

Metal Scene Formation in the World's Most Populous Region

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Of his band's Japanese admirers, Testament's Alex Skolnick writes:

These fans seemed to really notice the emotion expressed in my guitar solos, as though they related my pain to their own lives. This was incredibly interesting to me – here was this culture that was largely based on keeping expression and emotions in private. Yet they were actually hearing what I'd been trying to express through all the double kick drums, crunchy riffing, and growling vocals.¹

There are many possible reasons for metal's extraordinary popularity in Asia – and this chapter reviews some of them – but perhaps it is as simple as this ability to convey musical meaning across cultural boundaries.

Whatever the causes, metal's popularity in Asia is a social fact. While metal music is occasionally dismissed (even haughtily so) in the United States as nostalgic 'dad rock' or marginal esoterica for self-selecting elitists, in Asia the genre has remained vital, and its popularity appears to be growing. Composed of tens of millions of avid enthusiasts, the Asian metal music scene is an increasingly interconnected territory that has forged ties to other world regions through its most successful, distinctive-sounding groups, including Chthonic from Taiwan, Burgerkill, Seringai and Voice of Baceprot from Indonesia, Rudra from Singapore, The Hu Band from Mongolia, Bloodywood from India, and Babymetal from Japan. While it would not be inaccurate to state that online platforms enabled the global conquest of these bands, such an assertion would also be incomplete – even facile. The emergence of viable local music scenes and the culmination of a painstaking decades-long process of metal indigenisation were also necessary prerequisites for this success. In order to make an impact on the global scene, Asian metal acts also had to overcome Westerner listeners' resistance to Asian musics, a dismissal rooted in long-enduring colonial and racist stereotypes.² Among these stereotypes, as students of postcolonial theory are well aware, is the offensive notion that Asians are weak and emasculated compared to white Europeans. Thus the ability of Asian people, especially young Asian women, to master a music genre that extols strength and power

is consequential within the larger history of cultural representations. The following survey of metal music in Asia assesses major developments since the genre's 1970s introduction to the region by focusing on three contemporary, internationally acclaimed artists. There are obviously many other important groups representing every imaginable metal subgenre, but our present purposes will be served by these few examples.

Historical Background and Overview

Foreign popular musics, from Christian hymns to tangoes, have influenced local musical life in Asia for centuries; this intensified following the global dispersion of American jazz recordings in the early twentieth century.³ Following post-WWII decolonisation, fledgling Asian governments decried Western popular music as a corrosive cultural pollutant,⁴ resulting in a climate in which metal music was not only oppositional in a broad sense (the genre's conventional trafficking in transgressive imagery, sounds and behaviours) but specifically in that enthusiasm for metal culture became unavoidably anti-government and anti-censorship. While metal music's foreignness and racial otherness were at first barriers to its wholesale adoption, Asian metallers were inspired by Sepultura from Brazil, proof that metal could thrive in the non-Anglophone Third World, and Death Angel, a thrash metal band from the San Francisco Bay Area composed of Filipino cousins, taken as proof that Asians could play this music too. Many also knew of the partial Asian ancestries of Metallica guitarist Kirk Hammett (Filipino) and Eddie and Alex Van Halen (Indonesian).

Along with punk, hardcore and underground hip hop, metal is a form of Extreme Youth Music that has transformed the global musical and political landscape over the last fifty years.⁵ In the contemporary milieu, massive, long-established metal scenes in Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Nepal exert influence on rapidly expanding ones in India, China, mainland Southeast Asia and other regions on the continent. Japan is home to Asia's oldest metal community, with Loudness and EZO its best-known 1980s exports, and metal labels are powerful enough to even sign bands from other countries.⁶ Though men are still the majority, Japan is the world's most gender-balanced metal scene; this is likely due to the popularity of *visual kei*, a national hard rock genre with an ardent audience of mostly Japanese women.⁷ The connected metal scenes in the adjoining Southeast Asian nations of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore⁸

