

Minjung Kayo: Imagining Democracy through Song in South Korea

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Abstract

During South Korea's authoritarian period (1961–87), student activists employed songs to express their anti-government and pro-democratic views. Known as *minjung kayo* (people's songs), these protest songs can be traced to the modern American folk music embraced by South Korean youth in the 1960s. By the late 1980s, however, *minjung kayo* carried emphatically anti-American, nationalistic, and socialist tones, echoing the *minjung* ideals that strove to achieve authentic 'Koreanness'. This article unravels the complexities underlying the process of *minjung kayo*'s development into an emblem of the pro-democratic movement, which entailed a shift away from its initial reflective and poetic style inspired by American folk music (exemplified in the songs of Kim Min-ki) and a move towards the militant style influenced by the Marxist composer Hanns Eisler. It argues that *minjung kayo* embodied the complex relationship South Korean activists held with their colonial past and autocratic present, as well as visions of their democratic future.

South Korea's transition to democracy in 1988 followed nearly three decades of confrontational tension between the authoritarian regime and organized opposition movements. During this period, student activists constituted one of the major forces challenging the state, beginning with the student uprising of April 1960 that led to the resignation of South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee. Violent measures of protest and repression ensued, following the pattern that Christian Davenport has termed the 'Law of Coercive Responsiveness'.¹ The autocratic regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-hwan of the 1970s and the 1980s drew upon military force to quell public demonstrations, meaning that civil activists needed to find alternative ways to protest. *Minjung kayo* – translated as 'popular songs of the people' – was one such tactic. *Minjung kayo* had its root in the intellectual and community-oriented milieu of university campuses in the late 1960s, reflecting the emergence of a distinct countercultural youth culture (*Ch'öngnyön munhwa*). Throughout the 1970s, when student activism intensified in the wake of Park Chung Hee's 1972 promulgation of the authoritarian Yusin Constitution, the songs that South Korean youth had embraced in the previous decade – in particular, modern American folk songs – became

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I thank the Korea Democracy Foundation for allowing me to use copies of the scores donated by American Presbyterian missionary Linda Huffman Jones (1944–2010).

¹ Christian Davenport, 'State Repression and Political Order', *The Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007).

the musical archetype for a growing body of protest songs. After the 1980 Kwangju Uprising, as student activists fully embraced the nationalistic ideology of *minjung* ('the masses' or 'the people') as their central ethos, the protest songs became known as *minjung kayo*. In both its cultural and political manifestations, *minjung kayo* served as an expression of the aspirations of South Korea's pro-democracy movement.

As a symbol and sound of resistance during South Korea's transition to democracy, *minjung kayo* reflected the complex attitudes of young people towards Western culture and their native Korean culture. While *minjung kayo*'s origins can be traced to the modern Western folk and country music enthusiastically embraced by Korean youth in the 1960s, the relationship of Korean youth culture to the values expressed in Western folk music evolved in important ways over time. At first, the Korean appropriation of American folk music – which came to be known as *p'ok'ŭsong* (the Korean transliteration of folk song) – was devoid of the marked sociopolitical undertones of singers such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. However, as university students became politicized during the 1970s, *p'ok'ŭsong* became re-politicized. By the late 1980s, as South Korea's democratic movement peaked, *minjung kayo* had developed into explicit anti-hegemonic political statements, purveyed with their own local agendas and characteristics. This evolution entailed both politicization of the lyrics and changes in musical style.

A further key factor in the adaptation of American popular forms was a growing nationalist impulse, a salient aspect of the *minjung* ideology. As the oppressiveness of autocracy became conflated with the social issues resulting from the state's concentration on economic rebuilding, South Korea's democracy movements in the 1970s and 1980s increasingly addressed those driven to the peripheries of society during the country's rapid modernization. *Minjung* was therefore the ideological locus that brought together the marginalized and those who stood in solidarity with them. Seeking historical inspiration in the *Tonghak Undong* of 1894, an anti-government insurrection led by armed peasants and the followers of the *Tonghak* religion, and the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919, a series of nationwide anti-Japan protests initiated by students and religious leaders, the *minjung* movement was, as Namhee Lee elucidates, 'intimately tied to the critical re-evaluation of modern Korean history'.² This foundation gave the agenda of the student-led democratic movements a nationalistic bent, which was further reinforced by student activists' increasing perception of South Korea's autocratic regime as subservient to American interests. *Minjung kayo*, as a tactical strategy and cultural expression of the *minjung* movement, also increasingly embodied a nationalistic disposition. Yet, as a genre influenced by modern Western folk music, this orientation presented fundamental ironies.

Previous accounts of *minjung kayo* have focused upon the rise of South Korean youth culture in the late 1960s, the influence of American folk music, and the genre's evolution into a prominent element of the protest movement throughout the 1970s and the 1980s.³ Such

2 Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 24. See also Nancy Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 27–35.

3 See Aekyung Park, 'Modern Folksong and People's Song (*Minjung Kayo*)', in *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Hyunjoon Shin and Seung-Ah Lee (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Young Mee Lee, *Dongbaek agassi*

history is helpful in parsing out *minjung kayo*'s inadvertent implication in political conversations throughout the 1970s and its conscious involvement in radical social movements in the 1980s. Less explored is the question of how the initial American inspiration for *minjung kayo* fared in the face of the *minjung* ideology's growing emphasis on Korean traditions. A further important perspective has recently been offered by Chang Nam Kim, who argues that *minjung kayo*, despite cultivating a successful system outside the institutional arena, operated similarly to the mainstream, hegemonic culture, developing its own fan base, market structure, and responses to technological developments.⁴ Such an analysis is confirmed by the entry of an offshoot of *minjung kayo* into the mainstream popular music industry during the mid-1980s, gaining wider acceptance for the genre among the general population, but also implying a potential dilution of its message of dissent and difference.

From these conjunctures arise some key research questions. First: how did *minjung kayo* represent progress as an alternative path towards modernity and democracy? Following a short introduction to the historical backdrop for the emergence of South Korea's democracy movement, my account will explore how the music and practice of *p'ok'ŭsong* within student circles manifested democratic ideals that laid the ground for *minjung kayo*'s transition from a cultural practice into a political one. The second question I pursue relates to the nationalist position central to the *minjung* movement: how did *minjung kayo* express 'Koreanness', and what were the implications for the genre's original sources of musical inspiration? As already mentioned, Korea's democratic movement throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s emphatically rejected Americanism, as it sought to assert the nation's historical and cultural autonomy. Understanding how the anti-imperial, anti-colonial goals of the *minjung* movement translated into *minjung kayo* is crucial to understanding its relevance and significance in Korea's transition to democracy.

