited with perfecting the system. By “ensuring that all of [the] necessary attributes were combined to create the perfect pop star...SM controlled every process and part that went into the manufacturing of Kpop idols and their hits.”<sup>15</sup> Talent agencies in Japan, including Yoshimoto Kogyo and Amuse Inc., have also developed similar programs. In the process of reducing the scouting and training of an idol to a standardized system of manufacture, idol agencies have been able to marginalize the idol trainee to a state much like that of a doll to be assembled. This is not to say that idols and trainees do not labor, nor that their labor does not create a surplus value.

The labor of the idol is often significantly more strenuous, more time consuming, and more demeaning than the average worker. However, idols are not viewed by the capitalist as merely a means for the creation of surplus value; they are also seen as a necessary prerequisite for the creation of the final product. By hiring songwriters, lyricists,


choreographers, recording engineers, etc. with a portion of their variable capital, idol agencies apply the living labor of their traditional employees not only to the means of production, but to the idol as well. The idol cannot produce a satisfactory

# ACTURING SS

exchange-value on their own; instead they must be able to absorb the labor of others in order to create a final, saleable commodity. In fact, the final product, the idol's *image*, ends up as a construct separate from the idol. It becomes a source of revenue that does not fall under their own jurisdiction. Due to this relation, idols are expected to meet a standard archetype. Their abilities in song, in dance, in appearance and in weight are heavily codified, to the degree that failure to meet these requirements can often lead to expulsion from a training academy.<sup>16</sup> Because the idol transfers value from the labor-power of others to their saleable image, but is also a "free-laborer" contracted for their labor-power, they can be seen as a peculiar form of productive capital, compromising both fixed capital in the form of a means of labor, as well as fluid capital in the form of purchased labor-power. Similarly, they can be seen as a portion of constant capital that gradually transfers value over a set period of time, as well as a portion of variable capital that is capable of producing surplus labor.

To further solidify this concept, where the traditional employees of talent agencies are hired by piece-wage or by annual salary, the idol is confined by a multi-year contract, known colloquially as a "slave" contract. These agreements start from the beginning of their training career, and at one point, lasted as long as 13 years (though now legally limited to 7 in South Korea).<sup>17</sup> Contracts often specify very little in the way of wages, and almost always contain clauses related to the restriction of personal life choices outside of specifically agency related activities. If any clauses are violated, the idol is invalidated and often severely demoted or even expelled from the agency entirely. In some cases, the idol is also fined a large sum of money.<sup>18</sup> Because idols often give up much of their traditional education in order to undergo training, these punishments can ruin their future career chances, and prevent them from finding employment outside of the industry. In the particular relation established, these multi-year contracts serve as the turnover period for a portion of the means of labor (i.e. the idol as separate from their saleable image), as well as a way to solidify the costs of their maintenance. Through this method, the agency conditions the idol to act as a means of labor that is capable of labor-power. The idol can absorb and gradually transfer values from multiple turnovers of fluid capital, thus acting as fixed and constant capital, while simultaneously existing as a portion of fluid and variable capital by producing surplus-labor that is fully consumed in the production of the final commodity. In other words, the idol can transfer a value to a product while simultaneously valorizing it further. This relation applies to the period of direct employment of the idol, but because the relation technically originates from the purchase of labor-power from a "free-laborer", it is important to note that the laws of the supply and demand of labor-power (as opposed to the supply and demand for means of labor) are still applicable and relevant to the idol's inception. For instance, in conjunction with the in-house system, the use of a graduation model<sup>19</sup> allows for the maintenance of an industrial reserve army. By requiring a constant





stream of recruits, talent agencies conjure up the illusion that anybody can become an idol, thus further glutting the labor market with hopeful cadets.

An additional facet of idol capital to be examined is the extension of surplus labor in proportion to necessary labor. In *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx illuminates three possible methods for capital to increase the rate of surplus value: 1) increasing the absolute surplus value, or increasing relative surplus value by 2) increasing the intensity of labor, and 3) increasing the productive efficiency of labor.<sup>20</sup> The following enumerates a few methods utilized by the idol industry to achieve this extension.