can trace their roots to the popularity of hard rock music in the region in the 1970s and 1980s⁹ but accelerated in the 1990s as underground networks of bands, gigs and DIY cassettes sprang up with links to the global tape-trading underground.¹⁰ This ‘Nusantara’ metal scene has produced bands representing every subgenre, from the atmospheric black metal of Jakarta’s Vallendusk to the traditional thrash of Shah Alam’s Cromok. Elsewhere in Asia, the megacity of Kathmandu became the epicentre of a massive Nepalese metal scene, with bands such as Cobweb and Ugra Karma,¹¹ while a smaller, tightly-knit metal scene arose in Bangladesh centred on the capital city of Dhaka.¹² Nascent scenes in Burma¹³ and other mainland Southeast Asian nations, China¹⁴ and the Indian subcontinent constitute fertile zones for future metal development. There has been little scholarly research on metal scenes in Central Asia, yet the region has produced some excellent groups, including Kazakhstan’s Aldaspan and Azerbaijan’s Violet Cold.

In recent years, awareness of other scenes within the region has increased, with more collaborative ventures undertaken. Founded in 2015 by Hong Kong musician Riz Farooqi, the website *Unite Asia* is a centralised source for information about Asian punk and metal bands. In October 2021, *Unite Asia* and other outlets announced that the early albums of the Singaporean ‘Vedic metal’ band Rudra, whose pathbreaking compositions combine Indian classical music and Hindu sacred texts with dissonant extreme metal,¹⁵ were being re-released by the Chinese independent metal label Awakening Records.

Rudra is the first old-school Asian metal band, and the first with such a distinctive locally developed sound, to be picked by the Chinese label. ‘I didn’t know what Vedic metal was, and I liked Rudra because of their music’, said Li Meng, Awakening Records’ manager. ‘In my mind, they are the true leaders of Asian extreme metal music’.¹⁶

As of this writing, such cross-regional collaborations are still uncommon, but their frequency is increasing as linguistic and logistical obstacles fall away.

The Metallification of Asian Music

I have written of four necessary steps in the integration of an Anglo-American popular music genre into a non-English-speaking country¹⁷: In the *first stage*, bands play English-language covers of songs by their favourite metal groups. Any original material in this stage is also performed in English to sound like the original source material. Bands who stay at this

stage can develop reputations in the local concert circuit but do not record albums and usually do not have nationwide profiles.

The *second stage* is characterised by linguistic hybridity, in which metal bands devise ways to deploy the national language in metal contexts. Once this difficult hurdle has been cleared, bands become commercially viable to national recording industries, and their members can pursue music careers. The Chinese band Tang Dynasty, whose classic heavy metal debut was one of the most commercially successful albums in 1990s China, is a good example of this second stage. So are legendary Indonesian bands Burgerkill and Seringai, who combine virtuosic musicianship, intense drive and a range of twentieth-century heavy metal influences with a deep engagement with Indonesian society and politics.

The Taiwanese band Chthonic, formed in 1995 in Taipei and one of the most politically active metal groups in the world, represent the pinnacle of the *third stage*, that of musical hybridity. While Tang Dynasty used traditional Chinese music in song intros and interludes, Chthonic developed a unique form of folk metal¹⁸ that combines the *erhu* (Chinese spike fiddle), called *hena* in Taiwan, with death, black and symphonic metal. Other East Asian stringed instruments such as the Japanese *koto* and the *yueqin* (Chinese moon lute) are added to song textures as well. Chthonic are well known for their outspoken support of Taiwan's independence from mainland China. After the pro-democracy, youth-driven Sunflower Movement dramatically reversed a long trend in Taiwanese politics toward assimilation into mainland China, lead singer Freddie Lim, previously chair of the local Amnesty International chapter, gained a parliamentary seat in 2016 as a member of the pro-independence New Power Party.

