



# Building Cultural Identities of the Korean Nation-State: *An Analysis of Musical Elements in The Rose of Sharon (1948)*

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## Abstract

*This article presents a critical overview on how musical elements of The Rose of Sharon (Mugunghwa dongsan) were aligned with its political messages for building the Korean nation-state during the post-colonial period. The film was first presented to the public at the March First Movement memorial event for the newly established state in the southern part of Korea, the Republic of Korea. Recommended by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), the film was used as a nation-building publicity film providing a blueprint for the ideal Korean community: ethnic Koreans living in Hawai'i. Musical elements of the film were indicative of two prominent features for the Korean nation-state: transnational Korean community sharing the same culture and a pro-American society appreciating Western/American culture. The former was presented through ethnic Koreans' appreciation of Korea's traditional song and dance, while the latter was exemplified by their performance of hymns, operatic song, and hula. The musical elements in The Rose of Sharon were in line with music-related cultural policies of the nascent ROK government established under American hegemony.*

**Keywords:** Korean documentary film, political agenda, Koreans in Hawai'i, cultural identity, nation-building, publicity film, post-colonial Korean society

## Introduction

On March 3, 1949, a documentary film titled *The Rose of Sharon* (*Mugunghwa dongsan*) was shown at the Municipal Theater (Sigonggwan, the present-day Myeong-dong Art Theater). The film premiered at an event commemorating the March First Movement of 1919, one of the earliest public displays of Korean resistance against Japanese colonial rule of Korea (1910–1945) (*Chosun Ilbo* 1949). The Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) had been formally established on August 15 of the previous year, making this the first event where South Koreans commemorated a day as citizens of a sovereign nation. This study attempts to investigate the cultural identities the young ROK government intended to construct by examining the musical elements in *The Rose of Sharon*.

*The Rose of Sharon* was distributed by the Goryeo Film Company (Goryeo yeonghwaswa). The company had a close relationship with the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), through which American civil affairs officers governed the southern part of the Korean Peninsula from September 8, 1945 to the establishment of the ROK on August 15, 1948. The ROK Ministry of Culture and Education (Mungyobu), a central administrative agency of the newly established ROK government, recommended the film be shown as one of the March First memorial events. The film was also revived at different theaters and schools (*Gungminbo* 1948a). Unlike other post-liberation films, *The Rose of Sharon* did not meet the censorship criteria, so there was no need for the film to be redacted or edited, as was required for other contemporary films such as *Hurrah for Freedom* (*Jayu manse*), shown at the 1949 March First Movement memorial event alongside *The Rose of Sharon* (C. Chung 2019, 41–42). The ROK government's use of *The Rose of Sharon* as *publicity film* without any changes indicates that specific elements of the film were in keeping with its political agenda. A political end behind the film's production was also reflected in the film's advertisement slogan: "Let's accomplish independent unification by reviving the spirit of the March First Movement" (*Chosun Ilbo* 1949).

*The Rose of Sharon* was filmed in 1947, when the USAMGIK began to

pay serious attention to cultural matters in South Korea. As fears of “losing ground in the propaganda war against the Soviets” arose in 1947, the USAMGIK began to promote a positive image of the United States within Korea (Armstrong 2003, 73). The film’s director was Ahn Cheol-young (1909–?). Ahn, having completed his studies in Japan and Germany, had been working as the art section chief of the ROK Ministry of Culture and Education. In the immediate post-liberation years, the USAMGIK, alongside the South Korean Interim Government (SKIG), focused both on the establishment of the nation-state and the interpellation of individuals as nation through manufacturing nationalism (see Y. Chung 2003). The USAMGIK forged a counter-revolutionary order by reviving Japanese colonial legal-governmental apparatuses and allying itself with Korean colonial collaborators and political elites representing the privileged class (Cumings 1981, 429; D. Choi 2013, 14). This was the most urgent task for achieving de-colonization and establishing the legitimacy of the ROK government, which entailed the direct and indirect collusions with intellectuals.

