

ARIRANG: HOW DID THE FOLK MUSIC PROMOTE SOLIDARITY DURING A PERIOD OF COLONIZATION AND DIASPORA

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Abstract: *The paper discusses how a form of folk music had promoted solidarity during a diaspora. Through examining a case of Arirang, a Korean folk music, it demonstrates how the specific elements of folk music instigated national sentiment of “han” and a shared cultural identity. It also deals with a particular period of Japanese colonization, which lasted from 1910 to 1945, and its colonial policies to annihilate Korea historical and cultural root which portrays how the role of folk music had expanded under an imperialist regime. Furthermore, the paper claims that during the Japanese colonization period, New Arirang, a modernized version of the folk song, Arirang, was a unifying medium among Koreans who were displaced to different countries as laborers under the Japanese rule. By exploring how the folk song had been modified into a modern version and had served a different cultural function during a political turmoil, the paper emphasizes the role of soft power and folk culture in a politically and culturally fractured society. The paper concludes that Arirang raised a solidarity among the people of a colonized nation, by awakening their cultural root based on its attributes as a folk music, being a cultural tool for the Japanese resistance movement, and reminding a wide spectrum of colonized people from ordinary farmers to displaced laborers and political activists of national sentiment.*

Keywords: *Arirang, folk music, diaspora, solidarity, colonization.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Arirang, a form of Korean traditional folksong, is a cultural representation of “Korean-ness.” Being able to sing Arirang itself became a proof of being Korean. Homer. B. Herbert, an American missionary and historian, stated in a journal, *Korean Repository* in 1864, that “to the average Korean, this one song holds the same place in music that rice does in his diet all else is mere appendage. One can hear it everywhere and at all times.” (Kim, 2012, p. 103) It is a song about sadness of lovers’ parting, injustices from living as commoners, the nostalgia of hometown, period of dramatic change and, persevering colonial oppression. The song enabled Koreans, who historically suffered from consistent suppression from their neighboring

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countries, to sublimate unbearable pain into a playful taste of art. Arirang has evolved from a subgenre of regional folksongs into a symbol of solidarity. During the Japanese colonization, it played a critical role in voicing people's sufferings arousing resistant sentiment against the Japanese rule, and unifying people during the Korean diaspora. The paper explores how regional folksongs of Arirang had been unified and modified into a modern version, New Arirang and how its folk-music elements and malleability upheld cultural solidarity among the colonists whose cultural identity was under a threat of obliteration. The paper discusses that the soft power based on a cultural medium exerts a great degree of influence over people as it is naturally embedded in their daily lives and elicits emotional empathy among them.

2. METHODOLOGY

Google scholars, EBSCO, and Bibliography of Asian Studies are the major DB sources that were used to attain secondary sources regarding origin, musical attributes, and historical role of Arirang. The search terms, "Arirang", "New Arirang", "Korean folk music", "Japanese colonization" were used. Also, search engines, Google and Naver were used to search primary sources such as the original lyrics of the diverse versions of Arirang. The sources from articles and books, published in English and Korean languages were included.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Origin of Arirang

Arirang is a type of traditional folk song that has the repeated refrain, "arirangarirang arariyo" (Kim, 1989, p. 15). Although the refrain does not have a particular meaning, it is a crucial indicator that determines whether a folk song falls into the category of Arirang (Kim, 1989, p. 15). The reason the refrain plays a critical role in identifying Arirang is that it takes up a half of most Arirang songs (Kim, 2012, p. 16). It comes in the very first and the last part of the song and the last part is often endlessly repeated depending on the singer's preference (Kim, 2012, p. 16). Each region in Korean has its own Arirang (Kim, 1989, p. 15). There are 50 types of regional Arirangs in the Korean peninsula (Kim, 1989, p. 28). Even though these regional Arirangs have different melodies, lyrics, and lengths, as long as they share the refrain, they are termed as "Arirang" (Kim, 1989, p. 15). The fact that all Arirangs share the same refrain, signifies that they did not develop independently in each region, but were modified into different versions from one original version and spread to different parts of the peninsula (Cho, 2007, p. 12). Furthermore, Arirang is flexible and modifiable that anyone can add lyrics based on his or her interests and situation, as long as the song has the Arirang refrain (Cho, 2007, p. 16). Arirang is more of a

skeletal framework for musical and lyrical articulation than a song, since only the Arirang refrain and familiar contours of the melody are required to qualify as an Arirang (Atkins, 2007). Such flexibility later allows Arirang to evolve into different forms in different time periods, according to different objectives. Thus, it can be said that malleability of Arirang eventually resulted in omnipresence of Arirang in daily lives of Koreans.