From autocracy to democracy: a warped development

South Korea's transition to democracy can be traced through a series of conflicts between the state and increasingly influential activists. After the 1945 surrender of Japan ended its 35-year-long annexation of Korea, South Korea was placed under the trusteeship of the United States Army Military Government (USAMGIK) for three years. Autonomous government was finally achieved in 1948, with Syngman Rhee, a renowned former independence activist who had been in exile in America since 1904 and was strongly favoured by Washington, as its first president.⁵ Modelled after the American democratic system, Rhee's

neun eodi ro gasseulkka (*Where Did the Camellia Lady Go?: Seeing the Park Chung Hee Era through Popular Culture*) (Seoul: Inmul gwa Sasangsa, 2017); Okon Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization of Pop Music in Korea: From the 1960s to the 1980s', in *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*, ed. Keith Howard (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2006), 37–9.

4 Chang Nam Kim, 'Indie before Indie: Minjung Song in the History of South Korean Popular Music', in *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, ed. Sunyoung Park (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

5 Yong-Pyo Hong, *State Security and Regime Security: President Syngman Rhee and the Insecurity Dilemma in South Korea, 1953–60* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 17.

government had elements of both a presidential and a cabinet system, in which the members of the National Assembly – chosen in a general election in May 1948, in which 80 per cent of eligible voters participated – had the power to elect the president and to approve the vice president and the prime minister.⁶ Yet, to the disappointment of both the United States and the Korean people, the Rhee government, whose stated inaugural national goals had been freedom and democracy (along with anti-communism), proved to be ineffective largely due to his corrupt politics.⁷ In 1954, in the wake of the Korean War and the subsequent upheaval, Rhee amended the constitution to allow for an unlimited number of presidential terms and was elected for a fourth term in March 1960. Alarmed students took to the streets, bringing about a change of both president and prime minister, but distrust of the new government persisted. On 16 May 1961, Military General Park Chung Hee and his Military Revolutionary Committee led a coup d'état, establishing a Supreme Council for National Reconstruction and promising to restore civilian power after stabilizing the nation. Park subsequently won the presidency through direct election in both 1963 and 1967, but in 1969 he amended the constitution to allow himself to run for a third time and beat his rival Kim Dae-jung only by a close margin.

Park's declaration of the Yusin Constitution in October 1972 marked the beginning of 'the dark age of democracy', an expression employed by scholars of Korean history to convey the severity of the era.⁸ The Yusin Constitution brought all three branches of the government under presidential power and allowed Park to stay in office indefinitely, thereby formalizing his dictatorship.⁹ This turn of events rekindled anti-government activism among college students, whose distrust towards the Park regime had been growing since his push for the normalization of relations with Japan in 1963.¹⁰ In October 1973, anti-Yusin student demonstrations swept across the country, starting at the Seoul National University, the centre of the student movement at the time. In 1973 and 1974, Park declared multiple executive orders, known as the Emergency Decrees, leading to massive incarceration of student protestors and making criticism of the Yusin Constitution illegal. Although mass student actions came to a seeming halt as a result, student activists continued 'to establish a national front by creating networks among schools in different regions of the country', which prepared for even more effective activism in the 1980s.¹¹

The regime came to an end on 26 October 1979, when Park Chung Hee was assassinated by his own security chief, Kim Jae-gyu. Amid demonstrations across the country calling for democracy, military general Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a military coup in December

6 The Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA), *The Korean Government: Policies and Administration, 1948–2013* (Seoul: Daeyoung Moonhwas Publishing, 2015), 21.

7 KIPA, *The Korean Government*, 21; Hong, *State Security and Regime Security*, 19–22.

8 See, for example, Paul Y. Chang, *Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democracy Movement, 1970–1979* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 3–4.

9 Youngju Ryu, 'Introduction', in *Cultures of Yusin: South Korea in the 1970s*, ed. Youngju Ryu (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 4–5.

10 Chang, *Protest Dialectics*, 19–20.

11 Chang, *Protest Dialectics*, 37.

1979. In May 1980, pro-democratic protests erupted in the city of Kwangju, first by students and later by the general populace. Chun confronted the protestors with a bloody crackdown that resulted in thousands of casualties, in what is considered one of the most violent civil disturbances in South Korea's history.¹² The Kwangju Uprising transformed the nature of the democratic movement, making it more radical and aggressive, as well as more overtly anti-American. From 1987, student-led demonstrations were joined by a broader swathe of Korean society, with massive nationwide protests eventually leading Chun Doo-hwan to acquiesce to the demand for the return to a direct presidential election. In 1988, South Korea finally realized a stable democratic government for the first time since the Korean War.

During these years of political upheaval, the state's push for economic development, which outpaced all other areas of social development, became fodder for the rise of the *minjung* ethos. South Korea's rapid economic growth under Park Chung Hee was enabled above all by the concerted mobilization of state power and the appeal to collective nationalism.¹³ Such an approach to modernization implied a skewed process of development: favouring government-subsidized *chaebol* conglomerates and urban development, Park's policies also brought exaggerated inequality between the newly rich, the urban poor, and farmers.¹⁴ In a 1961 speech intended to gain US support for his Five-Year Economic Development Plan, Park claimed that 'the root of democracy that we have planted requires nutrition, which is economic development'.¹⁵ Yet this ethic of 'economy first, democracy later' seemed increasingly strained as his regime expanded the suppression of free speech and civil society in the course of the 1970s. As the realization of democracy was further delayed under the Chun Doo-hwan regime, an alternative view of modernity for South Korea – democratic, egalitarian, and displaying stronger historical autonomy – crystallized into the *minjung* ideology, becoming the central ethos for South Korea's democratic movement.

***Minjung kayo*: from a cultural practice to a political practice**

Understanding *minjung kayo* as a cultural practice requires understanding the experiences of South Korean youth, and particularly the college youth culture of the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. College students during this period were keen to distinguish themselves from the

12 Yong Cheol Kim writes: 'According to government figures, approximately 200 people were killed, more than 1000 were wounded, and thousands of participants were incarcerated.' Yong Cheol Kim, 'The Shadow of the Gwangju Uprising', in *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*, ed. Georgy Katsiaficas and Na Kahn-chaе (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 121.

13 South Korea's rapid economic growth under Park Chung Hee has led to mixed assessments of his presidency; in a 2009 poll, South Koreans voted Park as the most respected president. *Segye Ilbo*, 30 January 2009, <http://segye.com/newsView/20090129003271>. See also Byung-Kook Kim, 'Introduction: The Case for Political History', in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.