In the context of the Cold War, when even a vast range of cultural resources were being used as weapons, it was no surprise that the authorities should actively utilize mass media, among which cinema was the most effective (Sim 2012a, 207; Armstrong 2003, 74; S. Lee 2017, 115). Strictly speaking, *The Rose of Sharon* was not a propaganda film. Ahn’s trip to the United States to shoot the film came at the recommendation of USAMGIK, which possibly covered the expenses. However, among Ahn’s duties as a dispatched government official was to inspect major cultural institutions and industries in the US and to make reports to the government (Sim 2012b, 29). So technically, *The Rose of Sharon* can be categorized as an overseas travelogue in the tradition of Western travelogues; a *reversed* travel film, which introduced the First World to the Third World, and a poetic landscape nourished by the tradition of the travel essay (Sim 2012b, 62). Here it was the ROK government employing the overseas travelogue/travel film/landscape poetry in film form to publicize the newly established South Korean nation-state.

*The Rose of Sharon* concerns neither the independence movement nor

the history of colonial Korea. It diverges from other films of the period that have been termed *naesyeoneol sinema* (national cinema) or *minjok yeonghwa* (Korean ethnic film) created on the Korean Peninsula (C. Chung 2019, 18).<sup>1</sup> The nearly thirty-five-minute film serves to reveal the life of ethnic Koreans in Hawai'i. Hawai'i is where the first and the first sizeable Korean immigrant communities were formed in North America. Korean immigrants played a central role in the independence movement that sought to liberate Korea from Japanese colonization. The formation and development of colonial-era Korean nationalism abroad was substantially done in Hawai'i (see R. Kim 2011). Meanwhile, the population of Asian immigrants in Hawai'i outnumbered whites. Considering the distinctive demographics of Hawai'i, local authorities there tried to establish unity among ethnic groups and political cooperation between Pacific nations. After World War I, local authorities realized the need to confirm solidarities between different ethnic groups to prevent a war sparked by racism. There seemed no place on earth quite so ideally fitted to such an experiment of this type than Hawai'i, as it was considered "a paradise" for every immigrant community regardless of their culture, ethnicity, or religion (Pierce 2004, 124–154). The "America" that Koreans encountered in Hawai'i was significantly different from the society and culture of the continental United States (A. Choi 2004, 140).

Why then was a film about Koreans in Hawai'i used as a nation-building publicity film for South Korea? Previous studies have already answered this question from the perspective of Korean travelogues. There is general agreement that international travelogues written by Koreans during the colonial period repeatedly reminded readers that Koreans remained part of the Korean nation and formed their own communities as such, even when living abroad. Such a discourse was predicated on the Korean people's shared blood and history, and their deep and common interest in the nation-building agenda (Im 2008; Sim 2012a, 2012b; H. Kim 2015). This was meant

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1. For Korea, Chonghwa Chung (2019, 18) uses the term "nation-state film" in place of "national cinema" to reflect Korea's pre-1950 historical peculiarities of state-making, including its colonial experiences, the liberation period, and the establishment of separate governments in North and South Korea.

to persuade Koreans to fashion their nation after the model offered by the modernized life and rich benefits of Koreans living in America, on the condition that they preserve their ethnic identity (Han 2011, 293). The screening of *The Rose of Sharon* can be understood in this context. The Korean-Hawaiian community in *The Rose of Sharon* was offered as a “mirror” of the shared ethnic consciousness of Koreans everywhere and a “model” for a modernized South Korea (Im 2008, 101).

This article builds upon previous studies and analyses of the musical elements of the film, using socio-cultural and ethnomusicological perspectives. The term “musical elements” here includes background music and musical stage scenes, as well as aspects pertaining to music theory (i.e., mode, rhythm, timbre, etc.). In other words, the historical contexts of the film’s music-inserted scenes and the musical characteristics in these scenes will be explored. Background music or musical scenes comprise quite a large part of *The Rose of Sharon*, demonstrating how much of the film is devoted to showing musical presentations by Koreans in Hawai‘i. No previous research has investigated how the film’s musical elements were aligned with the Korean nation-state-building project. Music in film in general is a “separate artistic fragment expressing in a different medium what the film expresses in visual and narrative terms” (Brown 1994, 239). With this in mind, this study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how the film’s description of overseas Koreans’ musical activities suited the political purposes of its screening: suggesting it as mirror and model for the newly established sovereign nation of South Korea. To demonstrate this, I first trace the process of producing *The Rose of Sharon* and then scrutinize the film’s musical elements in line with its political agenda.