There are countless explanations on the origins of Arirang and what it actually means, which is still controversial. One of the most recognized theories is that the melodic sounds gathered from various places along the Baekdu Mountains (Kim, 2012, p. 42). The melodic sounds are called “menari note” which are associated with children crying and funeral casket bearers (Kim, 2012, p. 42). The theory claims that this melody is the archetype of sounds most familiar to Koreans who lived under nomadic tribes such as Ye, Maek, and Han during the pre-historic time (Kim, 2012, p. 42). The first Arirang is known to be sung in Jeongseonin Gangwon Province, which is located in the middle of the peninsula (Kim, 1989, p. 19). Although the Arirang Monument is located in the town to celebrate its originality, the specific time period of its origin is unknown (Kim, 1989, p. 20). Jeongson Arirang spread to the southern regions and even to the capital of Yi Dynasty (1392 CE-1910 CE) (Kim, 2009, 342). Such distribution of the Arirang genre to different regions had occurred, along with the development of shared popular consciousness in response to the unstable order of Yi Dynasty’s feudal system and frequent farmers’ revolts (Kim, 2009, 342). The wide regional presence of Arirang folk songs setup a cornerstone for the birth of the New Arirang that took a significant role as an effective unifying force in the unstable colonial Korea.

2. Japanese Colonization and the New Arirang

Along with the modernization under the Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945, the Arirang, had previously existed as a form of collective regional folk songs, was developed into a modern popular song called New Arirang which gradually became a central emblem of social and cultural solidarity during the Japanese colonization. Korea, which sustained its position as a hermit nation for a long time, was under a threat of becoming a colony of its powerful neighbors. After winning Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and Russo-Japanese War in 1904, Japan made Korea its protectorate in 1905 (King). Finally in 1910, Japan annexed Korea and ruled Korea under a residency general, directly subordinate to the prime ministers in Tokyo (Committee of Korean Modern History, 2013, p. 35). The Government General, or the colonial government enforced a policy of assimilation to train Koreans as their submissive loyal subjects (CKMH, 2013, p. 171). In order to do so, they needed to obliterate deeply rooted cultural and social factors in daily lives and so enforced the Japanization process of Korean custom, language, names, and culture through repeated education and prevention of its practices of convention (CKMH, 2013,

p. 172). Under the justification of granting equality to the colonists as Japanese citizens, Japanese administration attempted to remove Korean-ness out of their lives to discourage the rise of national solidarity that can potentially lead to massive resistant uprising.

In response to the increasing suppression under the Japanese rule, a nationalist movie director, Na Un-Kyu made a silent movie called *Arirang* with the theme song of New Arirang, or Shin (□, 新)Arirangin order to uncover the brutality of Japanese colonization and to stir up the unity among Koreans through a cultural medium of Arirang that has folk-culture elements. His hometown is Hwe-ryung and he overheard the laborers from the South, singing the traditional folk song of Arirang (Cho, 2007, p. 34). Touched by the agony embedded in the song, in the early 1920s when he makes the movie, he replayed the melody, which turned out to be that of BonjoArirangto the Seong-san Music band and wrote lyrics by tracing his childhood memory (Cho, 2007, p. 35). This eventually began to be called as the New Arirang and its lyrics are:

Arirang, arirangarariyo

I go over the Arirang hills,

There are many stars in the clear sky,

And many grief in life and in this world

Arirang, arirangarariyo

I go over the Arirang hills,

My lover who abandoned me

Will be footsore before he goes ten li(里, a half kilometer) (Kim, 2012, p. 51)