14 See Young-chol Cho, 'The Chaebol Regime and the Developmental Coalition of Domination', in *Developmental Dictatorship and the Park Chung-Hee Era: The Shaping of Modernity in the Republic of Korea*, ed. Byeong-cheon Lee, trans. Eungsoo Kim and Jaehyun Cho (Paramus, NJ: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006). Also see, Jung-en Woo, *Race to the Swift: State and Finance in Korean Industrialization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

15 *Dong-a Ilbo*, 17 November 1961, 1.

previous generation. While their predecessors represented the colonial legacy, the war, and extreme poverty, the youth of the late 1960s grew up in relative affluence and political stability. Moreover, they benefitted from the expansion of university campuses nationwide, which was integral to South Korea's transformation into a developed country.¹⁶ Universities provided not only a higher level of education than previously available, but also the physical space for social networks based on shared cultural and intellectual interests. As a result, the university system enabled this generation to grow into a significant cultural and social force in South Korea.

Often more educated, urban, and Westernized than their parents, these youths sought out cultural forms that could express their sociopolitical reality. Like people of their generation worldwide, music was an important vehicle for self-expression for South Korean youth. In particular, they enthusiastically embraced modern American folk music, transliterated as *p'ok'ŭsong* in Korean.¹⁷ Until then, popular music in South Korea was dominated by *trot* (or *t'ŭrot'ŭ*), which resembled the Japanese *enka* and carried connotations of colonialism. Another prevalent genre, Western rock or dance music, which had been introduced through the US military club stages in South Korea, was regarded as frivolous and uncultured, especially by those that grew up in traditional households upholding Confucianist values.¹⁸ In contrast, American folk songs, with their simplicity of sound, use of the acoustic guitar, emphasis on individual voices, and unpretentious melody and accompaniment, held great appeal. Songs such as Bob Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall' (1963) and 'Blowin' in the Wind' (1963) and Simon and Garfunkel's 'The Sound of Silence' (1964) entered South Korea's musicscape through AFKN, the radio station for the US military in Korea, as well as imported Hollywood movies and TV programmes.¹⁹ They were then shared in live music salons or cafes in Seoul such as C'est Si Bon and Ch'owŏn, which were the cradle of *p'ok'ŭsong* singer-songwriters, as well as in churches and the social centres such as the YMCA and YWCA.²⁰ College song clubs were also significant and would eventually play a central role in transforming *p'ok'ŭsong* into *minjung kayo*.

However, despite the popularity of American folk songs, their leftist political connotations did not fully register in South Korea during this time. According to Okon Hwang, both

16 William W. Boyer and Nancy E. Boyer, 'Democratization of South Korea's National Universities', *Korean Studies* 15 (1991), 84–5.

17 Y. M. Lee, *Dongbaek agassi*, 277–9. Also see Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 37–9.

18 See Roald Maliangkay, 'Supporting Our Boys: American Military Entertainment and Korean Pop Music in the 1950s and Early-1960s', in *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*, ed. Keith Howard (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2006).

19 John Lie, *K-pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, and Economic Innovation in South Korea* (Oakland, CA: California University Press, 2015), 31–2; Maliangkay, 'Supporting Our Boys', 21–4.

20 See A. Park, 'Modern Folksong and People's Song (*Minjung Kayo*)', 84. In the 1960s, the Korean Protestant church, which historically had strong cultural affinities to the United States because of American missionaries' involvement in the colonial resistance movement and recovery after the Korean war, expanded exponentially alongside the growing university system. Churches provided spaces for university students to share both their religious faith and their cultural interests. See Donald N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986); Dongbok Yang, 'A Study on the Emerging Korean CCM in 1970~1980s', *Korean Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies* 30/5 (2016).

students and *p'ok'ŭsong* singers remained 'indifferent to political aspects of the American sources'.²¹ Until the early 1970s, *p'ok'ŭsong* had a primarily subcultural status; by embracing the genre, college students suggested their attraction to an alternative, more Western and modern lifestyle associated with American music. Won Kim goes so far as to claim that, in looking to American or Western culture, South Korean students 'found a temporary escape from the constraints of a state and society that emphasized their duty toward national revival'.²²

For most students, the appeal of *p'ok'ŭsong* was primarily the simplicity of its music and instrumentation, which made it suitable for musical sharing. *P'ok'ŭsong* was often enjoyed as a sing-along genre, rather than being experienced only as a listener.²³ Group singing soon became an important and ubiquitous aspect of college life: to those familiar with South Korean cultural history, the 1960s and the early 1970s often conjures up images of a group of university students in jeans or miniskirts singing and playing acoustic guitars together on campus, at coffee houses, at churches and social centres, and even on the subway.²⁴ This participatory quality rendered *p'ok'ŭsong* an ideal medium for college students to share with their peers their own stories and reflections on society and to develop close-knit connections. Exemplifying the processes described by Thomas Turino, for whom performance presenting 'no formal artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants' serves as a 'prime field for sustaining communities', *p'ok'ŭsong* performance contributed to the forging of egalitarian social relations that were ready to mobilize for the protest movement in the post-Yusin era.²⁵

Another factor that made *p'ok'ŭsong* a central aspect of college life was its capacity for free expression during times of oppression. At the most basic level, the straightforward nature of *p'ok'ŭsong* – its unexaggerated melody, vocal style, and harmonization – inspired youth to engage with it, either as writers or performers, as a form of self-expression.²⁶ More significantly, circulated outside the mainstream music industry, student-created *p'ok'ŭsong* was not limited by industry conventions and therefore had greater freedom regarding the topics of the lyrics. Staying outside of the establishment also meant that it was shielded from government censorship. In 1971, Park's regime banned a host of Korean popular songs that were considered as 'unhealthy', 'degenerate', or rebellious, judgements based on arbitrary criteria in relation to the lyrics, the overall feel of a song, or a singer's public image and

21 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 38.

22 Won Kim, 'The Race to Appropriate "Koreanness": National Restoration, Internal Development, and Traces of Popular Culture', in *Cultures of Yusin: South Korea in the 1970s*, ed. Youngju Ryu (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 41.

23 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 37.

24 A picture from 1975 captures a moment of a group of college students bonding over music on the train; two students are playing the guitar, some are dancing and singing, and others are just listening and enjoying the moment. See <http://cleanvote.hani.co.kr/popups/print.hani?ksn=814487> (accessed 15 September 2022).

