Music as Resistance: Arirang, Han, and Liberation

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A belief commonly held throughout various musical spaces is the idea that music is a "universal language," and that a prerequisite to performing or creating music should be leaving all personal strife and baggage "at the door." While music can certainly be a respite from the everyday obstacles that one may face, art is, in fact, inherently political. The Oxford English Dictionary defines politics to be "the assumptions or principles relating to or underlying any activity, theory, or attitude, especially when concerned with questions of power and status in a society."[1] The politics of music refers to every aspect of the music-making life cycle, whether it be the cultural and social background of each composer, the pieces that performers choose—or do not choose—to play, or the concerts and organizations that audiences decide to support. When it comes to the liberation of an oppressed people, music can play a key role in fostering solidarity due to its political nature.

Arirang, a beloved Korean folksong which is widely regarded as the unofficial national anthem of both Koreas,[2] is an invaluable piece of music not only because of its tangible beauty, but also the fact that it is the musical personification of Korea's political legacy. The Korean peninsula, like many other nations and regions that were reduced to discardable pawns in power

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[1] "politics," Oxford English Dictionary, last modified September 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/politics_n?tab=meaning_and_use#13190742

[2] Donna Lee Kwon, "Korea from Both Sides of the Border," in *Music in Korea: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

struggles among the already powerful, was a victim of the "general scramble for colonies among the major world powers."[3] Japanese occupation and exploitation left Korea unstable, giving both the United States and USSR a chance to further take advantage of the internal conflict and differences in ideology post-1945. *Arirang* is a symbol of the resistance and struggle that the Korean people have and will continue to exhibit.

***Minyo*: Korean Folksongs and Assimilation**

The term *minyo*, or folksong, was introduced during Japanese occupation by writer Mori Ogai, who had translated the German word *Volksleid*.[4] As such, the word itself, although very much a part of Korean identity, will always have an association with the ways in which the brutal Japanese administration ethnically cleansed and demonized traditional Korean culture. While the folksongs themselves may not have been originally created, performed, and passed down in reaction to Japan's occupation, the very term that categorizes them among the many branches of *gugak* is a reminder of it.

The reason that *Arirang* is such a popular folksong that now spreads across two nations is due to its classification as *t'ongsok minyo,* or widespread folksong, as opposed to *t'osok minyo*,

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[3] "The Japanese Occupation of Korea: 1910-1945," Korea Society, September 2007. https://www.koreasociety.org/images/pdf/KoreanStudies/Monographs_LessonPlans/High_School/5%20The%20Japanese%20Occupation%20of%20Korea%201910-1945.pdf

[4] Keith Howard, "Minyo in Korea: Songs of the People and Songs for the People." *Asian Music* 30, no. 2 (1999): 1, https://doi.org/10.2307/834312

meaning local folksong. Donna Lee Kwon describes the former as having "more entertainment value" and the latter as "limited to a specific geographic area."[5]

These two groupings of *minyo* are comparable to how hip-hop has various specific regional differences that are not known to the mainstream, but specific genres, like trap and drill, have become globally popular, despite initially originating in their own areas in the United States. However, the transition from local to widespread poses its own issues, as it gives way to the appropriation and distortion of the original culture, as well as the erasure of the context in which the music resides. Experimentation with a specific kind of music or genre as well as inevitable evolutions that occur within the music do not equate to said distortion. Instead, a lack of regard for and willful ignorance about the various histories surrounding the art are the true issue. A common criticism Black artists have about those who appropriate their music is that often, non-Black musicians will utilize the sounds, techniques, and foundations of genres, such as trap, but fail to voice their support for the culture from which they are taking.

Arirang, due to its general popularity, was an easy target for appropriation by Japanese artists, who recorded their own versions of the folksong as a way to feed into "Japanese fantasies of a primordial Korean wonderland."[6] Because of the increased Western influence through the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japan had consequently opened its doors to various forms of music from around the world, including *Arirang,* and "Japanese composers and arrangers used all the

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[5] Donna Lee Kwon, "The Singing Voice," in *Music in Korea: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90.