## 1. Increasing Absolute Surplus Value

This method has already been demonstrated in part by the creation of large idol groups and training academies. By increasing the number of idols, the agency is able to create a larger number of performing acts, and can thus increase the mass of surplus labor expressed in the final sale of each of these products. On the method of lengthening the working day, idol agencies practice something akin to the relay system explained in *Capital Vol. 1* Chp. 10 Section 4.<sup>21</sup> Although idols are limited to a legal maximum of hours in the working day (with some caveats),<sup>22</sup> idol agencies can still set other employees to work in creating materials to be used by the idols,<sup>23</sup> e.g. market-

ing, composition, choreography, etc. while the idols are not working. This differs from the relay system only in the specific sense that the industrializing English capitalist aimed to decrease the time in which his means of production lay unused, and that the idol agency aims to maximize the production of preliminary articles necessary for the final commodity's formation. Both do so by conquering a larger portion of the day for the production process. Additionally, the ambiguous wage clauses of idol contracts allow agencies to hold an idol's necessary labor to a minimum standard, thus increasing the ratio of surplus to necessary labor.

## 2. Increasing Labor Intensity

The idol training model intensifies labor by creating an atmosphere of extreme competition within idol groups and trainee programs. As mentioned previously, the simplest violations of any number of rules can result in severe punishments. Additionally, should the performance of an idol drop below that of others, they also risk being terminated. This creates an incentive for the idols to expend a larger amount of labor-power in a shorter amount of time, in order to secure their position, and also to keep from falling behind.<sup>24</sup> By pitting idols against each other, the agency can also prevent idols from utilizing collective bargaining. Korean idols are also expected to learn different languages, styles, and genres of song and dance to appeal to a larger audience. Because the Korean idol



can adapt to such a wide variety of material, the supply of labor they are expected to absorb and valorize in a fixed amount of time increases proportionally. In other words, higher proficiency creates higher expectations, and a larger quantity of expected expenditure of labor-power in a set period of time. Although Japanese idols are also expected to learn a variety of musical skills, their training methods in this particular aspect are not as intense. Japanese idols direct a higher portion of their skills towards fan interaction as opposed to international appeal, due to their focus on the domestic market.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the increase in intensity of labor for a Japanese idol derives more from developing groundwork to facilitate a positive relation with a rapidly expanding audience.

### 3. Increasing Labor Productivity

The above mentioned diversity in training not only increases intensity, but also productivity. Because the contracted idol is essentially a portion of the means of labor, the ability for an idol to integrate labor from a variety of inputs increases the amount of value produced in proportion to labor absorbed. A set quantity of labor with many acceptable inputs is thus able to produce more value than it did with only a few compatible inputs. For example, the idol agency can hire different managerial groups for the development of music and products; one for the Indonesian market, another for the American market, another for the Vietnamese market, and yet another for the Thai market. If an idol can then absorb all the inputs without requiring the translation or re-design of the ancillary and raw materials, then the efficiency of the manufacturing process increases. Of course, the natural progression of technology also increases the productivity of labor. For instance, the

widespread practice of televising or broadcasting certain acceptable aspects of an idol's training regimen as a sort of "get to know them" program creates a more personable relationship with fans, and thus allows for the training process to be monetized as well. This does not expend any labor that is not proportionally lesser than the value it garners.

Taken as a whole, the idol's relation to capital is generally more exploitative

# SELT DRB

than what is found in other working conditions of the imperial core, certainly more so than the larger number of independent music artists from the West. The *absolute* alienation of the idol from not only their labor and means of production, but from their own identity, develops an ever increasing list of contradictions between the production and consumption of idol media.





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ince its inception, the self-purported objective of the idol industry has always been "to sell dreams".<sup>26</sup>

In Japan, after the political upheaval of the 50's, the 1960's brought the largest surge in radical protest since the Meiji Restoration. Upstanding citizens from all walks of life rose up in response to the strengthening of the Anpo agreement. Hundreds of

# JOINING FANS

thousands took to the streets, millions signed petitions, and thousands were injured and shot by police during protests.<sup>27</sup> Groups like the communist and anarchist Zengakuren movement (as well as its later revolutionary factions) even stirred up popular support from the People's Republic of China, eliciting a series of political cartoons in the 人民日报 (People's Daily).<sup>28</sup> The functionally dis-junct and ideologically bereft Zenkyoto movement also began to protest American imperialism and Japanese monopoly capitalism. In South Korea, the long line of militaristic and anti-communist dictators

created a similar, but often more acute struggle for the Korean people. The South Korean regime's frequent use of violence, lack of hesitation to kill (see Gwangju Massacre), and close proximity to the DPRK further accelerated the need for a controlling consumer culture. If the U.S. plan to contain Communism was to stand, the revolutionary spirit of East Asia had to be crushed. In conjunction to the traditional use of force, the cultural juggernauts deployed their greatest weapons. Among these was the opium of dreams.