25 Thomas Turino, 'Four Fields of Music Making and Sustainable Living', *The World of Music* 51/1 (2009), 95.

26 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 37. Also see Young Mee Lee, *Han'guk taejung kayosa (History of Korean Popular Music)* (Seoul: Minsogwŏn, 2006), 241–57.

behaviour.²⁷ This policy also led to the politically charged lyrics of American folk songs being toned down or entirely rewritten when they were translated into Korean.²⁸ *P'ok'ŭsong* therefore provided students with the room for critical reflection on the self, and eventually, on the country's social and political reality. Thus, despite its initial lack of political connotations, *p'ok'ŭsong* increasingly represented freedom of expression with simmering political significance, and as a form of social commentary, it signified the antithesis of the capitalistic establishment primarily associated with the authoritarian regime of Park Chung Hee.

With such potential for social mobilization, *p'ok'ŭsong's* politicization gathered pace after the declaration of the Yusin government in 1972. Within the extremely restrictive and hostile environment of the following years, students turned to songs to build solidarity and express their political views, such that the very act of engaging with these songs became in itself a form of protest. A key figure precipitating *p'ok'ŭsong's* politicization was the prolific singer-songwriter Kim Min-ki. While still a student at the Seoul National University, Kim was arrested in 1972 for 'fomenting anti-government sentiment' after leading a sing-along session that involved an independence movement song from the colonial period, the American civil-rights anthem 'We Shall Overcome', and his own '*Kkot p'iunun ai*' ('A Child Growing a Flower').²⁹ The last of these songs, later banned by the government, employed a metaphorical use of the Rose of Sharon, the national flower of Korea, to signify democracy and to express frustration and anger towards the South Korean government.³⁰ Over the following years, Kim Min-ki came to be known as one of the most important *minjung kayo* singer-songwriters, and his songs became symbolic of the anti-government movement in South Korea. Kim's songs often addressed the oppression of the common people and a range of social problems, but they were characteristically poetic, contemplative, and lyrical. The subdued expressiveness made his songs broadly appealing, favoured even by those students who did not relate with the more radical activism but were distressed by the grim realities of the Yusin government.³¹ His songs were all banned immediately on release, a fate that in 1975 extended too to his '*Ach'im isul*' (Morning Dew), released on the singer Yang Hee-eun's 1971 debut album, even though it has earlier been lauded by the government as a 'healthy song'.³²

27 See Jung-Min Mina Lee, 'Singing its Way to Prosperity: Shaping the Public Mind through "Healthy Popular Music" in South Korea', *Music and Politics* 14/1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0014.105>.

28 For instance, Okon Hwang writes that, when Bob Dylan's 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' was adopted by the Korean female singer Yi Yŏnshil as '*Sonakpi*' [Rain shower], Dylan's 'surrealistic portrait of nuclear horror [was] replaced with a romantic mage of a contemplative youngster'. Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 38.

29 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 40.

30 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 40.

31 According to Young Mee Lee, radical student activists initially deemed Kim Min-ki's songs too sentimental and unsuitable to serve their purposes. Y. M. Lee, *Dongbaek agassi*, 293–5.

32 Records show that this song was played on the radio in the early 1970s under the 'echoes of songs' campaign (*norae ūi meari undong*), a cultural programme initiated by the Bureau of Public Information and the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction in September 1962. *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 17 October 1972, 8. The song can be heard at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLg0erjLdxY.

Along with ‘*Ach’im isŭl*’, ‘*Sangnoksŭ*’ (Evergreen), released in 1979, is among the best-known *minjung kayo* by Kim Min-ki.³³ In the late 1970s, after being discharged from mandatory military service, during which he was imprisoned for composing a ‘rebellious’ song, he worked at a sewing factory in the city of Bupyŏng and witnessed the difficult life of the workers first-hand. He helped the workers in various ways, including arranging a joint wedding for those who could not afford wedding ceremonies; ‘*Sangnoksŭ*’ was composed for this occasion. Like many of his other songs, the lyrics of ‘*Sangnoksŭ*’ are introspective and metaphorical, although the intended political messages are unmistakable. The song starts by evoking a scene of a pine tree standing in wilderness, alone yet resilient:

Look at that hill, there full of green pine trees.
 Though there’s no one at all to look after them,
 In the wind and rain in the drifting show,
 They still stand fresh and green, till the end of time

The second verse reveals the song’s subversive nature more clearly, expressing the determination of the oppressed to fight through adversity. The song ends with an expression of solidarity among the oppressed:

Aching and sorrowful days of the past
 We never want to see those days again
 By our work and sweat, with new consciousness,
 We’ll be like green pine trees in the wilderness
 Though we don’t have so much, friendship still is ours.
 So let’s walk hand in hand sharing pains and tears
 Though the way we walk is long and dark
 Our vision’s clear and bright for the way ahead

The music is similarly pensive (see [Example 1](#)): in a medium tempo and with a melody spanning just over an octave (ranging from a to c²), the song does not come across as a typical protest anthem. The production, using piano, bass guitar, and drums, points to the influence of other genres of Western popular music heard in Korea. Even with the spirit of resistance, the lyrics are far from truculent. Nonetheless, the sentiment of resolution is mirrored by its musical features. In live performances, the song’s original singer Yang Hee-eun often repeated the last line, with the melody rising to a high C. This ascending gesture, paired with the words, ‘We will break through and win in the end’, conjures up a feeling of determination. With every phrase starting with a crotchet rest, there is also an emphatic quality that increases the dramatic effect of the song. With its emotive power, ‘*Sangnoksŭ*’, as well as ‘*Ach’im isŭl*’, was

33 This song was released in 1979 on the female singer Yang Hee-eun’s album as ‘*Kŏch’iron tŭlp’ane purŭrŏn*’ (‘Like Green Pine Needles in a Rough Field’). In 1993, Kim released it on his own album under the title ‘Evergreen’. The original version can be heard at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yflg8rySOY.

민중가요운동가김민기
Minjung Gayo Undongga Kim Min-ki

사 록 수

· 59 ·

저 들 에 푸 르 큰 흥 보 들 만 라
 서 량 고 쓰 리 던 지 난 날 들 도
 우 리 들 가 진 것 비 록 적 어 도

들 보 는 사 람 도 아 나 없 는 데
 다 시 는 다 시 는 은 지 말 라 고
 손 에 손 맞 잡 으 눈물 흘 리 니

비 바람 불 고 눈 반 아 저 도
 맑 홀 리 라 새 구 지 리 라
 우 리 나 갈 길 맑 고 환 려 도

은 누 리 큰 가 지 망 겿 푸 르 다
 거 되 은 들 판 에 흥 보 들 피 라
 계 되 고 나 아 가 큰 내 비 기 라

Green Pine Trees

Look at that hill - there full of green pine trees.
 Rich - ing and sor - row - ful days - of the past -
 Though we don't have so much friend-ship still is ours.