Though its origin lies in one of the traditional Arirangs as Na got its melody and most lyrics from the BonjoArirang, the New Arirang has distinct traits from the old Arirangs. The New Arirang does not fall under the category of traditional folksongs but under the New Folk Song which were popular during the 1920s and 1930s along with the import of gramophones from Japan (Kim, 2009, p. 14). The New Folk Song is a westernized form of the traditional folksong as it is played either solely with the Western instruments or with a mixture of Western and Korean instruments (Kim, 2009, p. 14). Since the New Folk Song had traditional components such as the lyrics, melodies, and sentiments, its familiarity made it easier to come across the audience (Kim, 2009, p. 14). As such, even though the New Arirang was played with Western instruments, its melody and most of its lyrics were the same as those of Bonjo Arirang (Kim, 2009, p. 14). Also, since it still maintained the refrain of “arirangarirangarariyo”, it could be identified as Arirang. As such it maintains the traditional elements of the pre-existing Arirang, which allowed the

New Arirang to replace the regionally diverse forms of the old Arirangs to be sung as a new popular anthem of Korea (Kim, 2009, p. 15).

Another aspect of the New Folk Song is that it was distributed in the form of a record like the Western popular music (Kim, 2009, p. 14). Since a record can only take up three minutes, the Korean traditional folk songs like the old Arirang which often continue on and on in a cyclical manner eventually were framed and standardized into a three-minute song to meet the modern expectation (Kim, 2009, p. 14). The New Arirang was also made into a record form, which consequently promoted its rapid distribution and popularization (Kim, 2009, p. 15). As depicted, the Arirang, originally a pronoun for a type of traditional folksong, was modernized and simplified into the New Arirang, which pursued both cultural tradition and widespread popularity.

The movie, *Arirang* is the central factor for making Arirang as an anthem for solidarity. The movie premiered in Seoul in October 1, 1926 (Atkins, 2007). Though it was an emulation of foreign melodrama, it was an effective expression of national fury against the Japanese rule and became an important precedent for using a cultural platform to convey anti-imperialist messages (Atkins, 2007). One of the major contributing factors that enabled Arirang to serve a political function was that the movie itself had an anti-Japanese plot and message, and the music Arirang was an indispensable element of the plot. The anti-Japanese feature of the movie and the fact that the New Arirang was a theme song of the movie associates the song itself with an anti-Japanese tendency. Throughout the movie, the song, Arirang was played eight times (Atkins, 2007). Also, in the movie, Director Na devised the protagonist to elicit public singing of the Arirang, in order to elevate emotional reactions of the audience and to inculcate the anti-Japanese spirit to the colonists by making them sing along the Arirang. The song raised popularity along with the movie's success, as the movie was played in the theater for a year and made the very first great hit in the box office in Korea (Kim, 2012, p. 40). As shown, the New Arirang that was first introduced to the audience as a cultural conveyor of a political message naturally shaped its reputation and role as a song of resistance and Korean solidarity.

3. Voicing the *Han*, a Representation of Korean Sentiment of Suffering

The New Arirang contributed to relieving agony of Korean colonists by giving hopeful message and reassuring their national identity. Even before the appearance of New Arirang, the traditional Arirang has been embedding a long-existed sentiment of *Han*(한, 恨), a feeling of everlasting, painful sorrow (Lee, 2013, p. 82). Although the Chinese character, *Han* exists in both China and Japan, it refers "to be angry at" or "to hate" (Kim, 2012, p. 50). However, in Korea, *Han* is a mixture of anger and sorrow (Kim, 2012, p. 50). Korea was constantly threatened and persecuted

by these two powerful neighboring countries (Kim, 2012, p. 50). As a result, the meaning of *Han* to Korea is different from those of the other countries because it mirrors Korea's helpless situation in which though irritated by the mistreatment, there is nothing it can do but to bear the anger and sorrow (Kim, 2012, p. 50). Thus, Koreans consider this unique sentiment as an inner beauty and a source of strength for the oppressed Koreans (Lee, 2013, p. 88). This type of sentiment also indwells in the New Arirang which allows people to release and relieve *Han* by singing it. As seen from the lyrics above, the New Arirang is about a woman who has to bid farewell to her lover who goes beyond Arirang hills (Cho, 2007, p. 12). As the lyrics say, "My lover who abandoned me/ Will footsore before he goes ten li," the narrator hopes the lover to come back one day (Cho, 2007, p. 12). Although she is suffering from the despair of parting with her lover at the moment, by self-assuring that her lover will get a footsore and come back to her, she keeps her hope and bears the pain (Cho, 2007, p. 12).