The idol industry began to slowly erode the student desire for political struggle in the 1970's, "when many young people began to seek respite from political violence and turbulent student movements."<sup>29</sup> Both male and female idols rose in prominence, and the birth of a clearly identifiable consumer culture first appeared around these stars. As the industry has evolved, idols have continued to embody the dreams of each successive generation of adoring fans. The first idols of the 70s and 80s displayed extravagance and a luxurious lifestyle, capturing the desires of the people in their destitute conditions. When the living standards of the common worker began to marginally improve, idols adopted a more friendly, relatable demeanor. Today, when the exploitation of capital absorbs nearly all semblance of social life and meaningful interaction, idols have come to emulate the different types of relationships that many young workers have little hope for.<sup>30</sup>

This alienation of the working class is one of the leading reasons as to why the idol image has diversified so rapidly. The consumers of today yearn for what capital dissolves, e.g. romantic, sexual, platonic, and even familial connections. The stereotypical idol fan is characterized as an individual in their twenties or thirties who has lost hope



in developing meaningful interpersonal associations. These fans look up to their idol as an embodiment of their desires. In order to satisfy these manifold cravings, idol agencies manufacture talents who are cultivated for a variety of marketable characteristics. The three most prevalent and most applicable persona archetypes of the modern idol are purity, relatability, and maturity. The first appeals to the consumer's desire for a relationship that is "innocent"; the desire for a construct that is reminiscent of a previous self. Such a nostalgic purity, although often a manufactured facade, evokes a strong emotional (and monetizable) response. The second characteristic, relatability, creates a sense of shared struggle. Being able to identify with the highs and lows that an idol goes through constructs an illusory bond of camaraderie between the idol and the fan. This is often achieved through the televisation of training and fan meetup events. The third characteristic, maturity, takes the emotions of the first characteristic and applies them in the opposite direction. Where purity corresponds to a consumer's desire for the past, maturity corresponds to their wishes for the future. The mature idol thus serves as a figure to depend on, or as someone to look up to.

Alongside these three overarching divisions, an agency can then apply any number of additional niche personality traits to further strengthen the affection a fan feels for an idol. By developing these parasocial relationships, idol agencies are able to hook consumers on the apparent attainability of dreams, and convert fan commitment into a commodity relation. In the most extreme cases, idol enthusiasts can sink the majority of their life savings into a single idol or idol group.<sup>31</sup> Even some of the more casual fans can spend upwards of \$100 a month on related merchandise.<sup>32</sup> This nearly religious devotion of idol fans serves as the groundwork for a rabidly loyal consumer base.

Once the idol has reached a certain level of renown, the idol agency is then free to place the idol on the advertising market, linking idol media consumers to a larger web of commodity producers. Essentially, the idol agency develops the idol, not to sell the *idol* as a commodity, but to sell the idol's *image* as such. This malleable form transcends the limitations of a physical commodity, and allows the agency to apply the image to any number of products. Beginning with the group *Onyanko Club*, idol music has since become "so intertwined with TV that it can't be appreciated outside that context,"<sup>33</sup> and in today's Japan, nearly 50% to 70% of all advertisements feature some sort of idol.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the vast quantity and diversity of idol related products allows for the subsumption of a fan's identity to the consumption of idol media. Rather than defining themselves based on who they are or who they wish to be, the idol fan becomes trapped in a cycle, eventually defining themselves through the commodities they consume. It is here that the situational irony of the idol industry reveals itself. Through the creation of a consumer identity on the basis of a fictional construct, a construct that is fully in conflict with its own human vessel, the idol industry has produced lifeless automatons that propagate capital accumulation in the name of "dreams". From this unassailable contradiction, a myriad of horrific abuses have arisen, of which a few will now be presented.