Chthonic are quite popular in their home country, despite the extremity of their sound. Due to the success of the nation of Taiwan in controlling the Coronavirus, Chthonic have been able to play large concerts on their home turf, attracting thousands of masked spectators. The band's CD recording of their massive 27 March 2021 concert in Takao, Taiwan, which is shipped in a box with customised face masks, a hand sanitiser bottle and a face mask chain, attests to their continuing appeal to young Taiwanese.

While Chthonic now also enjoy an enthusiastic global audience, this was built slowly over the twenty-five years of the band's existence. The remainder of this chapter will discuss two groups that exemplify even better the *fourth stage* of genre indigenisation: the phase of *internationalisation*, when a band's unique sound attracts a global audience. The two bands, Babymetal and Voice of Baceprot, were founded more recently, and while their composition is unusual, they both exemplify this phase.

Enter Babymetal

Babymetal, whose name rhymes with the Japanese pronunciation of 'heavy metal', were created in 2010 by a Japanese record producer (Kei Kobayashi, later known as 'Kobametal') out of a subgroup of a school-themed pop idol collective called Sakura Gakuin (Cherry Blossom Academy). The group, three teenaged singer-dancers backed by experienced session players and programmed accompaniment, performed an audacious amalgam of chirpy J-pop and thrash/death metal, a combination that took many by surprise and was widely thought at first to be nothing more than a bizarre novelty. Indeed, at one time, the success of Babymetal in the international metal arena would have seemed improbable, since by featuring Japanese teenagers in a clearly manufactured pop group, Babymetal appeared to violate so many of the sacrosanct genre rules of metal.¹⁹ Yet Babymetal now play to packed stadiums around the world and are featured regularly in major metal magazines such as *Revolver* and *Metal Hammer*, the latter featuring the two remaining members of the group (Suzuka Nakamoto ['Su-metal'] and Moa Kikuchi ['Moa-metal']) on the cover of its July 2021 issue, marking the band's tenth anniversary. In the words of staff writer Stephen Hill, 'A decade on from their inception, Babymetal's mix of hyperactive J-pop, brutal riffs and heavy metal bombast has seen them sell out arenas, stun major festivals, conquer the mainstream, befriend legends of the genre and make some members of *Hammer's* Facebook page throw proper toddler tantrums'.²⁰ One reason for their success, controversial though it may be, is that the energetic synthesis of pop music and death metal Babymetal wound up performing by their second album was really a form of power metal, a subgenre that *already existed* in the metal pantheon, a subgenre that combines uplifting, melodic songs of self-empowerment, often employing Mixolydian or Ionian modes, with churning extreme-metal riffs.

To the Babymetal story I have two additional observations. First, the basic pattern of singer flanked by two backup dancers has strong East Asian antecedents. The Korean superstar and popular music trailblazer Seo Taiji, who started his career as a heavy metal bass player, was the first artist to have two hype dancers and perform intricate pop-music choreography to speed metal²¹ – Babymetal is really just following in their footsteps. Furthermore, since they combine metal with a national style of music (J-pop) and sing mostly but not exclusively in their national tongue, Babymetal could be viewed as the world's most commercially successful folk metal band.

Second, as Lorraine Plourde has observed, Babymetal can be said to epitomise the Japanese ideal of *kawaii*, loosely translated as ‘cute’.²² Yet this is a version of cuteness that includes the concealed menace of that which is coded as harmless and feminine (such as a kitten’s sharp claws and teeth). As stated above, much of Asian heavy metal’s aesthetic potency in the West derives from its capacity to overcome Orientalist expectations. The sight and sound of young Asian women mastering a powerful style of music confounds underestimations born of anti-Asian, ageist and sexist bias, rendering such performances compelling and memorable. And thus there is now a whole metal subgenre pioneered by Babymetal: *kawaii* metal.

Even before Babymetal’s massive global popularity (for example, as the first Asian act to top the Billboard Rock Chart in 2019, it is the most popular Japanese band in the history of the United States), there was no shortage of Japanese women metal artists who play their own instruments, including in bands on the most extreme end of the spectrum. Contemporary groups include Aldious, Bridear, Gallhammer, Hagane and the veteran grindcore group Flagitious Idiosyncrasy in the Dilapidation. Yet the group of young woman metal musicians who eventually captured the Western media’s imagination came not from Japan but from Asia’s other massive metal scene, Indonesia, which has its own proud history of female participation.