### **An Overview of *The Rose of Sharon***

Ahn Cheol-young arrived in Hawai‘i in mid-October 1947 for an approximately one-month stay to film the everyday life of the Korean diaspora community there. The title of the film, *The Rose of Sharon*, refers to Hawai‘i, where the Rose of Sharon—also Korea’s national flower—is in full

bloom all year. Various aspects of the diasporic Korean church, school, and business activities are described in the film. The first scene depicting the beautiful surroundings of Hawai'i and Ahn's arrival at the Honolulu airport is followed by the introductory narration (all presented in Korean):

Hawai'i, the paradise of the world, is composed of eight large and small islands at the center of the Pacific and is where approximately 7,000 Korean patriots have resided for over forty years. Their immigration began with the East-West Development Company recruiting Koreans from 1902 to 1904. The Korean population that first arrived at Hawai'i was dispersed over American territories. The picture bride system also left various memories for the compatriots here. The patriots in Hawai'i, how exciting and appreciative to see them! For forty years, they have desired Korea's independence and lavished spiritual and material support on independence activists. Indeed, their contribution shall be forever remembered in the history of the Korean independence movement. What kind of place is Hawai'i? I would like to introduce Hawai'i through this film, *The Rose of Sharon*. (*The Rose of Sharon* 00:55–01:50)

Even though Ahn introduced the film as a documentary film purporting to show the everyday life of Koreans in Hawai'i, many scenes of *The Rose of Sharon* were choreographed. The first and last scenes of the film, describing Ahn's arrival and departure, were in fact acted out. Scenes of the Korean Women's Relief Society (Daehan buin gujehoe) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) stressing the Korean women's various social activities were also the result of Ahn's request that relevant Koreans gather at a selected filming location and act naturally (Sim 2012b, 76). Do Jin-ho, a first-generation Korean Hawaiian, played a leading part in scheduling and recruiting cast and crew for filming. Do even suggested the director wait until November for shooting on the grounds that the most beautiful season in Hawai'i was autumn (Sim 2012b, 75).

To Koreans in Hawai'i, the film was a great opportunity to show off what they had accomplished on US territory. The ethnic Koreans willingly participated in producing *The Rose of Sharon*. Some of them even provided lavish financial support. The film includes a scene where Mrs. Park Bo-

gwang and Mrs. Han Gyeong-hui donate \$20,000 and \$3,000 respectively to the film's production costs (*Kyunghyang Shinmun* 1947). The first-generation Koreans in Hawai'i felt that the film was like a "textbook" sent to their compatriots in Korea with the message, "You need to learn from us!" (H. Kim 2015, 234). Overall, the local Korean population was active in and overly supportive of the film-making process. *The Rose of Sharon* premiered in Hawai'i at the Honolulu YMCA on June 4, 1948. It was three months before the film was introduced to a select audience in South Korea (*Gungminbo* 1948a; *Dong-A Ilbo* 1948).

*The Rose of Sharon* portrays the United States as a nation with the most advanced and elevated civilization. Particularly notable in this portrayal is the use of civilization as a measure that transcends national, regional, and cultural boundaries, emphasizing its universality. The depiction of American civilization also highlights its humanistic foundation, catering to the needs of every individual within its national borders. Together with this is the representation of the United States as a country without imperialist or colonialist ambitions, and which champions the liberation of the colonized from European imperialism (Im 2008, 100). This image of the United States serves to justify the ROK alliance with the United States. More importantly, this imagining of the United States as an ideal world was inseparably linked to the agenda of the ruling ROK ruling elite which ultimately was to produce the new postcolonial Korean nation under American hegemony.