Though there's no one at all to look af - ter them,
 We hav - er want to see those - days a - gain
 so lets walk hand in hand show - ing pains and tears

In the wind and rain in the drift - ing snow,
 By our work and sweat, with new con - scious - ness,
 Though the way we walk is - long and dark

They still stand fresh and green, till the end - of time
 We'll be like green pine trees in the wil - der - ness
 Our vis - ion's clear and bright for the way - a - head

16 9/1/20

Example 1 'Sangnoksu' ('Evergreen'), music and lyrics by Kim Min-ki.

one of the most often heard *minjung kayo* during the massive demonstrations in 1987, known as the June Democratic Struggle, which eventually led to the regime's collapse.³⁴

Socially conscious, *p'ok'ŭsong*-inspired songs such as Kim Min-ki's, as well as existing songs from the colonial-era independence movement (such as those heard in Kim's 1972 sing-along session), constituted a body of songs that came to be widely known as *minjung kayo* by the end of the 1970s. These songs were central to college song clubs such as *Meari* ('Echo') of the Seoul National University and *Hansori* of Ewha Womans University.³⁵ Mirroring the trajectory of *p'ok'ŭsong*, these groups had their origin in the body of students who recreationally shared and sang American-inspired folk songs. By the time of Park's assassination in 1979, they were clearly positioned as groups of musical student activists, the majority of them non-professional musicians, devoted to creating, performing, and disseminating *minjung kayo*. Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, *Meari* published *minjung kayo* songbooks that comprised original songs by its members, along with existing protest songs from Korea and American folk songs by musicians such as Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger.³⁶ The group also recorded two albums of original songs in 1979 and 1980; these were not publicly released but circulated widely among student activists. By the 1980s, some of the first generation of singing student activists took on leadership roles in the movement, forming new groups such as *Saebyŏk* ('dawn'; 1984~1993) that collected, notated, and rearranged existing *minjung kayo* that had been circulating orally; they then presented the songs in variety-show type concerts and distributed them through illicit recordings, fuelling the new cohort of college *minjung kayo* circles.³⁷ By the middle of the decade the *minjung kayo* repertoire circulating nationally reached nearly 1000 songs.³⁸

It is noteworthy that all these activities took place outside the established music industry. The *minjung kayo* movement therefore was not just about collective singing; its significance also lay in the development of a countercultural system and an anti-hegemonic force that was self-sustaining for over a decade.³⁹ Namhee Lee has described the *undonggwŏn* ('circle of activists') culture as embodying a vision for a 'counterpublic sphere' that could '[create] a community in which various contradictions of capitalism, such as dehumanization, individualization, fragmentation, and alienation are overcome, and wealth, equality, and a restored community would be enjoyed by all'.⁴⁰ *Minjung kayo* activists consciously distinguished themselves from mainstream popular culture, while collectively reflecting upon their social responsibilities as privileged, social elites. As they sought to create their cultural 'field' (in

34 Okon Hwang, 'Kim Min-ki and the Making of a Legend', in *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, ed. Hyunjoon Shin and Seung-Ah Lee (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 134.

35 Several universities across the country had similar song groups. See Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 42.

36 Hwang, 'The Ascent and Politicization', 41.

37 Mingap Seo Jeong, 'Chŏhangŭi shidae, nae kyŏt'e noraega issŏtta' ('In the Age of Resistance, Songs Were by My Side'), *The Hankyore*, 24 April 2021, www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/992415.html.

38 Y. M. Lee, *Dongbaek agassi*, 335.

39 Lee Young Mee, who was a member of *Saebyŏk*, also highlights this point: Young Mee Lee, 'Minjung Kayo,' *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, 2013. <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/Item/E0066428>.

40 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 10.

Bourdieu's sense) within a flawed society, they carved out their own ways of generating and consuming cultural content that reflected the values of *minjung*, building a system that represented a democratic praxis. In so doing, through both the music and the way they engaged with the music, the activists demonstrated that an alternative – inclusive and unhinged from the capitalist cultural system – was possible.

***Minjung kayo* and the question of Koreanness**

When South Korean youths of the 1960s and 1970s embraced *p'ok'ŭsong* and American culture, part of their desire was to re-imagine their postcolonial and authoritarian reality in light of recent Korean history. In this reappraisal, they entered into competition with the regime they were struggling against. The concern for 'what is Korean' began to influence both popular culture and cultural policy as early as the 1960s. In the wake of the Japanese annexation, the Korean War, and continued foreign interventions leading to the country's division, there was a widely felt urgency to reinforce Korea's distinct national identity. The 1962 Cultural Heritage Protection Law (*Munhwajae pohobŏp*), enacted to restore and preserve Korea's tangible and intangible cultural properties, is one example of how the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction (1961–3) led by Park Chung Hee responded to such need. In 1972, the July Fourth North–South Korea Joint Statement – the first bilateral agreement since the armistice, declaring joint commitment to a peaceful reunification – ignited discussion among intellectuals in South Korea over what ethnic-national traditions might mean for a unified Korea, prompting renewed interest in ethnic nationalism (*minjok chuŭi*) over the following two decades.

Such discussions nourished and were nourished by cultures of dissent. The student movements of the 1970s actively raised the question of what the notion of 'the people' meant for the nation. As the new elites of the recovering country, college students had a sense of their social responsibilities as well as an awareness of their privileged place. This consciousness is what Namhee Lee calls 'the discourse of moral privilege', which she defines as characterized by 'the intellectuals' self-representation as socially conscious and ethical'.⁴¹ Lee argues that the *minjung* movements arose from a collective anxiety among intellectuals and college students that South Korea's modern history was a 'failed history', imposed on a populace deprived of agency.⁴² This search for an authentic national identity, encapsulated in the 'three min ideology' comprising *minju* (democracy), *minjung* (people), and *minjok* (nation), became the central framework of the protest movement throughout the 1980s. The profound interest in traditional Korean culture among the activists gave to the *minjung* movement a strongly nationalist bent. Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s various art forms, from literature to music to theatre, became subject to a sweeping exploration of Korean tradition and national identity. Out of this cultural movement emerged novel genres. For instance, *madanggŭk* (literally, 'yard play'), a new theatrical art form primarily performed by student activists as social and political critique, was inspired by different elements of traditional

41 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 15.

42 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 4–5.

Korean theatre and dance, especially masked dance (*talchum*).⁴³ As we will see, *minjung kayo*'s allegiance to this nationalistic cultural movement presented fruitful tensions with the American musical influences that had been the genre's bedrock.