Another critical part of the song is "Arirang hills" In the song, Arirang hills are not real hills, but more of a metaphor for grave ordeals to overcome (Kim, 2012, p. 47). The lyrics, "I go over the Arirang hills" reflects an unyielding determination to overcome difficulties in life, filled with *Han* (Kim, 2012, p. 47). By singing this part, people being colonized reassure themselves to bear the hardships and climb over the Arirang hills in their own lives (Kim, 2012, p. 47). Such hopeful characteristics of Arirang eventually played a crucial role in encouraging the oppressed Koreans to boldly confront the colonial reality and not to lose hope and overcome it. Furthermore, Na, the director who inserted the New Arirang in the movie explained, "Arirang hill is a hill of hope and I wanted to convey a message of hope and encouragement to the viewers to conquer the tragic fate we all are facing and to stand strong as one" (Kim, 2012, p. 48). Such strength and hope that Arirang is composed of, successfully upheld solidarity among Koreans under a shared sentiment and allowed them to withstand the harsh colonial reality.

This is exemplified through the stories of Comfort Women and Kamikaze soldiers. Kamikaze is a suicide squad whose pilots were to carry bombs in their aircraft and make a suicide attack on US ships during the Pacific Wars (Lee, 2013, p. 198). Among these Kamikaze soldiers, there were young Korean men who were forcefully conscripted to the war as loyal subjects (Kim, 2012, p. 227). One of them was a twenty-five-year-old man, Tak Gyeong-hymn (Kim, 2012, p. 227). The night before he leaves for his last mission in May 11, 1945, he told Torihama Tome, a woman at a restaurant, "if I die and come back as a spirit, I will come as a Hotaru, or firefly. Now I am going to sing a song for you. A song of my mother land" and sang Arirang (Lee, 2013, p. 200). Next morning, he sailed off to Okinawa for the Kamikaze mission and his airplane signal was disconnected at 9:15 am (Lee, 2013, p. 200). For Kamikaze soldiers like him, the song of motherland was a comfort that

relieved the fear the colonial victims had to bear, by drawing the memories of home and reminding themselves of *Han*, a sentiment of the home country.

Another example of Arirang being used as a reliever of colonial suffering is to Comfort Women who endured sexual abuse and humiliation through singing Arirang. Women who served in Japanese military brothels as sex slaves were called Comfort Women and they numbered 10,000 to 200,000 (Lee, 2013, p. 204). The majority of them were Koreans, who was deceived that they will be provided with well-paid jobs (Lee, 2013, p. 205). One of them was Noh Su-Bok, who was taken to Thailand during the war in Southeast Asia (Lee, 2013, p. 205). She said she often sang Arirang and it soothed her agony throughout her nightmare in Japanese camps as it often retrieved her back the image of her homeland which gave her courage and hope to live on those horrifying days (Lee, 2013, p. 40). As exemplified, Arirang had developed into a symbol of colonial oppression and atrocity of war. It was a song of the oppressed that comforted those who became scapegoats of the tragic history of a powerless country, as singing Arirang reminded them of nationally shared sentiment and cultural nostalgia.

4. New Arirang and Resistance Movement against the Colonial Rule

Arirang promoted solidarity among Koreans as it was used as an effective tool in the resistance movement against the Japanese imperial rule. In an interview, the director Na said, “when I was filming the movie, I tried to project the message of ‘my fellow Koreans, let’s not give up’ into every scene. Through the brave protagonist, Young-jin, I also wanted to remind Koreans of the fact that, though we are physically subdued by the powerful force, our traditional spirit is still masculine” (Lee, 2013, p. 40). Reflecting from the interview and the anti-Japanese settings of the movie, the movie *Arirang* and its background music, the New Arirang contain resistant sentiments which eventually resulted in cultural persecution from the colonial government.

