



2014 Korean Studies Lecture

# Politics of Arirang

Tripartite Function of a Korean  
Folksong in S. Korea, N. Korea and China

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*Arirang* is the most well-known and popular folksong of Korea, which originated from the central region of Korea in the middle of 1920s as a New Folksong (*Sin-minyo*). It has evolved to be the iconic song for both South and North Korea, as well as for Koreans abroad. In 2011, the Chinese government has designated *Arirang* as an intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of the ethnic Koreans in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of China. Herein, nationalistic South Koreans were suspicious of the Chinese advance as one of ongoing Chinese efforts for appropriation of Korean heritage, which includes the ownership of some historical events. South Korean government has been actively promoting the song internationally as the national musical icon, with considerable extent of exaggeration on its historical origin. Their effort resulted in the registration of "Arirang" as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). On the other hand, "Arirang" has rarely been mentioned in North Korea until the early 1990s. North Korean government hosts the "Arirang Festival (or Arirang Mass Games)" in honoring the birthday of the late "Dearest Leader Kim Il-sung" and tourism. The recent use of the cultural title is an effort to tone down the strong ideological embossment, and projecting a utopian Korea under socialism through the unification of the peninsula in North Korean terms. This presentation explores the tripartite states of *Arirang*: as a musical icon through its nation-branding function in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), as a soft image-making medium in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and as a political embrace of minorities by the People's Republic of China.

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