The discourse surrounding 'Koreanness' was explored and appropriated not only by the dissidents but also by the Park Chung Hee government.⁴⁴ The Park regime, in its effort to rebuild the economy of Korea in the post-war era, focused on promoting strong collective national identity and a 'healthy' mindset. For Park, eliminating the legacies of the colonial era, including the colonial mentality, was a critical step towards rebuilding a unified national identity.⁴⁵ In the nationwide call for 'healthy national popular songs' (*kŏnchŏn kungmin kayo*) initiated by the Park government in 1967, among the five suggested categories were songs about folklore or national holidays.⁴⁶ The 1971 policy on popular culture similarly emphasized the promotion of 'a new value system that prioritizes national security and an awareness of independent national identity'.⁴⁷ In 1981, President Chun Doo-hwan issued a calculated response to the growing dissident culture with a government-led festival called *kukp'ung* (literally, 'national customs'). Under the motto 'a festival of national collegiate folklore and traditions' (*Chŏn'guk taehaksaeng minsok kuk'ak k'ŭnjanch'i*), this massive event, held during the first anniversary of the Kwangju Uprising, attracted an estimated 5 million citizens and celebrated Korea's traditional culture through performing arts, games, scholarly discussions, singing competitions, and various traditional customs including shamanic rituals.⁴⁸ While the festival clearly aligned with the state's rhetoric of strengthening Korean national identity, it also appropriated the dissidents' core cultural and intellectual tenet of people-centred nationalism in an attempt to subsume the counter-hegemonic movement.

Writing of the nationalistic concern shared by activists and regime alike, Namhee Lee observes that 'the boundaries between repression and resistance, power and emancipation, are not fixed but fluid and there are points of intersection between the state discourse of nationalism and modernization and the oppositional *minjung* discourse'.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, a clear difference lay in the mode and the objective of each side's brand of nationalism. The Park regime's assertion of Koreanness was concerned with promoting a collective national identity that would precipitate the nation's economic rebuilding. The anti-regime activists, on the other hand, were more focused on reconstructing a national identity in the wake of colonial legacies. Abelmann calls the latter's impetus to re-envision national identity and history the '*minjung* imaginary', defining it as 'a creative idiom for imagining a past that offers legacies – conscious and unconscious – of broad-based anticolonial, anti-imperial, and

43 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 187–212.

44 W. Kim, 'The Race to Appropriate "Koreanness"', 38–40.

45 Jung-Hoon Lee, 'Normalization of Relations with Japan: Toward a New Partnership', in *The Park Chung-Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, ed. Byung-Kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

46 *Dong-a Ilbo*, 6 July 1967, 5.

47 *Dong-a Ilbo*, 11 December 1971, 7.

48 *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 28 May 1981, 1, and 1 June, 1981, 1.

49 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 1–2.

antiauthoritarian action'.⁵⁰ This notion, which explains how the possibility of reconstructing historical memories can become a mobilizing factor for contention and social change, also helps elucidate why *minjung kayo* could emerge as a potent strategy for broader social movements thanks to its grassroots performance styles and distribution networks, while also proving a conundrum in light of its origins in American and Western European musical styles.

The movement's anti-colonial leanings were emboldened in the wake of the Kwangju Uprising of May 1980, when the claim spread across the country that the United States had condoned the Chun Doo-hwan regime's brutal use of military force to quell civilian unrest.⁵¹ The Korean attitude towards the United States subsequently shifted markedly. Katherine Moon observes that 'as any casual observer of Korean politics and US-ROK relations knows, the Kwangju massacre/uprising of May definitively changed the bilateral dynamic'.⁵² This change entailed the *minjung* movement activists aligning with socialism in their rejection of capitalism and the Westernization of the state. According to Gi-Wook Shin, some went as far as endorsing and adopting *chuch'e sasang* – North Korea's central governing ideology claiming its political, economic, and military independence and self-reliance – as the guiding principles of their radical activism against the South Korean regime.⁵³ Shin writes that '[s]upporters considered North Korea "a beacon because of its long practice of independence and self-reliance" and felt that only the North could claim revolutionary legitimacy for the nation of Korea', while the United States continued to support the 'antinationalist authoritarian regimes' of the south.⁵⁴ By the mid-1980s, one of the important objectives of the student movement – influenced by the writings of Marx and Lenin – was to expose, undo, and remove the American influence on Korean politics and policy.⁵⁵ Thus, a radical student activist group wrote in a 1986 leaflet that 'Korean society is dominated by American imperialism and its puppet government . . . Anti-American self-reliance is to push out American imperialism for national liberation . . . and the general ideology of our transformative movements is national liberation, *minjung* democracy, which is to establish the independence of the nation'.⁵⁶

This shift in political attitude was reflected in the primary subject matter of *minjung kayo* after the Kwangju Uprising, as South Korea's democratic movement became more clearly driven by the *minjung* imaginary. Now, *minjung kayo*, instead of focusing on an individual's feelings or personal reflections on society, explicitly referenced 'different *minjung*

50 Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past*, 38.

51 Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 102. Also see David Straub, *Anti-Americanism in Democratizing South Korea* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2015), 27–9.

52 Katherine H. S. Moon, *Protesting America: Democracy and the U.S.-Korea Alliance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 32.

53 On the adaptation of *chuch'e sasang* by student activists in the 1980s, see N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 131–8.

54 Gi-Wook Shin, 'Marxism, Anti-Americanism, and Democracy in South Korea: An Examination of Nationalist Intellectual Discourse', *Positions* 3/2 (1995), 523–4. Quoted in Moon, *Protesting America*, 55.