In *The Rose of Sharon*, Ahn suggests a "utopian future" for the Korean nation-state under the protection of the United States (Sim 2012b, 83–84). But of course, the Korean community in Hawai'i was not without its problems. The most serious problem was division, which led to factional strife. After Syngman Rhee (Yi Seung-man, 1875–1965) challenged the leadership and gained control of the Korean National Association (KNA) in 1915, the Koreans in Hawai'i were deeply divided. Those who were forced out of the KNA leadership—mostly followers of Park Yong-man (1881–1928)—refused to cooperate with Rhee. In addition to personality differences between the two leaders, the division involved opinions about the best strategy to win Korean independence; pro-Rhee members favored diplomatic efforts to gain support from Western countries, while anti-Rhee

members advocated military confrontation (Ch'oe 2007, 5). After Rhee was appointed to the Shanghai-based Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in 1919, a scandal over allegations of Rhee's abuse of power intensified these internal disputes. Rhee left the KNA and organized the Comrade Society (Dongjihoe) in 1921 to reinforce his position vis-à-vis the KPG, thus leading to the salient feature of the Korean communities: political factionalism. Feuds and squabbles were periodic occurrences, plaguing the Korean community, undermining the spirit and morale of the Koreans in Hawai'i, and seriously tarnishing their image.

*The Rose of Sharon* reveals no such dark sides of the Korean overseas community. The USAMGIK hired Director Ahn, who had previously worked for the left-leaning Joseon Film Company (Joseon yeonghwasa). The fact that Director Ahn was hired by the USAMGIK, and the USAMGIK-sponsored the Goryeo Film Company in 1947, indicates Ahn's establishing a new political path as "a moderate cultural nationalist" (Han 2011, 287; Sim 2012b, 181). More interestingly, most of the cast for *The Rose of Sharon* were former anti-Rhee members of the KNA. This film even depicts a scene of KNA-affiliated Koreans seeing Ahn off at the Honolulu airport. Such an enthusiastic reception of Ahn and his project by KNA members must have been the result of the director's close relations with KNA members in Hawai'i. Ahn's father was Ahn Chang-ho (1883–1966),<sup>2</sup> a minister who served in Hawai'i and dedicated his life to Korean independence as a representative figure of a largely anti-Rhee KNA (S. Kim 2005; Sim 2012b, 90). Members of the KNA, Ahn's father included, ardently supported Kim Gu's plan of establishing a unified independent Korean nation without intervention of other countries. The KNA members cooperated with Ahn's film production, while hoping to witness a unified Korea. Many scenes of KNA members in the film are meant to highlight the accomplishments of overseas Koreans, while there is no overt indications of political messaging.

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2. Ahn Cheol-young's father Ahn Chang-ho (1883–1966), and Dosan Ahn Chang-ho (1878–1938), a fervent Korean independence movement leader who established the Young Korean Academy (Hung Sa Dahn), are not the same person. The latter died in 1938, after being captured and imprisoned by the Japanese.



The question I pose here is how the ethnic Koreans' musical activities as depicted in *The Rose of Sharon* are linked to the central principles underlying the ROK nation-state-building project, that is, how the film endeavors to depict: (1) a transnational ethnic community sharing the same culture, and (2) a quasi-utopian and modernized society that might serve as a mirror and model for the ROK. The following sections discuss the musical elements in *The Rose of Sharon* as aligned with these two goals.

### **Musical Activities of Koreans in Hawai'i as Mirror for the ROK**

*The Rose of Sharon* stresses the continued appreciation of native musical culture by the diasporic Korean community. As Im Chong-myong rightly noted, the film reminded South Korean people that the Korean nation forms its own community whether at home or abroad on the basis of its members' common origin as characterized by blood and soil (Im 2008, 101). The dance of Korea (*Joseon-ui chum*) and the Korean national anthem (*aegukga*) represented the shared Korean ethnicity beyond the nation's territorial boundaries. These two musical elements in the film were aligned with the initiative of the pro-American ROK government in constructing the new nation-state: building transnational Korean communities.