# BEHIND THE MASK

**I**n the process of crafting an idol persona that is separate from its carrier, a rift emerges between the personal life of an idol and their life as a laborer. The idol is contractually obligated to maintain their facade as long as they are within the public eye, for the protection and preservation of “fans’ fragile fantasies.”<sup>35</sup> However, because of the stalker like devotion of the most infatuated fans, idols are occasionally unable to determine when the “public eye” is upon them. If they are caught violating some aspect of their persona or some ridiculously restrictive clause of their contract, the punishment is often swift and unyielding.

Take the case of Minegishi Minami, a former member of the AKB48 B team, who was seen leaving her boyfriend’s home in 2013.<sup>36</sup> After the rumor was published in a gossip magazine, the official AKB48 YouTube channel uploaded a video of Minegishi begging for forgiveness while choking through a torrent of tears. The most shocking aspect was that Minegishi had shaved her entire head, which she unconvincingly claimed to be her own decision. In Japanese culture, the act of cutting one’s hair is symbolic of contrition, but for a woman (and an idol who is marketed for physical traits, at that) to completely shave her head was unheard of. Minegishi was allowed to continue working with AKB48, but was demoted back to a training team “for causing a nuisance to the fans”.<sup>37</sup> Others had no such luck after similar incidents. To name a couple, Sashihara Rino was exiled to a sister group of AKB48 after her tearful apology, and Masuda Yuka was kicked from the

agency entirely.<sup>38</sup>

In an even more outrageous incident, Yamaguchi Maho from NGT48 was tailed home by two stalkers who proceeded to attack her as she was entering her apartment. The two men attempted to pin her down, but were stopped by a building resident and later arrested by the police. Yamaguchi alleged that other members of NGT48 had helped the attackers locate her home (likely a result of the rabid competitive atmosphere within idol groups). In response, Yamaguchi's management did absolutely nothing. Instead, Yamaguchi was made to apologize for "causing trouble".<sup>39</sup> She was uninjured in the attack, but was soon ousted from NGT48 for being "an assailant against the company".<sup>40</sup> Although her more sensible fans were outraged at NGT48 management for accusing Yamaguchi, no apology was issued until the Niigata prefecture withdrew funding from NGT48 enterprises. In another act of rapacious greed, Yamaguchi's management sued her attackers *after* she had left the group, and obtained a several million yen settlement (none of which was given to Yamaguchi).

A further, more violent example of assault is the case of TV idol Tomita Mayu. Be-

tween January and February of 2016, Tomita received a package containing books and a watch in the mail from an obsessive stalker fan. Tomita returned the items, and the stalker began to send multiple harassing messages to her Twitter account and her blog. The stalker began to escalate his actions, and sent upwards of 400 hostile tweets to Tomita, many of which were blatant death threats. Tomita contacted the police in fear of her life, but was dismissed and told that social media messages were not a significant sign of danger.<sup>41</sup> Twelve days later, the stalker confronted Tomita outside of one of her venues and asked her why she had returned his mail. Finding her answer unsatisfactory, he flew into a mad rage and stabbed Tomita from behind more than twenty times with a pocket knife he had prepared beforehand.<sup>42</sup> The man was apprehended, but Tomita was in a critical condition. When she eventually recovered from a two week coma, the 34 stab wounds on her back, neck, and face had partially blinded her left eye.<sup>43</sup> She now has difficulties eating, can no longer sing, and suffers from severe PTSD. In another showing of gross incompetence, the perpetrator was given a sentence of only 14 and a half years in prison for attempt-

ed murder. Tomita is still fighting a court case to prevent others from experiencing what she went through.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the cultivation of vigilant and damning surveillance of behavior, the personality rift also yields a tremendously negative effect upon an idol's mental development. Typically, trainees sign contracts at a young age, often before the onset of puberty, and begin to mature as their fame expands. Due to the unnaturally intense and time consuming process of manufacture, idols often cannot experience the process of growing up in a more traditional environment. This fame can give rise to a number of issues. Although the previous examples illustrate incidents where idols inadvertently crossed a social stigma, there have been multiple occasions where idols have indulged in illegal activities as a result of their stunted development.