55 See N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 124–7.

56 Quoted in Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 166.

communities, including factory workers, farmers, political prisoners, and the urban poor'.⁵⁷ Songs such as 'Nongmin'ga' ('Farmer's Song') and the 'Minjung ūi abōji' ('The Father of *minjung*') were far darker than the *minjung kayo* circulated among college students. Over the course of the 1980s, radical student activists literally brought themselves closer to the *minjung*, joining farmers or factory workers in protests, thereby '[forgoing] the privileges that reinforced the difference between the intellectual and the working class'.⁵⁸ *Minjung kayo* of the 1980s echoed this progression: the directness of the titles of these songs, such as 'P'aōpka' ('Song for Strike'), 'Nodong johapka' ('Song for Labour Unions'), 'Tan'gyōl t'ujaengga' ('Song for Unity and Fighting'), 'Chintcha nodongja' ('The Real Labourer'), and 'Sōnbonge sōsō' ('Standing on the Vanguard') drew a stark contrast to the metaphorical titles of the *minjung kayo* from a decade earlier.⁵⁹ By the late 1980s, such labour songs became central to the *minjung kayo* repertoire. An anti-American sentiment was also in evidence. The lyrics of '5 wōl ūi norae' ('Song of May'), a song about the violence of the Kwangju Uprising that the historian Yoo Ha Jeong remembers as one of the most frequently performed songs in Kwangju during the 1980s, displays vehement anti-American sentiments with the words (in translation), 'Yankee guy with a raised nose, back away, our history we embrace and forge ahead.'⁶⁰

The post-1980 *minjung kayo* injected the nationalist and socialist tendencies of the *minjung* ideology into the musical framework that had been established by the *p'ok'ūsong* of the previous decade.⁶¹ The result was a departure from the mellow and contemplative sound of the 1960s folk songs and a turn towards a more militant style of socialist anthem, with simple yet assertive tunes and marching rhythms conducive to mass singing. The 1981 anthem 'Im ūl wihan haengjin'gok' ('March for the Beloved' hereafter) is arguably the most famous among the *minjung kayo* written in the aftermath of the Kwangju Uprising, and representative of the militant style of late *minjung kayo*. Written by the poet Baek Kiwan and the composer Kim Jong-ryul, the song commemorated the posthumous marriage of the labour activists Yoon Sangwon and Park Ki-soon; Yoon had been shot and killed by soldiers during the Kwangju incident.⁶² In the key of D minor and replete with dotted rhythms, 'March for the Beloved' is an impassioned march (see [Example 2](#)).⁶³ Traversing a wide melodic compass and reaching up to g^2 , the song can be taxing for many voices. Yet, the strenuousness

57 Chang, *Protest Dialectics*, 211.

58 N. Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 292.

59 Y. M. Lee, 'Minjung Kayo'.

60 Yoo Ha Jeong, *Kūraedo uri nūn norae handa: minjung kayo wa 5-wōl undong iyagi (We Still Sing: The Story of minjung kayo and the Activism of May)* (Kyōnggi-do P'aju-si: Hanul, 2017), 155.

61 The Korean musicologist Tong-ūn No has considered the Kwangju Uprising as 'a historical musical event', which motivated the activists to be more selective about which songs enter the *minjung kayo* repertoire and to create new songs. Tong-ūn No, '5.18kwa ūmagundong' ('5.18 and song movement') in *Kiōk t'ujaeng kwa munhwa undong ūi chōn'gae (The Memory Struggle and the Development of Cultural Movements)*, ed. Kan-ch'ae Na et al. (Seoul: Yōksa Pip'yōngsa, 2004), 352, quoted in Y. H. Jeong, *Kūraedo uri nūn norae handa*, 127.

62 *The Hankyore*, 3 May 1997, 25.

63 The original recording is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwLD-Ybqlv0.

민주주의를 가요로
Korea Democracy Folklore

March for Love

with-out love and with-out honor- With-oua name to leave be- hind,
 Let's go forth in life to-ge-ther, we made our fer-vent vow
 Now I can-not find my col-leagues On-ly their flag-still - waves.
 Un-til- that new day comes, Nothing will shake our re- solve
 Time will pass, but not the truth-mountains and riv-ers know-
 Now a - wake and cry-ing out, End-ness bat-tle cry-
 Go-ing on- be - fore, - We, the liv-ing must go on! -
 Go-ing on - be - fore - To-ge-ther we must go! -

Example 2 'March for Love' (better known as 'March for the Beloved'), music by Kim Jong-ryul, original lyrics by Baek Kiwan, translator unknown.

effectively conveys the song's sombre message: to follow the footsteps of the dead comrades, to fight even if it risks one's life.

Leaving no love, no honour, no fame,

We've made a passionate vow to keep working on for the rest of our lives.

Comrades are gone; only the flag waves,
 Let us not be shaken until a new day comes
 Mountains and streams know, though the years pass by.
 Awakened, we cry zealously:
 ‘We march ahead; those who live shall follow us.’
 ‘We march ahead; those who live shall follow us.’⁶⁴

The song was first heard as the final chorus in a student-produced musical *Neokpuri – pit üi kyörhonsik* (*Dispelling – Wedding of Light*; 1982), which was conceptually modelled after a traditional shamanic ritual for the dead.⁶⁵ Protestors immediately embraced ‘March for the Beloved’ as an anthem for the democratic movement as well as other social movements.⁶⁶ Today, it still occupies a symbolic place as a reminder of the *minjung* spirit in South Korea. It has also been adopted as the anthem for democratic movements in other Asian countries, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Myanmar.

Notwithstanding this iconic status, ‘March for the Beloved’ is a complex symbol when viewed as an embodiment of the anti-colonial and pro-democratic agenda of the *minjung* movement. Composed within the framework of Western music in terms of harmony, melody, and song structure, the song might appear problematic as an expression of national autonomy and self-determination. However, the widespread influence of Western music in Korea since its introduction in the late nineteenth century meant that the idea of musical ‘composition’ almost always implied adhering to fundamentals of the Western musical system. The creators of *minjung kayo* instead sought to invoke a national element through the use of traditional Korean instruments in performances, or the incorporation of folk tunes such as *Arirang* as standard *minjung kayo* repertoire.⁶⁷ This is precisely how the ‘March of the Beloved’ was presented in its first performances and recording.⁶⁸ Performed by Chonnam National University’s student club *Kwangdae* (‘jester’), which was dedicated to traditional performing arts such as the mask dance (*t’alch’um*), the recording involves the use of Korean traditional percussion instruments including *kkwaenggwari* (small metallic gong), *puk* (drum), *ching* (gong), and *chang-gu* (hourglass-shaped drum), along with a guitar, as accompanying instruments.⁶⁹

64 The official English translation, done by Robert David Grotjohn, professor of English at the Chonnam National University in Kwangju, modified the lyrics slightly to fit the melody. My translation here is more literal.

65 The musical was jointly produced by Kwangju-area singers, novelist Kwang Seok-young, and the Chonnam National University student Kim Jong-ryul. Like the song, the musical was dedicated to Yoon Sangwon and Park Ki-soon. Y. H. Jeong, *Küraedo uri nün norae handa*, 139–41.

66 Y. H. Jeong, *Küraedo uri nün norae handa*, 139–41.

67 Ch’angnam Kim et al., *Norae undongnon* (*The Theory of the Song Movement*) (Seoul: Kongdongch’e, 1986), 23, quoted in Hwang, ‘The Ascent and Politicization’, 43.

68 Listen to the very first recording of ‘March for the Beloved’ at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9vKGPkLz0U.