#### *The Dance of Korea*

The short performance described in the film as the "dance of Korea" represents transnational ethnic communities sharing the same culture. This scene of a group of Korean girls dancing to music played on a phonograph is accompanied by the narrator's words:

Koreans have been learning traditional Korean dance. The Korean girls are performing a creative dance to melodies played on a phonograph. Their dresses and headdresses were made by the girls' fathers and mothers by harkening back a dim memory of a time before they had left Korea. The dancers are third-generation Korean girls who have never been to

Korea. However, they meet whenever they have time to practice dancing and enjoy Korean traditional culture. Although the tempo and techniques of their dancing are open to dispute, their enthusiasm and sincerity to cherish Korean culture deserve praise. (*The Rose of Sharon* 25:00–26:15)

As the above narration implies, the “dance of Korea” scene was curated to show the preservation of Korean ethnic culture. The words “the tempo and techniques of their dancing are open to dispute” suggest that the dance was quite different from traditional dance and music in Korea.

The costumes and accessories of the dancing girls are like those of court dancers in Korea. In Korea’s original court dancing, dancers in a group—most court dances are group dances—wear brilliantly colored costumes and headdresses. To heighten the visual effect, all court dancers wore sleeve extensions, *hansam*, over the hands. It is essential for the dancers to dance with grace and dignity; the movements of the dancers, using shoulders, arms, hands, and heels with very little leg movement, are generally very slow, creating a mystical atmosphere. It is as if the dancers have transcended reality. Subdued movements and the flowing curves created by the dancers’ bodies are considered the aesthetic of Korean court dance (S. Kim 2005, 30–31). The scene of the Hawai‘i-born Korean dancing girls in *The Rose of Sharon* is too short to determine precisely what dances they were imitating. It is fair to presume, however, that they were imitating Korean court dances like the “Spring Nightingale Dance” (Chunaengmu or Chunaengjeon) that integrates the full range of beautiful movements seen in most court dances. This is because an article dated April 26, 1940 in *The Honolulu Advertiser*, one of Hawai‘i’s main dailies, notes “Spring Nightingale Dance” followed by “Korean court dance” in parenthesis when documenting Korean female dancers’ performances at a local multi-cultural event called Lei Day (*Honolulu Advertiser* 1940).<sup>3</sup>

Most notably, the accompanying phonograph music in the scene is far from the original music accompanying court dance. Music accompanying

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3. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino dances were performed at the Bishop Museum for Lei Day. The “Spring Nightingale Dance” in the newspaper article is rendered, “Chin Yang Moo.”

Korea's court dance—understandably called “court music”—begins as a slow beat and produces a solemn yet magnificent ambiance. As an example, the music of the aforementioned Spring Nightingale Dance is Yeongsan hoesang, a chamber suite for the Buddhist dance honoring the sacred Mount Yeong (Moon 1983, 71). It consists of nine pieces, normally performed one at a time, which together may take nearly an hour to perform. This suite was originally based on a former religious chant about the Buddha preaching on the mountain, but its pieces have since lost their vocal tradition. It is played by a Korean music ensemble composed of the Korean hourglass drum (*janggo*), cylindrical oboe (*piri*), fiddle (*haegeum*), and flute (*daegeum*).

On the other hand, the background music for the “Dance of Korea” scene sounds like a newly adapted folk song called *sin minyo*; this was not court music but folk music. Since the late 1930s Koreans had begun to appreciate *sin minyo*, which blended traditional Korean musical tunes and Western orchestration. *Sin minyo* was sung in compound meters (6/8, 9/8, or 12/8) using the vocal timbre typical of traditional Korean folk songs. Its lyrics and melodies, meanwhile, were composed by individuals and “performed in a relatively fast tempo to the harmonic accompaniment of Western musical instruments in addition to traditional Korean instruments” (Maliangkay 2018, 69). The background music in the “dance of Korea” scene sounds very much like *sin minyo*, considering its *sol*-mode pentatonic scale (*sol*, *la*, *do*, *re* and *mi*), three beats in a repetitive pattern of “strong-weak-weak-strong-weak-weak,” relatively fast tempo, and the singer's high-pitched tone.

