

# The Gwangju Uprising and the Cultural Nationalism in Music: Hybrid Composition since 1980

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Jinmi Huh Davidson

## Abstract

While conducting a literature review in preparation for the present study of cultural nationalism, I came across a monograph whose title struck a resounding chord—the phrase *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement That Changed the History of Modern Korea* can also accurately be applied to the musical history of modern Korea.<sup>1</sup> The *Minjung* ideology,<sup>2</sup> which emerged in the second half of the 1970s and evolved alongside the South Korean democratization movement in the 1980s, is the most critical signifier of the movement-oriented musical discourses developed in the 1980s. The timeline of development for the “Korean music” movement and its progeny the “national music” movement closely trail the two central political course of events, namely the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and the nationwide June 1987 Uprising.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will chronicle and probe into the two dominant musical discourses of the 1980s and delineate the musical movements’ indebtedness to the political context of the democratic movements as well as the nationalistic musical expression’s contribution to the cultural aspect of the *minjung* movement. There is a significant body of scholarship on the notion that the political and cultural movements are inseparably interlocked entity that conceptualized the *minjung* ideology. The historical context and the tenets of the Korean music and national music discourse will be examined in relation to the nationalistic belief system and strategies of the *minjung* movement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement That Changed the History of Modern Korea*, translated by Yu Youngnan (Paramus, New Jersey: Homa & Sekey Books, 2006), title page.

<sup>2</sup> It’s difficult to find an accurate English translation of *Minjung*. The two-syllable word *minjung* refers to the “people” and the “mass,” appearing in multiple historical and cultural contexts, including its contemporary use with national identity-searching form of nationalism. In the context of the South Korean democratic movement, the *minjung* can be identified as the non-militant “civic citizens,” and yet with the debate over which cultural identity should the Korean nation express persisting, it is not at all clear who is to be considered as *minjung*. More often the term *minjung* appears as an adjective with an implied meaning of “populist” sentiment.

<sup>3</sup> The “Third Generation” Composers Group (the frontrunner of the Korean music movement) and the *Mineumyeon* (the acronym for *Minjokeumakyeonguhoe*, Association for the National Music Research) made their establishment and operative ideology public in 1981 and 1988, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> For studies of *minjung* culture in the postcolonial nationalistic political context see the following: Chulhee Chung, “Minjung and Cultural Origins of the June Uprising in South Korea,” presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (Chicago, Illinois: April 1, 2005); Hagen Koo, *Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 142-52; Choi Chungmoo, “The *Minjung* Culture Movement and the Construction of Popular Culture in Korea” in *South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, edited by Kenneth M. Wells (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 105-18; and Nancy Abelmann, “Minjung Theory and Practice,” in *Cultural Nationalism in East Asia: Representation and Identity*, Research Papers and Policy Studies 39, edited by Harumi Befu, (Berkeley, California: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1993) 139-65.

For theoretical understanding, writings of musicologist Lee Gangsuk and Lee Geonyong, the principal proponents of the Korean music discourse, will be considered as well as the rhetoric of the national music movement formulated by Lee Geonyong and musicologist No Dongeun and revealed in their joint monograph *Minjok Eumaklon*. For appreciation of activist practice, joint communal projects of Lee Gangsuk and Lee Geonyong, such as “*Eumaki Itneun Maeul*” [musical village], and the activities of the *Minjokeumakyeonguhoe* [Association for the National Music Research], established by Lee Geonyong and No Dongeun, will be examined.

More imperatively, to comprehend the mechanism of the nationalistic rhetoric applied to music, *Miari*, a song composition by Lee Geonyong will be selected as a case study. In contemplating whether the nationalistic music movements were successfully transformative, constructing the national identity and *minjung* musical culture, and if not, then to identify their significance in history of Korean music, piano piece *Nau Oraedoen Kkum Hana* [An Age-old Dream of Mine] by Shin Dongil, from the subsequent generation will facilitate. The compositional studies will reveal both composers abandon the “art for art’s sake” modernist expression and strive to make emotional connection with their audience. Consequentially, elements borrowed from both traditional and Western popular music enter into their composition, resulting in the hybrid musical form.

On the whole, this paper focuses on the musicologists’ and composers’ response to the tumultuous democratization movement in the 1980s and on the significance of the sociopolitical context in contemporary Korean art music, and it aims to broaden and enrich already well-defined musical correlatives of *minjung* movement, such as *pungmul* [farmer’s drumming and dancing], *talchum* [mask dance], and *madang gut* [shamanist ritual], all of which originates from the indigenous folk tradition and strategically employed to symbolically invoke the *minjung* sentiment and also physically mobilize the crowd in most student and worker demonstrations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Many aspects of movement-oriented music discourses are well covered in Korean musicological scholarship. However, much of the writings are generated by the nationalists themselves and are not cross-referenced by the sociologists and historians outside the music field. Although a number of overseas ethnomusicologists focus on traditional musical forms popularized since the late 1970s and historians in related fields frequently refers to the strategic use of the folk music in discussions of the *minjung* movement, thus far, very little research is done in English on works of Western music trained nationalists—this is due to the general lack of scholarship on Korean composers.