69 Sönc’h’ul Kim, ‘Yushin p’ogabül nömö 5wörüi munhwayesullo haengjinhada’ (‘Beyond the Tyranny of the Yushin, March through the Arts and Culture of May’), *Pressian*, 19 August 2021. The article features the original sketch of

Beyond the engagement of these traditional elements, however, the militant style of ‘March for the Beloved’ indicated *minjung kayo*’s increasing alignment with the cultural forms of international communism, such as the hymns of the Marxist composer Hanns Eisler. This was no coincidence: sometime during the 1980s, Eisler’s best-known anthems, including ‘Solidaritätslied’ (1931), ‘Einheitsfrontlied’ (1934), and ‘Der heimliche Aufmarsch’ (composed by Wladimir Vogel in 1930; arranged by Eisler in 1938), infiltrated into South Korea’s activist circles. Although evidence of engagement with these songs or with Eisler emerged only after the June Democratic Protests of 1987 – until when traces of any dealings with Marxist music would have been self-censored and removed, a consequence of South Korea’s 1948 National Security Act that designated pro-communist acts as treasonous and virtually illegal – it is likely that South Korean activists, at least those at the leadership level, were familiar with his music. In July 1987, just a month after the protests that began to hint at the dissidents’ victory, Albrecht Betz’s biography of the composer, *Hanns Eisler: Musik einer Zeit, die sich eben bildet* (1976), was published in Korea under the title *The Revolution of Music, Music of Revolution*. Soon after, several music activist groups recorded Eisler’s anthems in Korean; the best-known renditions by the Korea University’s *minjung kayo* club *Noreaöl* even closely observed the forceful vocalization of Ernst Busch, the original singer of many of Eisler’s anthems.⁷⁰ Also circulating among the activists at this time was ‘L’internationale’, the worker’s movement anthem emerging from the Paris Commune (1871) and later the national anthem of the Soviet Union in 1922–44, which was printed under the category ‘Songs after 1987’ in the *minjung kayo* collection by *Meari* (1993).⁷¹

This trajectory of *minjung kayo* has several important implications. First, by aligning with Marxist communism, *minjung kayo* not only reflected the growing anti-American sentiments but also stood in diametric opposition to American models of capitalism and democracy. In other words, as its political orientations crystallized, *minjung kayo* emphatically distanced itself from its American models, both musically and ideologically. Second, *minjung kayo*’s Marxist orientation suggested the dissidents’ increasing interest in North Korea as well as the desire for and idealization of unified Korea. Songs such as ‘*T’ongil ün kü önüp ttae*’ (‘When Will We Finally See the Reunification’) and ‘*Paektusan*’ (‘Paektu Mountain’) express hope for Korea’s reunification and an emancipatory revolution. In an extreme case, ‘*Chosön ün hanada*’ (‘Korea is One’) originated in North Korea and was circulated in South Korea with adjustments to the lyrics to remove overt references to the North Korean regime. Finally, these developments arguably signified *minjung kayo*’s departure from its early grassroots impulses

‘March for the Beloved’ by the composer Kim Jong-ryul: www.pressian.com/pages/articles/2021081709114618003 (accessed 16 September 2022).

70 These recordings can be heard online at: ‘Yöndaëüi norae’ (‘Solidaritätslied’) www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyGsVYq99XE; ‘T’ongil chönsönüi norae’ (‘Einheitsfrontlied’) [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyBR4HChTuU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyBR4HChTuU;); ‘T’ujaengüi mulkyöl’ (‘Der heimliche Aufmarsch’) www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-knpWSsPUA.

71 The Korean version of ‘L’internationale’ can be heard at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZiL-wUY_0M&t=5s. This adoption similarly mirrored the resurfacing of this anthem in the 1960s and 1970s in other parts of the world; see Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: Avant-garde Music in 1960s Amsterdam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 285–6.

and a turn towards organized, even hierarchical, approaches. Not only did the years of accumulation of leadership, repertoire, and operational skill mean that the *minjung kayo* movement naturally shifted away from its initial countercultural and amateur paradigm, but also the growing clarification of its ideological commitments implied a more centralized model and the existence of authorities within the movement. In these ways, militant *minjung kayo* such as ‘March of the Beloved’ reflected the complex unfolding of the *minjung* movement’s aspirations for ‘a horizontal community or an indigenous cultural socialism’,⁷² and thus of its vision of democracy.

Conclusion

The convoluted development of *minjung kayo* explored in the last section were underlined by an offshoot that entered the mainstream market during the mid-1980s. In counterpoint to the radical and militant strand, *minjung kayo* also gained wider public circulation through songs that carried a far less belligerent sound and lyrics. In 1984, the *minjung kayo* group *Noraerül ch’annün saramdül* (People Who Find Songs) publicly released their first album, produced by Kim Min-ki; to circumvent state censorship, the songs were rendered non-inflammatory. Despite the songs’ apoliticality, or precisely because of it, the broader populace was now able to engage with the cultural form that had previously circulated principally among college students and activists. Their second album of 1989 sold over 700,000 copies, an enormous commercial success at that time.⁷³ While this commercialization of *minjung kayo* presents an obvious irony for the genre whose beginning was emphatically countercultural, a still greater paradox may be that *minjung kayo* was able to embrace a broader range of *minjung* communities by attaching itself to the established systems of the commercial popular music market.

Despite its historical complexities, recent political events in South Korea have proved that *minjung kayo* still carries the potential to bring about dynamic social change. *Minjung kayo* saw a rapid decline in the early 1990s, as a combined result of South Korea’s new spurt of economic growth, waning student movements, and intensified state regulation on labour movements. However, in 2016 and 2017, during the demonstrations calling for the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung Hee, *minjung kayo* was once again at the centre of political activism. In these mass gatherings, Kim Min-ki’s ‘*Ach’im isül*’ and ‘*Sangnoksu*’, along with other *minjung kayo*, powerfully resurfaced as the central vehicle to express South Korean people’s wishes for a healthy democracy.⁷⁴ Notably, few people associated the singing of *minjung kayo* as a pro-communist gesture, in the way that the state perceived it in the 1980s. This is a telling sign that *minjung kayo* might continue to thrive, continuously reshaped by historical exigencies, just as it was during South Korea’s struggle for democracy.

72 Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past*, 25.

73 Y. M. Lee, *Han’guk taejung kayosa*, 335.

74 The performance of the singer Yang Hee-eun, joined by a crowd of approximately 1.5 million people gathered in the *Gwanghwamun* Plaza on 25 November 2016, can be seen at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Woiq0_MukPE.

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