Superficial examples of this come primarily from drug abuse. Because of the strict anti-drug laws of South Korea and Japan, the possession and or use of any type of narcotic, including comparatively harmless ones like marijuana, can be punished with long prison sentences. In the case of Takabe Ai, voice actress and pin-up idol, her use of narcotics



brought down her entire career. After being apprehended for drug possession, Takabe was dropped from her agency, her name was erased from the credits shows she voiced in, and the shows were removed from streaming services.<sup>45</sup> However, because personal drug usage does not directly bring harm to others, it would be unjust to place blame upon the idol. Within the context of their exploitation, these desperate actions are merely an expression of alienation and a result of its effects on the worker. For Kim Jong-hyun, former member of the South Korean boy-band SHINee, this alienation led, not to drug use, but to suicide. In his final note, Kim said "it wasn't my path to become famous... it's a miracle that I endured all this time."<sup>46</sup> Essentially, the gap between his contract and his conscience led him to depression, and eventually death.

This same sense of alienation has manifested as an opposite extreme in idols that use their fame to commit heinous acts. Most notably, in 2019, the K-Pop industry was shaken by the discovery of a sex cabal of entertainment moguls and K-Pop stars, now referred to as the Burning Sun Scandal. The Burning Sun nightclub was partially directed by Lee Seung-hyun (stage name Seungri), who was a member of the K-Pop group Big Bang. In response to the assault of a clubgoer by a staff member, the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency (SMPA) began an investigation of the club, and unearthed copious amounts of evidence concerning drug trafficking, prostitution, date rape, and police corruption.<sup>47</sup> Later on, the police obtained message records between a number of idols, including Lee, revealing the use of spycams to record and distribute videos of women being intoxicated and raped.<sup>48</sup> In one particular group chat, singer-songwriter Jung Joon-young messaged his friends saying, "Let's all get to-

gether online, hit the strip bar and rape them in the car." In response, a member of the chat said, "Our lives are like a movie. We've done so many things that could put us in jail."<sup>49</sup> In the following crackdown, the SMPA investigated a wide swath of entertainment conglomerates, and apprehended or detained nearly 4000 people in establishments where drug trafficking and prostitution were commonplace.<sup>50</sup> Lee has since stepped down from his place in Big Bang and the entertainment industry, but has evaded arrest.

In Japan, similarly horrific practices are commonplace as well. However, instead of examining the perpetrators, this section will illuminate a victim's experience in order to provide a different perspective. In terms of sexual abuse and malicious contracts, Hoshino Asuka, a former adult video actress, epitomizes the experiences that thousands of budding stars go through. Hoshino first entered the show business not as an idol, but as a finalist for a Miss Magazine contest in 2004.<sup>51</sup> She made a number of minor appearances in mainstream films, and was confronted by a man she calls "Mr. A" a few years after her debut. When approaching Hoshino, Mr. A claimed to be an investor in the entertainment industry, mentioning the names of a few large record companies and publishing agencies, and asked Hoshino to contract work with him. She agreed, and was told her first job would be a gravure shoot, but found out that it was for an adult video when she arrived. "My contract didn't mention a word about adult videos," said Hoshino.<sup>52</sup> "They told me to show them my passport, and I was told to sign my name on a blank sheet of paper. They never gave me my copy of my contract, saying they'd lost it." In December of 2010, her first video was published, and sales ranked 23rd on their distribution site. With their revenues, Mr. A and



his associates bought a new office in a high class establishment while paying Hoshino a pittance, telling her they were working hard for "her sake" and told her to "give it everything [she] had."<sup>53</sup> For the next three years, Hoshino was forced to perform sexual acts on film against her will, and without a stage name, which she was never given an option to use in the first place.<sup>54</sup> She developed a mental disorder, causing her to have intense bouts of depression, extreme anxiety when meeting people, and difficulties eating. After escaping the AV business, Hoshino's doctor informed her that her health would have continued to decline, and she eventually would have died if she remained an AV actress.<sup>55</sup> When asked about the agency's recruitment practices, Hoshino compared their tactics to the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult, a group of religious extremists that were responsible for a number of terror attacks in the mid 90's.

