

The Post-Nostalgic Underpinnings of North Korean Songs of Arirang

북한 아리랑의 포스트 – 노스탤지어적 기반에 대한 연구

Peter Moody, 고려대학교

This article contributes to musicology, history, and inter-Korean scholarship within the global Korean Studies community. In 2014, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) inscribed the iconic and treasured vocal music tradition of "Arirang" on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, not as a single folksong but as an entire "popular lyrical singing genre." This was the first time North Korea received formal recognition for its intangible culture from UNESCO, which occurred just two years after South Korea added its own entry of Arirang to the list. Rather than interpreting Arirang's sonic culture in the North as a collection of specimens to be preserved, this paper examines Arirang through the lens of "heritagization," i.e. the processes of instrumentalizing and repurposing what is designated as "cultural heritage" for novel social applications (Margry 2011; Sánchez-Carretero, 2015). Despite the DPRK's decision to highlight six regional versions of "Arirang" to be safeguarded, "Arirang" is very much a living tradition in the DPRK; furthermore, two of the most prevalent versions of Arirang in the North, "Yŏngch'ŏn Arirang" and "Kyŏngsangdo Arirang," are named after regions in present-day South Korea, with the former being only rarely heard and the latter having a different name in the ROK (Jin 2019). Such a circumstance has resulted from the arbitrary nature of Korea's postcolonial partition, considering how much Arirang renditions and vocal music characteristics over the entire East coast of the Korean peninsula resemble each other compared to their counterparts in other parts of North and South Korea. While in inter-Korean interactions, Arirang has represented the restoration of an idyllic and independent national community prior to its colonization and protracted separation, within the DPRK, the song has served cultural hegemonic ends, augmented by musical and lyrical changes to trigger revolutionary optimism about the present and future. Borrowing from Frederic Jameson's notion of "nostalgia for the present" (1991) and referencing decades of sheet music, recordings, and official publications, this paper will demonstrate how songs of Arirang in the DPRK have significantly contributed to cultural creation, identity construction, and indigenization.