

# How The Korean Folk Song "Arirang" Ties In With BTS' March Comeback

Plus: Interviews with Korean diaspora and an ethnomusicologist on the significance of "Arirang"

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*Arirang* album cover. (Photo: courtesy of BigHit Music)

On March 20<sup>1</sup>, BTS will make their long-awaited comeback with an album called *Arirang*. Since it was announced, fans *and* media have been speculating about the cultural significance of the title, the album cover possibly being an homage to a group of 19th century Korean students studying in the U.S. (more on that later), and whether the title hints at what kind of music listeners can expect on the upcoming record.

I have a theory that no one seems to agree with, but that's not new. LOL Though it may seem improbable, it is stuck in my head that *Arirang* has been a part of the group's long-term plan. Is it feasible that the members and their team mapped out when *Arirang* would be released — not tied to the March 20 date, but specifically as the title of their **post-military** comeback? Did they have this album planned from the get-to in 2013? Or, more likely, did ideas begin to percolate in 2017 when they worked on “Spring Day” — a song that simultaneously shares both nothing and everything with the Korean folk song, “Arirang.”<sup>2</sup>

Believe it or not, I had a lovely singing voice as a child. This is what my parents and teachers told me anyhow. But I do remember singing often back then and carrying a tune quite nicely. Until I got too embarrassed to sing in public, two of the Korean songs I was often asked to sing were “Arirang” and “산토끼” — the latter being a children's song about a *mountain rabbit*. At that time, I sang both songs with enthusiastic peppiness. That's not how I would sing “Arirang” today though. Because as an adult, the song registers as not only a song of hope and resilience, but also one of mourning — kind of like how “Spring Day” speaks to me.

## **OLDER KOREAN DIASPORA SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON “ARIRANG”:**

## Grandparents Singing Arirang 아리랑



For this piece, it was important to me to share the views of Koreans whose voices aren't often heard much — if at all — on social media: the elderly. The following interviews were conducted in Korean and English, with my mother interpreting some of the colonial Japanese that I couldn't navigate.

**An-jin, 91:** *We lived through a lot — the Japanese occupation, **being forced to not use our Korean names**, being punished if we spoke Korean, the Korean War, being accused of being communists, having our country split up, not seeing some of our relatives ever again... If we thought too much about it, we couldn't go on. Most of us couldn't afford entertainment, but singing was free. We sang songs like “Arirang” to stay alive when it didn't seem like we could. A lot of us died.*

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**Peter, 67:** *My parents and wife are classical musicians who have played every iteration of “Arirang” that I can think of. I am partial to the string version with no vocals. The song's melody doesn't need words to get its message across. [NOTE: At this point, I asked him*

what the message was.] *The message is whatever we need it to be, which I think is why the song is still so popular after all these decades.*

**Ga-sup, 72:** *I only know a few BTS songs because of my grandchildren, but I would like to thank them for bringing “Arirang” to the attention of the younger generation. It is more than just a song, it’s Korea’s anthem in many ways. I don’t know if those boys will sing it on their record, or if I’ll even like what they do, but I hope they will honor the sentiments without forgetting about Korea’s turbulent history. I think that is their intention. I hope so.*

**Grace, 81:** *My oldest brothers were sent to fight in the Korean War and never returned home. We had no bodies to bury and that killed my parents’ souls, especially my mother. When I think of “Arirang,” I think of her wailing the song as if she wanted those in power who caused this to hear and understand what had been taken from her, from us. It’s not a song that I equate with happiness or optimism. It’s a song that I equate with death and mourning.*

Arirang, a Korean folk song



## **AN ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST’S TAKE ON ARIRANG:**

As with many songs, “Arirang” means different things, depending on who the listener is. Is it a song of hope, or one of mourning? Is it intended to tell a story of the past, or does it point towards the future? I have my own thoughts, which are determined by hearing the song growing up.

For this article, I wanted to convey more than my own experience. I reached out to Donna Lee Kwon, a professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Kentucky, to share her views.

Initially, I had this portion of the newsletter written as an essay, weaving in Dr. Kwon's quotes as part of a different story I wanted to tell. But after a few days of tweaking the piece and not being satisfied, I realized that I needed to take myself out of the equation, so to speak, because I realized that Dr. Kwon's words held more power and clarity on their own.

So I switched to a Q+A format, which I hope you will enjoy reading:

**Dr. Kwon, for the uninitiated, can you explain what “Arirang” means?**

“Arirang” — the standard or bonjo arirang/본조 아리랑 — is probably *the* most significant Korean song of the modern era. It tugs on the heart strings of North and South Koreans alike, as well as countless people across the various diasporas. What complicates this picture is that it descends from and is part of a much larger family of regional folksongs that also possess arirang refrains. In addition, it is beloved among non-Koreans as well. Before the K-pop era, [it] was probably the most recognizable Korean song internationally.

Among my music major students, many of them know the melody already because they may have played “Variations on a Korean Folk Song” — which is based on the standard Arirang — by John Barnes Chance in their band at school. It's very popular. Although besides the hill reference, some of the older arirangs stem from the mountainous eastern regions that are known as menari or meari songs, where *ari* means *echo*. But again, there is no definitive theory about the etymology of the word, from what I can tell.

Agust D '대취타' MV



Do you think *Arirang* is BTS' way of saying they're going back to their roots — not necessarily a deep dive into Korean music dating back to Joseon, but making a record that's *more* Korean than some of their newer [group and solo] songs? For what it's worth, I'm *hoping* the entire album will be in Korean, but I don't think it will be, and that's OK, too.