By brainwashing hopeful actresses into thinking that AV is the only way to succeed in entertainment, Mr. A's agency (and similar companies) could force the signing of dubious contracts, and impose horrendous working conditions with barely sufficient wages. Hoshino revealed that a close friend of hers had committed suicide because of Mr. A's and his compatriots' monstrous methods. She says that Mr. A showed not even the slightest hint of remorse, and has continued to employ the same methods up to this day. Since leaving the business, Hoshino now lives in a small apartment, works part time, and attends fan meetups to get by. Unfortunately, the remnants of the videos still hang over her head. "Even today, it still causes trouble for me," she says. "I thought about my family and friends and the pain had been excruciating. I seriously wished that I'd never been born."<sup>56</sup>

This contrast between the image of an idol

and their working conditions, the ideal and the material if you will, is unfortunately the adamant path of all progression under capital. In any industry, this phenomenon becomes more and more palpable the further that capital develops. Just like how the excesses of society and the lavish overindulgences of a rich country are juxtaposed with the abject poverty of that country's working majority, so are the bright, colorful, and opulent appearances of idols juxtaposed with their immense exploitation. Accordingly, idol culture can be viewed as the most developed stage of manufactured music. There is no doubt that the idol model will eventually become the predominant expression of the musical medium, so long as capitalism remains the driving force behind progress. Eventually, musical creativity will be a dream of the past, and mindless consumption will replace it. The question then arises: how is this to be prevented? How can we halt the expansion of this phenomenon while rolling back the abuses it has already wrought? In other words, what is to be done?

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REVOLUTION  
CREATING



When capital  
abuses our right  
to work, we fight  
to restore it.

When capital  
abuses our right  
to sustenance, we  
fight to secure  
it. When capital  
abuses our right  
to housing, to  
health, to life or  
to liberty, we  
fight tooth and  
nail to defend it.  
Thus, when capital  
seizes creativity  
from our hearts,  
we must fight to  
reclaim it.

The first duty of any revolutionary Marxist-Leninist minded individual is, and always has been, education. To educate others and to be educated by others is the basis of our movement. Only through comprehension can we hope to implement any meaningful change; only by *understanding* an issue can we hope to create a solution. By studying how capital originates and circulates, by studying how it accumulates and conquers, and by studying how it oppresses and exploits, our predecessors and contemporaries have been able to achieve the seemingly impossible. However, because of the ever expanding nature of capital, theoretical analysis must always be a continually evolving process. We must be able to understand each and every permutation of capital's oppressions, and we must be able to recognize its manifold markings. Accordingly, the revolutionary minded individual cannot limit themselves to the mere analysis of capital in one of its many forms. Where the boot of capital falls, we must be there to counter it. It logically follows that when put into practice, our actions must be all encompassing.

We cannot limit our actions to merely the political struggle, for capital does not reside solely within the political sphere. In the same way that the rich control the state apparatus, they also control the apparatuses of creative expression. Since the very first

REVOLUTIONARY  
ACTIVITY

revolutionary movements, the people have expressed themselves in art; they have created great works in the name of their cause. Music, in particular, has always conveyed the emotions of the people more organically, and more simply, than any theoretical treatise. In the Paris Commune, the Internationale, anthem of the working class, rang true for ages to come. In the concert halls of the Soviet Union, the Red Army Choir echoed proudly at the forefront of a nation, changing the future of martial music in countries across the globe. In the People's Republic of China, the people composed and performed great proletarian operas and orchestral masterpieces, taking control of their creativity and presenting the world with their determination. In the countless workers movements around the world, thousands of battle hymns, folk tunes, union songs, and working chanteys have been appended to the annals of revolutionary history.

As we advance into the future, the contradictions in capitalist society will become ever more apparent, dragging the working people of the world further and further into poverty, as the rich grow ever more wealthy. Likewise, the music industry under capital will eventually marginalize the artist to a mere doll through which a corporate decadence will be projected. The sounds of a capitalist future will not be determined through organic creativity, but through a corporately produced and propagated unit. In the same way that we must smash the bourgeois state and place a proletarian one in its place, we must also smash the bourgeois forms of expression and replace them with those that rise from the people. It is therefore our duty not only to educate and to liberate, but to give liberation a voice of expression. When capital abuses our right to work, we fight to restore it. When capital abuses our right to suste-

nance, we fight to secure it. When capital abuses our right to housing, to health, to life or to liberty, we fight tooth and nail to defend it. Thus, when capital seizes creativity from our hearts, we must fight to reclaim it. Only through a determined struggle on all fronts can the final victory be obtained.

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