[6] Taylor E. Atkins, "The Dual Career of 'Arirang': The Korean Resistance Anthem That Became a Japanese Pop Hit," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 3 (2007): 646. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20203201.

musical means at their disposal…to refashion 'Arirang' in an astonishing variety of ways."[7] As a function of such, the unceremonious and disrespectful constant disassembly and reassembly of the folksong to fit Japanese desire and taste is reminiscent of the dehumanization and exploitation of Koreans themselves—just as *Arirang* was regarded as a "pretty and quaint" Korean song that could be used in whichever way Japanese composers saw fit, the Korean people were viewed as replaceable objects whether it be the forced drafts during the Second World War, or the torture of protesting students on March 1st, 1919.[8]

Many prominent Japanese composers and artists, including composer Koga Masao (1904-1978), founder of the *mingei*, or folk craft, movement Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889-1961), and art connoisseur Asakawa Noritaka (1884-1964) viewed Korean arts as mystical childlike wonders, free from the strife of reality and having a fantastical connection to the earth.[9] The idea that an entire people group can collectively produce infantilized, "natural," art is problematic, because it promotes the notion that said people are in need of guidance by a somehow mentally superior or enlightened group. This argument is a direct iteration of European colonizers and conquistadors who believed that it was their divine right and duty to "enlighten" the supposedly savage indigenous peoples in the Americas. In other words, it was common among colonizers and proponents of imperialism to generalize the colonized as either barbaric animals or exoticized fantasies, both needing to be "settled."

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[7] Atkins, "The Dual Career," 658.

[8] Korea Society, "The Japanese Occupation."

[9] Atkins, "The Dual Career," 658.

The genesis of imperial Japan was marked by the overthrowing of the last Tokugawa shogun in 1868, marking the end of traditional political and social values and the increase in both Western influence and political systems,[10] as Japan wanted to be a part of the so-called "imperialist scramble"[11] that major Western powers were undertaking. Unsurprisingly, the style of music accepted by the Japanese-controlled government was that which took on Western influence. One such instance was *shin minyo,* or new folksongs, which were both popular and commercially viable during the 1930's,[12] a time where Japan had relaxed its ethnic cleansing policies in favor of "tutoring Koreans toward a distant day of independence."[13] Many of these newer folksongs combined aspects of traditional *minyo* and Western technique, including ornamentation from the former, and instrumentation and form from the latter.[14] It is plausible that Japan viewed this music as a sign of Korea's own "Meiji Restoration" and the fact that its culture, and by extension, social, economic, and political systems would be easily influenced by Western ideals. Even if Korea did become independent, its "Westernization" would allow Japan to still have economic advantages in the region.

The *Arirangs*: Characteristics of *Minyo*

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[10] "Empire of Japan," Encyclopaedia Britannica, February 16, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/Empire-of-Japan.

[11] Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Empire of Japan."

[12] Kwon, "The Singing Voice."

[13] Bruce Cumings, "Korea, A Unique Colony: Last to be Colonized and First to Revolt," November 1, 2021, https://apjjf.org/2021/21/cumings.

[14] Kwon, Donna Lee, "Colonial Legacies in Korea," in *Music in Korea: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127.

The idea of pitch in *gugak* differs from its Western counterpart, in that Korean traditional music views pitch as a gesture, rather than an independent note. A singular gesture is almost a phrase within itself—one note could contain slow vibrato, lifts, and distortion.[15] This performance practice, known as *sigimsae,* is one of the many aspects that constitute the four branches of regional *minyo.*[16]

Arirang, although often referred to as a singular folksong, has different iterations across these regions, with each version containing specific techniques of *minyo* from these areas. For example, *Arirang* from the Kyŏnggi province, or Kyŏnggi-do, is a part of the region's musical language of *gyeongtori,* which utilizes *do, re, fa, sol,* and *la*, also known as an anhemitonic pentatonic mode, where *do* is movable.[17] Instead of Western tonal harmony dictating how tendency tones function, this mode places *fa* as the central note, *cheong,* with the other four pitches functioning as a direct path towards the center.[18] *Chindo Arirang* and *Milyang Arirang,* originate from the Chŏlla province and eastern region, respectively, and have pitch centers that differ from the Western conception of scales and chords. *Chindo Arirang* has what is known as *kkeokneunum,* or the "bending note-pair,"[19] which are performed together as a pitch gesture,

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[15] "Introduction to Korean Traditional Music Styles," Sejong Cultural Society, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/composition/current/music/intro.php

[16] "Korean Traditional Music Styles."