Voice of Baceprot: The Future of Metal Is Now

‘Move Over, Babymetal’ announces the title of an article in online fansite *The Mary Sue*, ‘Indonesian All-Girl Metal Band Voice of Baceprot Is Here to Rock’.²³ Originally from a rural village approximately 20 kilometres outside the town of Garut, West Java, the members of Voice of Baceprot (roughly, ‘chatterbox’), singer/guitarist Firdda Kurnia (Marsya), bassist Nidi Rahmawati (Widi) and drummer Euis Siti Aisyah (Sitti), have been celebrated for their instrumental virtuosity and their willingness to challenge entrenched expectations regarding gender, religiosity and metal performance. The trio, who all wear the Muslim headscarf that is typical modest attire of village women in West Java, was first introduced to metal by their music teacher, who eventually became the band’s manager, Cep Ersa Eka Susila (known as Abah). Significantly, Abah is, unlike Kobametal, less of a Svengali figure and more of a facilitator/collaborator; when the group toured Europe for the first time in the fall of 2021, he stayed behind.

Voice of Baceprot play an aggressive amalgam of thrash and nu metal; the bands the three musicians mention most often in interviews as

influences are Gojira, Metallica, Rage Against the Machine, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sepultura, Slipknot and System of a Down. They are quite adept at their instruments, and their skill level individually and collectively is far above most ensembles twice their age. Voice of Baceprot have received a great deal of attention from Western media outlets, but in fact headscarf-wearing Muslim women playing heavy metal are not that unusual in Indonesia. Vocalist Asri Yuniar (Achie) of Gugat, virtuoso guitarist Meliana Siti Sumartini and drummer Siti Nurjanah of Soul of Slamming are some of the best-known figures currently in the scene. Moreover, the vast Indonesia metal scene is a place where countless women of varying degrees of adherence to Islamic practice (and female members of non-Muslim minorities) have long found avenues of self-expression.

Generally, the stages of music genre adoption slowly build on each other over decades, but because they are such a new band, Voice of Baceprot encapsulate all four at once: they still perform English-language covers, they play original songs in a combination of Indonesian and English, and recently they even debuted an instrumental based on the Sundanese pentatonic scale. Finally, of course, they have definitely impacted the international scene. The group have yet to record a whole album of original material but have already been covered by National Public Radio (US), *The Guardian* (UK), *The South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), the *New York Times* and the international metal music press. While this chapter was being completed, the trio finished their first European tour (Covid-19 notwithstanding, though they had to cancel a few dates) and seems poised to win increasing numbers of fans overseas.

While touring Europe, the members of Voice of Baceprot were surprised and somewhat dismayed to encounter so many interviewers' questions about their headscarves rather than their music. Since Europeans are more familiar with Middle Eastern Islam and the perennial conflicts between fundamentalist religion and heavy metal,²⁴ it is not surprising that they would not grasp the nuances of the Indonesian situation. Though Voice of Baceprot have certainly encountered staunch opposition from conservative religious forces in their own country, Islam itself is not regarded as problematic by most Indonesian metalheads, as opposed to certain strict, intolerant interpretations of it. In fact, numerous commentators, including Islamic scholars, have held up the members of Voice of Baceprot as religious and feminist role models for fellow Indonesians.²⁵ The trio have also received a great deal of support from members of Indonesia's longstanding metal scene, including Stevie Item from death

metal supergroup DeadSquad²⁶ and Stephen Santoso from the traditional metal band Musikimia.

Conclusion

Heavy metal has a long history in Asia. After first entering the region surreptitiously, in the form of rare and frequently unauthorised recordings, the music is now performed regularly by local groups and, while still not a mainstay of popular entertainment, is easily accessible through the internet.

