Special Lecture: Arirang

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**Western Perspectives on the Korean Concept of Arirang**

1. About inter-cultural perspectives
   1. East and West: What does this concept mean? What does it mean to be “Eastern” or “Western”? Does this separation still exist?
   2. Western vs. American: What is the difference between the Western perspective and the American perspective in terms of Korea?
   3. Subjectivity: This lecture represents my personal views. How does my experience and identity affect how I see or experience Korean culture?
   4. Cultural Constructs over time. This song’s meaning and significance has changed over time. Do we think about it differently than our parents or grandparents or ancestors? Yes. How so?
2. Literary Analysis of the Song “Arirang”
   1. History: Apparently the song is very, very old…possibly thousands of years old. There are many different versions from the various regions of Korea. A more in-depth comparative study would look at their important differences.
   2. Lyrics in translation
      1. Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo

Crossing over Arirang Pass

Dear who abandoned me here

Shall not walk even ten li before his/her feet hurt.

* 1. Interpretation
     1. Literal meaning
        1. The words of “Arirang” have many different layers of meaning.
           1. “Ari” : “big and forever” or “beautiful” or “missing someone.”
           2. “Rang” : “together” or “young person”
           3. “Goe-gae” : “hill” or “difficulty” or “separation”
        2. Lovers separated: The song is, on its surface, a sad love song about a lover who is left behind by the one they desire.
        3. The natural world of Korea: It is significant, I believe, that the setting of the song is the mountain.
        4. The music of the song is very emotional and stirring. It plays on a minor key, which stirs feelings of longing and a desire for resolution.
     2. Metaphorical meaning
        1. Two different but complimentary interpretations
           1. Jong: Represents “warm-hearted” or “tender-hearted” feelings.
           2. Han: Represents the feeling of long repressed or hidden anger or sadness.
     3. Political meaning: The song has many layers of meaning, but it has come, over the troubles of the last century, to represent the sadness and suffering of the Korean people.

1. Arirang in Historical Context
   1. Pre-modern: The song is very old and may have its roots in the political turmoil of the ancient period, where three kings fought for control of Korea. One can imagine two lovers from different kingdoms separated by conflict (similar to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*).
   2. Modern
      1. Japanese occupation: Throughout the Japanese occupation, Korean’s were forced to take on a separate identity as members of Japanese culture. This song can be seen to represent a lot of that frustration.
      2. Revolution and oppression. During the Japanese occupation there were many occasions when political protest erupted in the streets. Arirang was one of the important songs during those times.
      3. World War: During World War II many people were separated from their loved ones. Some were forced to work in Japan, some were forced to fight for Japan, and some unfortunate women were forced into sexual slavery. This song has special meaning for them.
      4. Korean War: The country was divided by war, brother sometimes fighting brother. The song has a special meaning for that time.
      5. A divided Korea. After the separation of North and South Korea, when families were torn apart, this song has come to have special meaning for Korea. It represents a longing for reunification, as a country and as families..
      6. The economic explosion: During the economic expansion of South Korea beginning in the 1960’s, South Korean workers were exploited and sometimes oppressed violently. This song has special meaning for them.
   3. Current applications
      1. Family life: I think that one of the biggest problems in Korea today is a business culture that forces workers to be away from their families due to mandatory over-time. This song could represent the cry of a young daughter for her father.
      2. Economic Expatriation: As the world economy has become globalized, many workers are forced to live far from their loved ones in other countries. This song can be seen to represent feelings of homesickness.
   4. Future
      1. Unification. The song is a powerful metaphor for the desire of all Koreans to become one country again. Perhaps in the future all of Korea can sing this song together.
      2. Global citizenship. I believe that the song Arirang is one of the world’s greatest songs. It represents the desire of all people to live in peace together.
2. My personal experience in Korean culture