Yes, this was my first thought actually. Especially because right before their hiatus, BTS put so much energy into achieving as much international success — Grammy awards potentially — as they possibly could by releasing a lot of songs exclusively in English, with more American/Western producers/songwriters, etc. I remember hearing many BTS fans lament that BTS was potentially losing a bit of their Korean identity during this phase. So, given this, this does seem like a statement that they at least want to release music that truly reflects who they are.

Suga (Agust D) does have a lot of experience incorporating Korean music into his songs, most impressively with “Daechwita,”<sup>3</sup> so I am really looking forward to what they might come up with here. They also have the song “Idol” that draws somewhat from Korean music and culture. In terms of language, I think there will be a higher ratio of Korean to English, but probably not exclusively Korean or English.

Growing up, I heard “Arirang” around the house a lot. The recorded versions we listened to, though, were primarily by female singers. Do you think BTS will sing a version of it on their album? And what would it mean for them to sing it, whether it’s traditional or a modernized pop version like they performed onstage in 2016?

[BANGTAN BOMB] Arirang arirang~Arariyo~~ - BTS (방탄소년단)



I wonder about this, too. I don’t necessarily associate this song with female singers only, although I can see how you might have this association. There’s actually a really famous rock version by the male Yoon Do Hyun Band that was extremely popular during the 2002 FIFA World Cup that Japan and Korea hosted. There have actually been many other popular versions such as “Arario” by Top Dogg and “Aradiho” by Drunken Tiger.

For me, personally, I think it will be difficult to sing the standard “Arirang” straight and have it not seem cliché or cringey, but I could be proven wrong. Listening to their version again [from their 2016 performance in France], they actually incorporate at least three versions of “Arirang”: the standard one, Jindo Arirang, and Miryang Arirang, plus they add new rapped verses and play around with the various melodies and add new lyrics. In light of this, I am very curious what they end up doing with *Arirang*. Will they choose other, lesser known versions of “Arirang” to draw inspiration from? Or re-work this version? Maybe even sample some of those early recordings

from the Library of Congress <sup>4</sup>? I have high expectations because of how good “Daechwita” was, so I can’t wait to hear what they come up with.

[MV] Yoon Dohyeon(윤도현) \_ 2021 Arirang Fighting Song(아리랑 응원가)



### What else should readers know about “Arirang”?

Strangely enough, even though some versions harbor criticism towards the Japanese occupation, it was also very popular in Japan! There’s an article written about it by [E. Taylor Atkins](#). There’s much more to this history, which I am sure you know, but because of all of this, the meaning of the song “Arirang” is subject to overdetermination, meaning that there are numerous meanings, interpretations, and histories that are possible, where the listener’s subjectivity/nationality/etc. can very much be a factor. You might even call it a floating signifier, in that its meaning can float around depending on the context, the listener, etc.

In the context of BTS naming their comeback *Arirang*, I even read an [explanation](#) from a folklorist [[Zarah Gagatiga](#) <sup>5</sup>] — not a Korean specialist — who read the whole comeback from a folklore lens, stating that “Arirang” is not a song you own, it is a song you carry. It comes from ordinary people. It comes from folk tradition. But of course you could read it as a love song, as a nationalist expression, as an anti-colonial resistance anthem — maybe even as a reunification song.

How would you describe *Arirang* in relation to BTS and [their fandom] ARMY?

The meanings that make the most sense to me would be to read *Arirang* in the context of BTS and their relationship to ARMY *during and after* the hiatus. According to scholar [Lim Dong-kwon](#), “*Arirang* is a frank confession of love as well as regret at parting,” and this seems like it is resonant with this situation. Even though there are many competing definitions of the etymology of the word *arirang* within the context of the standard lyrics, *arirang* refers to a hill or a mountain pass that your loved one is traversing, perhaps never to be seen again, leaving you behind.

In this case, BTS seem to be expressing their regret at parting, while also expressing their love for their fans in their comeback. Interestingly, given that the reason for their absence was to fulfill their duty to the [South Korean military](#), I feel like there is a nationalistic reading that is possible here, too. They could have chosen to fight harder for exemption to compulsory male service but chose not to. If any idol group could have gotten full exemption — not just extending the age of entering service — it would have been BTS.



1896: Korean students at Howard University (Courtesy: The Kiplinger Library of the Historical Society of Washington)

**BTS' *Arirang* album cover seems to be an homage to the seven Korean students who studied at Howard University and were recorded singing "Arirang." What do you make of this cover photo?**

I think this is very intriguing. I do think it is plausible from looking at the photos, that there could be a connection here. I will say that the *arirang* songs that these students were singing on the recordings are not the standard, more recognizable "Arirang" that we know of today. To me they sound more like the Kangwondo or Kyongsangdo — eastern folk songs — but, in any case, they were barely recognizable to any of the *arirang* songs that I know. In any case, as early Koreans who traveled to the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century, perhaps this connection could be suggesting that BTS are also courageous pioneers who "paved the way" for others, as their fans like to say.

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## **K-DRAMA INDEX**

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- 1 On a personal note, March 20 will also be my 6th anniversary of being cancer-free. So, yay *me!*
- 2 The folk song “Arirang” bears the distinction of being inscribed on the [UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#).
- 3 “Daechwita” is from Agust D’s mixtape, *D-2*. Agust D is the name Suga uses for his solo work.
- 4 Recordings were made of the Korean students studying at Howard University in 1896. They are now preserved in the U.S. Library of Congress.
- 5 ETA: Librarian Zarah Gagatiga is the folklorist Professor Kwon had referenced.



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