As the social disruptions of neoliberal capitalist development and proletarianization of nonaffluent classes progresses in Asian nations, metal music only increases in appeal for those marginalised by modernity's depredations, with the music's ability to express the strong emotions that attend social upheaval, ethical unmoorings, and the psychic wounds of increasing and conspicuous economic inequality. At the same time, the emergence of unique Asian metal 'alloys' has caught the attention of the international metal scene. Asian metal studies is not yet a recognised subfield, but it is only a matter of time.

As Asian bands have attracted the enthusiastic attention of international audiences, they have compelled a shift in dominant representations of Asian musics, which in the West have either been dismissed as boringly derivative, inauthentic pop or abstruse traditional styles inaccessible to non-Asian ears. Asian metal is decidedly neither, and its hold upon the imagination of the global music scene has arguably just begun. This chapter has argued that in order to understand Asia's best-known metal exports, it is crucial to learn about the vibrant scenes from which they came.

Notes

1. Alex Skolnick, *From Geek to Guitar Hero* (Louder Education, 2013), p. 254.
2. See Robyn Perry, 'Ersatz as the Day Is Long': *Japanese Popular Music, the Struggle for Authenticity, and Cold War Orientalism*, MA dissertation (Bowling Green State University, 2021).
3. E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Duke University Press, 2001).
4. Steven Farram, 'Wage War against Beatle Music! Censorship and Music in Soekarno's Indonesia', *RIMA: Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 41/2 (2007): 247–77.

5. Pierre Hecker, Mark LeVine, Nahid Siamdoust and Jeremy Wallach, 'Epilogue: The Joys of Resistance', in Mark LeVine (ed.), *We'll Play Till We Die: Journeys across a Decade of Revolutionary Music in the Muslim World* (University of California Press, 2022), pp. 251–86.
6. Kei Kawano and Shuhei Hosokawa, 'Thunder in the Far East: The Heavy Metal Industry in 1990s Japan', in Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene (eds.), *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 247–69.
7. Oliver Seibt, 'Asagi's Voice: Learning How to Desire with Japanese *Visual-kei*', in Christian Utz and Frederick Lau (eds.), *Vocal Music and Contemporary Identities: Unlimited Voices in East Asia and the West* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 248–66. Gender and the role and status of women in the scene have been central preoccupations of studies of heavy metal from the beginning. There has been relatively limited attention paid to heavy metal and gender in Asia, however, though see Hinhin Agung Daryana, Aquarini Priyatna and Raden Muhammad Mulyadi, 'The New Metal Men: Exploring Model of Flexible Masculinity in the Bandung Metal Scene', *Masculinities and Social Change* 9/2 (2020): 148–73; Marissa Saraswati and Annisa R. Beta, 'Knowing Responsibly: Decolonizing Knowledge Production of Indonesian Girlhood', *Feminist Media Studies* 21/5 (2021): 758–74; and Seibt, 'Asagi's Voice'.
8. This multinational, multicultural ecumene, often called the Nusantara region, has a long and robust history of musical cross-pollination and exchange. See Adil Johan and Mayco Santaella (eds.), *Made in Nusantara* (Routledge, 2021).
9. See Marco Ferrarase, 'Southeast Asian Glamour: The Strange Case of Rock Kapak in Malaysia', in Ian Chapman and Henry Johnson (eds.), *Global Glam and Popular Music: Style and Spectacle from the 1970s to the 2000s* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 232–44; Steve Ferzacca, *Sonic City: Making Rock Music and Urban Life in Singapore* (National University of Singapore Press, 2020).
10. Emma Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk and Death Metal in 1990s Bali* (Duke University Press, 2007); Amalina Timbang and Zawawi Ibrahim, 'Malay Metalheads: Situating Metal Music Culture in Brunei', *Situations* 10/2 (2017): 7–26; Jeremy Wallach, *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia, 1997–2001* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
11. Paul D. Greene, 'Electronic and Affective Overdrive: Tropes of Transgression in Nepal's Heavy Metal Scene', in Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene (eds.), *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 109–34.
12. Shams Bin Quader and Guy Redden, 'Approaching the Underground: The Production of Alternatives in the Bangladeshi Metal Scene', *Cultural Studies* 29/3 (2014): 1–24.