[17] Kwon, "The Singing Voice," 93-94.

[18] "Arirang," Sejong Cultural Society, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/composition/current/music/arirang.php

[19] "Jindo Arirang," Sejong Cultural Society, accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/composition/current/music/jindo.php

despite being separate on a Western notation system. The discrepancy and inability for such systems to capture the intricacies of *sigimsae* is reminiscent of how various other forms of music, including Hindustani and Carnatic styles, as well as Turkish classical traditions, cannot be transferred onto a staff. As such, it is impossible to name Western notation and performance techniques as the superior method, because while they may be effective in some cases, they tend to fall short when the music is not "the norm." However, the notion that Western culture is superior was clearly displayed in the types of music that the Japanese administration censored or allowed during the period of occupation.

Arirang and *Han*

Han is a collective sentiment, characteristic, and attitude said to be inherent to the Korean people. It has no concrete definition in the English language and is unlike any ideology found in the West. A possible explanation of *han* is the process in which both a people and an individual face a specific kind of hardship which they accept as fate—they then carry the anger, resentment, and grief with them, never externalizing it. Many definitions focus on the idea of resentment growing over time[20] but fail to address the equally significant aspects of acceptance and resignation which are what makes this concept so unique to Koreans. The closest word to *han* in any Western language could be the Greek "pathos," which equates to the experience and feelings of suffering and sadness and is commonly used as a means of evoking a certain emotions within an audience.[21] However, *han* is distinctive in that while it is a shared collective experience, it is

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[20] Heather Willoughby, "The Sound of Han: P'ansori, Timbre and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000): 18-19, https://doi.org/10.2307/3185241.

[21] "Logos, Ethos, Pathos, Kairos," University of Louisville, accessed March 22, 2024, https://louisville.edu/writingcenter/for-students-1/handouts-and-resources/handouts-1/logos-

also very much a private, sometimes isolating one as well. This is reminiscent of the Korean peninsula's past as a "hermit kingdom."[22] Because of Korea's general aversion to outside influence, it is no surprise that the internalization of grief and suffering is what truly constitutes *han,* rather than outward expression. The catharsis for this enclosed emotion lies in what Heather Willoughby describes as the "Sound of *Han*."[23] She argues that the text, rhythm, melodic modes, and physical gestures of *p'ansori*, a sung, storytelling genre of music provide relief for the Korean people.[24] Unlike pathos, which asks audiences to empathize with the suffering of another, the reflection of *han* in music allows Koreans to experience their own hardships together.

Similarly, m*inyo,* specifically all the versions of *Arirang,* despite lacking the storytelling gestures of *p'ansori*, are both a respite from and reflection of the collective suffering experienced by the Korean people. A common belief and value in Western practice is that music must "go somewhere." The more harmonically complex and the more composers deviate from and subvert common musical tropes, the better. On the other hand, *Arirang*, and its various iterations, is cyclical. Upon listening to Kyŏnggi-do *Arirang*, *Chindo Arirang*, and *Milyang Arirang,* audiences can easily hear the *changdan*, or rhythmic cycle, in which the folksongs revolve around. The pattern that the *Arirangs* utilize is known as *semach'i,* a moderately paced cycle that

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ethos-pathos-kairos#:~:text=Pathos%20(Greek%20for%20%E2%80%9Csuffering%E2%80%9D%20or%20%E2%80%9Cexperience%E2%80%9D)

[22] Kwon, "Korea from Both Sides of the Border," 13.

[23] Willoughby, "The Sound of *Han*," 20.