At first, the Governor General confiscated more than 10,000 pieces of pamphlets and posters, claiming that the background music has a dangerous message, concealed (Lee, 2013, p. 201). Though there was a certain degree of restriction and censoring of the movie itself, more intense persecution was practiced, as the song was popularized along with the success of the movie and began to be employed as a theme song for anti-Japanese movement. For instance, in a high school in Busan, the largest port city, students refused to sing *Kimi-gayo*, the Japanese national anthem, and sang the New Arirang from the movie (Lee, 2013, p. 204). Approximately 1,000 students marched down to the street, singing the Arirang (Lee, 2013, p. 204). Such mass movement alarmed the colonial government with the threat the Arirang can pose a threat to the colonial order. In response to this, the colonial government began to enforce more systematic censoring policies. In 1929, the Governor General prohibited Arirang for carrying dangerous messages and the

record stores were banned from selling the Arirang records (Lee, 2013, p. 248). In 1933, a law was passed that required the manufacturers and importers to obtain approval from the Governor General for all sound recordings before they went to the market in the colony (Lee, 2013, p. 248). Breach of these laws resulted into fines for the companies, performers, and consumers that did not comply (Atkins, 2007). However, during the late 1930s, the Governor General changed the policies as they launched the Japanization process to assimilate the colonists as loyal subjects (Kim, 2009, p. 350). As a result, Arirang became one of the victims of this assimilation policy that attempted to wipe off Korean identity. The Governor General changed the lyrics of the New Arirang melody into those with pro-Japanese message (Kim, 2012, p. 186). Such an Arirang was called the Emergency Arirang of which lyrics are "Arirangarirangarariyo/In order for a home to exist, there should be a country/Let's love the country and family more than one's body/Let the Sunshine on the world/Let's wave the flag of peace"(Kim, 2012, p. 187). It conveys a message of worshipping the emperor who is represented as the Sun in the lyrics and of being patriotic to the empire (Kim, 2012, p. 187).

The colonial government's attempt to Japanize the Arirang eventually infuriated Koreans, which made them launch the Arirang Remake Movement (Kim, 2009, p. 360). Just like the Japanese government, Korean nationalists changed the lyrics of the New Arirang to suit their taste, keeping its original melody (Kim, 2009, p. 360). For example, one of the most popular modified version of the New Arirang had the hopeful lyrics, "Arirangarirangarariyo/Friends, wake up from your shallow dream/The crimson sun is rising over Arirang Hill/ With two arms stretched wide" (Atkins, 2007). They used the word "sun" in a different way from that of the Japanese version as it symbolized the hope and a new start for the colonists (Atkins, 2007). Also, some modified versions raised awareness to the miserable life under the Japanese rule by having lyrics like "arirang arirang arariyo/all usable trees were sold as telegraph poles/all pretty girls as entertainers" and others lamented what it means to lose one's own country, by having lyrics like "arirang arirang arariyo/now I am an exile crossing the Yalu River/and the mountains and rivers of three thousand li are also lost" (Atkins, 2007). As demonstrated, the forceful assimilation policy provoked more effective and systematic resistance movement that employed a cultural medium of folk culture. Singing the original Korean version of Arirang was itself, an act of resistance against Japanization of Korean culture.

Moreover, they attempted to defy Japanese assimilation policy by editing the Arirang message according to their objectives: mostly, instigating cultural reawakening and culturally conveying anti-Japanese message. Arirang exerted its influence as a significant resistant tool as its lyrics were easily adjusted to embed the anti-Japanese messages. This was only possible due to the Arirang's flexibility, a characteristic in which a song can be coined as Arirang as long as it includes the main refrain of "arirangarirangarariyo." Promoted by Arirang's unique trait, the New

Arirang could have been modified into different versions for different purposes. Even though the New Arirang had resistant features from its birth by being used in the anti-Japanese movie, as it survived through constant persecutions and evolved into different versions that voiced the suffering colonists, it became even a more powerful unifier of Korean colonists against a constant threat of annihilation of its culture.

5. The New Arirang and Korean Diaspora

Arirang was a unifier of not only colonists in Korea, but also, fellow Korean migrants who were victims of Japanese colonization. Diaspora is being forced out of one's nation by external causes (Kim, 2012, p. 208). For Koreans, diaspora includes Koreans living abroad who had left Korea before the liberation in 1945 and had formed communities in China, Japan, Russia, and Central Asia (Kim, 2012, p. 208). They were workers who were forcefully taken under the Japanese rule, migrants who seek for more opportunities or escape from poverty, and political dissenters who actively participated in independence movements (Kim, 2012, p. 79). Though most of them abandoned their official nationality, they refused to remove their cultural identity. Arirang was a constant reminder of who they are.