13. Heather MacLachlan, '(Mis)representation of Burmese Metal Music in the Western Media', *Metal Music Studies* 2/3 (2016): 395–404.
14. Cynthia P. Wong, "'A Dream Return to Tang Dynasty': Masculinity, Male Camaraderie, and Chinese Heavy Metal in the 1990s', in Jeremy Wallach, Harris M. Berger and Paul D. Greene (eds.), *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 63–85. In 2016, Yu Zheng located active metal bands in every Chinese province consulting a combination of English- and Chinese-language social media. See Yu Zheng, *'The Screaming Successor': Exploring the Chinese Metal Scene in Contemporary Chinese Society (1996–2015)*, MA dissertation (Bowling Green State University, 2016).
15. Eugene I. Dairianathan, 'Vedic Metal and the South Indian Community in Singapore: Problems and Prospects of Identity', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10/4 (2009): 585–608.
16. Marco Ferrarase, 'Southeast Asian Vedic Heavy Metal Rocks China's Extreme Music Scene', *Nikkei Asia* (16 July 2021).
17. Jeremy Wallach, 'Global Rock as Postcolonial Soundtrack', in Allan Moore and Paul Carr (eds.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Rock Music Research* (Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 469–85.
18. Folk metal, which strategically combines local instruments with metal music, originated in twentieth century Europe and has flourished in diverse locales, from Latin America to East Africa. Numerous Asian bands specialise in this subgenre, such as Eternal Madness (Bali, Indonesia), Nine Treasures (Inner Mongolia, China), Black Kirin (Jilin, China) and the aptly named Japanese Folk Metal (Kanagawa, Japan). While they are more hard rock than metal, Mongolia's celebrated Hu Band also fit the folk metal template.
19. Lewis Kennedy, 'Is Kawaii Metal? Exploring Aidoru/Metal Fusion through the Lyrics of Babymetal', in Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi, Charlotte Doesburg and Amanda Digioia (eds.), *Multilingual Metal Music: Sociocultural, Linguistic and Literary Perspectives on Heavy Metal Lyrics* (Emerald, 2020), pp. 201–19.
20. Various Authors, '10 Years of Babymetal: The Story of a Modern Metal Phenomenon', *Metal Hammer* (July 2021), p. 37.
21. Sarah Morelli, "'Who Is a Dancing Hero?'" Rap, Hip Hop, and Dance in Korean Popular Culture', in Tony Mitchell (ed.), *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA* (Wesleyan University Press, 2001), pp. 248–58.
22. Lorraine Plourde, 'Babymetal and the Ambivalence of Cuteness', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21/3 (2018): 293–307.
23. Teresa Jusino, 'Move Over, Babymetal: Indonesian All-Girl Metal Band Voice of Baceprot Is Here to Rock', *The Mary Sue* (15 August 2017).
24. See Mark LeVine, *Headbanging against Repressive Regimes: Censorship of Heavy Metal in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia and China* (Freemuse, 2009).

25. Endrizal Ridwan and Bardi Rahmawan, 'The Heavy Metal Genre in an Islamic City of Padang: Struggle and Promotion', *Attarbiyah: Journal of Islamic Culture and Education* 6/1 (2021): 1–14; Saraswati and Beta, 'Knowing Responsibly'.
26. For more on the Indonesian death metal scene, which is likely the largest in the world, see Kieran James and Rex Walsh, 'Bandung Rocks, Cibinong Shakes: Economics and Applied Ethics within the Indonesian Death-Metal Community', *Musicology Australia* 37/1 (2015): 28–46; Dennis W. Lee, "'Negeri Seribu Bangsa": Musical Hybridization in Contemporary Indonesian Death Metal', *Metal Music Studies* 4/3 (2018): 531–48.