[24] Willoughby, "The Sound of *Han*," 23-28.

can be noted in a 9/8 time-signature.[25] The use of any *changdan* paints an image of constantly returning to the same place where one began, and the moderate tempo of *semach'i* adds to a resigned walk towards the destination. As a function of such, Korean people's acceptance of *han* as something they will always carry with them, without complaint, is expressed sonically by *changdan.*

The text of each *Arirang* also signifies aspects of *han*—the title evokes a sense of loss as *Arirang* itself is "nonsensical, generally implying the cultural sensibilities of longing and suffering."[26] Partial lyrics of Kyŏnggi-do *Arirang* and *Chindo Arirang* are as follows:

> *Arirang:*
>
> After abandoning me, my departing dear one/ I
> cannot even walk ten *li* without getting sore feet[27]
>
> *Chindo Arirang:*
>
> While meeting my lover coming and going/ Even
> though the logging is done I cannot play[28]

Much of the lyrical content throughout both *minyo* has much to do with a lost loved one, whether it be a significant other, family member, or friend. To the Japanese composers who appropriated *Arirang*, this long-lost person would have been an imaginary fantasy, created to

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[25] "Arirang."

[26] "Arirang."

[27] Kwon, "The Singing Voice," 93.

[28] Kwon, "The Singing Voice," 91.

highlight Korea's perceived innocence and wonder. The loss motif has dual meanings when looking at it through a modern lens. In the context of Japanese occupation, this figure represents the separation of families, loss of culture, like language and music, as well as loss of historical autonomy due to the ethnic cleansing practices of the Japan-imposed education system.

However, one can interpret the motif as the physical separation of the Korea after 1945, as the disregard for the humanity of Koreans did not stop after Korean independence from Japan. After the Second World War, both the United States and USSR did not "allow the Korean people to decide their own future,"[29] each global power viewing the peninsula as a way to gain an advantage over the other during the Cold War. To them, the land of Korea was just as disposable as its people, and both were no more than a means to an end. During his time as president, Franklin D. Roosevelt "acknowledged at once the importance of this strategic peninsula for peace in Asia."[30] To nations like the United States, peace did not mean the dignity and liberation of an oppressed people, but rather a country they would only support so long as it benefitted their own economic and political interests. This is evident in the way that the U.S. military mishandled and essentially inflicted a second authoritarian government in southern Korea, relying solely on English-speaking Korean officials who had previously worked with Japan for their own benefit, while the "Soviets ignored U.S. requests to coordinate occupation policies and allow free traffic across the parallel."[31] Korea and its people became a pawn in the game of struggle between the

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[29] James I. Matray, "The Korean War 101: Causes, Course, and Conclusion of the Conflict," *Education About Asia* 17, no. 3 (2012): 23, https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/the-korean-war-101-causes-course-and-conclusion-of-the-conflict/

[30] Matray, "The Korean War 101," 23.

[31] Matray, "The Korean War 101," 24.

United States and the USSR—between capitalism and communism. Consequently, forced separation and exploitation are unfortunate realities and commonalities for the Korean people. The resentment, sadness, and suffering which constitute *han* are simply ramifications of the preventable ways in which Koreans were not allowed to be human.

Han, the shared experience, has proven its foundational role in Korean identity through the efforts of both North and South Korea to preserve and promote the culture of a pre-1948 nation. While North Korea has utilized "traditional folksongs and melodies in reconstructing a strong national repertoire," South Korea has been actively "working to preserve a plethora of highly localized forms.[32] Despite being ideologically and societally opposite, both Koreas recognize that their people have a connection that cannot be separated by arbitrary borders.

Resistance and Liberation

With most global powers refusing to acknowledge the ways in which they have harmed others in hopes of gaining power, wealth, and status, it is crucial that the oppressed and exploited continue to advocate and raise their voices, and equally pertinent that the privileged listen. Instead of ranking music and various musical languages based on commercial success and viability, understanding the historical and social contexts in which the music was created in, as well as evolved through, can aid in fostering empathy. However, Japan's treatment of *Arirang,* and current artists' use of marginalized traditions is a clear commentary on not music's ability to hold political power, but rather oppressor's inability to see the oppressed as anything other than subhuman. The concept of *han* as a means of resistance is complex in that it is not only a

[32] Kwon, "Korea from Both Sides of the Border," 18.

reminder of the colonial oppression faced by Koreans, but also a communal memory and space, not specific to either North or South Korea. The possible future of a truly united and liberated Korean people would imply that the cultural threads that tie groups of people together cannot be severed by the selfish, inhumane power struggles among those who have little regard for the humanity of others.

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