According to one of the Korean- Uzbek residents, Arirang is a symbol of the culture of Korean-immigrant community itself and a representation of how the Korean immigrants had adapted and survived in the foreign countries (Kim, 2012, p. 209). For them, it was a song of nostalgia, cultural pride, and at the same time, of pain of living as an alien in the land away from home (Park, 1993, p. 115). To maintain the spirit of Arirang, various types of Arirang were sung and modified according to the regions. For example, among Korean migrants who resided in Manchuria and Jiandao since 1860s, New Arirang of Mt. Jangbaek was popular (Lee, 2013, p. 223). Its lyrics are "Is the fame of the country and pride of Yanbian/ Ari arirangseuri seurirang arariyo Ararigananne/ Jangbaek Mountain Range is our pride" which illustrates a mixture of typical pattern of Arirang verses and specific regional names such as Yangbian and Jangbaek, located in the border between China and northern Korea (Lee, 2013, p. 229). Additionally, Koreans who lived in Russia and Central Asia had "Chirchiq Arirang" which lyrics said, "Young girls picking cotton gather here for the rest/ They are merry for the rich fields/ Uzbek girls from Korean and/ Many Uzbek girls with bunch hair sit and get the Dombra/ Arirangarirang arariyo/ Arirang which has passed the Arirang Hill/ Become the melody of friendship in rich Chirchiq fields" (Lee, 2013, p. 229). The song not only aroused nostalgia with the same old pattern of "Arirangarirang arariyo" but also mirrored the immigrant lives of the Russian migrants as it mentioned cotton-picking and ethnic names like "Chirchiq fields" and "Dambra."

This was possible due to the flexible feature of Arirang, as its lyrics can be modified, added, and omitted depending on the person's need. As such, these

Arirangs were reproduced based on the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the migrants of different countries. Even though, the forms, lyrics, and melodies differ by regions, the major narratives of embedding *Han*, pursuing coexistence with natural surroundings and repeated use of the line “arirangarirang arariyo” remain unchanged. Thus, for these Korean migrants, Arirang was a combination of traditional Korean sentiment and various migrant lives, unique to the region. This particular attribute of Arirang enabled them to unify under the identity of migrants who share common experience of surviving in a foreign land and, of being Koreans who know how to sing Arirang and to be culturally affiliated with the Arirang phrases and melodies. Such strong unity, caused by Arirang among Korean migrants demonstrates the role of Arirang to draw people together by highlighting “Korean-ness” and reminding them of their cultural identities during a diaspora.

4. CONCLUSION

Arirang, as it had transformed from a subgenre of traditional regional folk songs to a unified version called New Arirang during the Japanese colonization, had become a critical emblem of Korean solidarity. It served a marked role as an iconic song of anti-Imperialism by being a cultural tool for the resistant movement against the Japanese oppression, voicing and relieving ordeals that the colonists bear under the tyrannical rule and by retrieving the identities of Korean migrants who were forcefully displaced to different countries during the colonial time. Even after the colonization, Arirang has been used as an irreplaceable symbol of Korean solidarity, especially at important moments of Korean history. It was played when the armistice was signed between South and North at the end of the Korean War in 1953 (Park, 1993, p. 110). It was also selected as the national anthem for a unified team of South and North Korea during the Beijing Asian Game in 1989 (Lim, 2013). Nowadays, it is often played as an ending song of K-pop (Korean pop music) concerts that were held in other countries to promote national solidarity by establishing Korean pride and international solidarity by highlighting the power of music (Kim, 2009, p. 501).

As exemplified, even though Arirang had started off as a resistant song against Japanese colonialism, its projected values and uses have been changing in response to the political and cultural situation of the nation. However, what has been maintained is that it still is a cultural expression of Korean identity and solidarity that had survived through consistent oppression and adversaries throughout its tragic and turbulent history. As it did during the period of colonization and diaspora, Arirang demonstrates the effectiveness of soft power even in these days, as culture exists as an inseparable part of people’s daily lives and is deeply ingrained through bearing consistent threat of cultural obliteration. The case study of Arirang demonstrates how a cultural medium of folk music can raise solidarity in a politically, socially and culturally fragmented society by being easily adopted and constantly evolved into an art form that conforms to the popular taste and cultural function of the age.

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