Simply put, the performance in this scene combines Korean court dance movements with folk song. As seen in the narration pointing out that the tempo and techniques of the dance were disputable, the Hawai'i Koreans' dancing differs markedly from the original form of court dance performed in Korea in terms of tempo, musical accompaniment, and overall movements. Despite its hybridity far removed from its original form and context, the performance in this scene suggests the continuance of Korean ethnic culture in Hawai'i. The intention of the film is corroborated in the following scene of young ethnic Korean audience members wearing traditional costumes—girls in Korean traditional long skirts (*chima*) and



**Figure 1.** Hawai'i-Korean youths in traditional Korean costumes in *The Rose of Sharon*

Source: *The Rose of Sharon*, Korean Film Archive (Hanguk yeongsang jaryowon).

jackets (*jeogori*) and boys in Korean traditional hats (*gat*) and overcoats (*durumagi*).

The background to the dancing scene is the Aloha Festival. This festival exemplifies a multi-cultural local event where different ethnic groups in Hawai'i come together to enjoy and share their respective ethnic traditions. By showing overseas young Koreans appreciating Korean dance, music, and costumes at this local event, *The Rose of Sharon* depicts the newly established Korean nation-state as a transnational and racial community sharing the same culture. The ethnic Koreans introduced Korean traditional culture, although it was a highly modified version combining both court and folk culture, to other multi-ethnic and multi-racial residents of Hawai'i, including Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, native Hawaiians, and white settlers from the mainland. It did not matter if they could not perfectly re-enact the traditional performances of Korea; what mattered was the fact they at least managed to present a *quasi*-Korean traditional performance.

The presentation of Korean ethnic culture and identity in a multi-

cultural setting is positively reflected in the film, suggesting a utopian society that the future Korean state should emulate (Han 2011, 292). It is significant that the dance of Korea is presented as more than a mere emblem of Koreanness in an overseas Korean community. Korea-derived cultural items, such as dance, is depicted as just as positive as the idealized Western music, which is discussed further below. The dance of Korea along with the musical elements addressed in the following sections imply that the idealization of different cultural orientations can co-exist in the same film.

*Aegukga: The National Anthem of Korea*

*The Rose of Sharon* ends with panoramic views of Hawai'i that summarize the previously shown principal scenes. The background music for these scenes is the national anthem of Korea, sung by the Korean Methodist Church Choir in Hawai'i. The national anthem accompanying an urban landscape of downtown Honolulu creates an effect as if the song were echoing through all the islands of Hawai'i. When watching this scene and listening to the music in theaters and schools in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, audiences would have felt as if peninsular Koreans and Korean Hawaiians had transcended their geographical distance to be unified as fellow citizens.

In the United States, the Korean national anthem had been sung at important events for Koreans to evince their desire for their country's independence from Japan. The 1919 Philadelphia Korean Congress held for three days from April 14 to mobilize support for the Korean independence movement was a typical example (see R. Kim 2006). The ceremonies concluded the three-day congress held at the Little Theater, where Koreans gathered from all parts of the United States and Hawai'i. The march from the theater took the route north on Eighteenth Street to Market and east on Market to Sixth and south on Sixth Street to Independence Hall. While rains splashed their banners until the red and blue designs ran together, 200 of the young men and women delegates to the Korean Congress marched with purposeful tread. They cheered at intervals and sang songs. Included here, of course, was Korea's national anthem (*Philadelphia Press* 1919).

However, the national anthem of Korea sung in 1919 differed from that in *The Rose of Sharon*. Although there is dispute over who wrote the lyrics, either Dosan Ahn Chang-ho (1878–1938) or Yun Chi-ho (1866–1945), the song’s lyrics first appeared in 1896 at the ceremony for the anniversary of the establishment of Independence Gate in Seoul. Published in 1905, *Songs of Praise (Chanmi-ga)* includes lyrics beginning with “East Sea and Mount Baekdu” (*donghae mul-gwa baekdu san-i*) that match exactly the lyrics of South Korea’s current national anthem. The lyrics had originally been sung to the tune of the Scottish folk melody, “Auld Lang Syne” (Yun 2020, 102). Thus, it would be fair to argue that the Korean anthem sung to the tune of the Scottish folk song was what the Koreans sang at the 1919 Philadelphia Korean Congress. The national anthem in the final scene of *The Rose of Sharon*, on the other hand, is the same as South Korea’s current national anthem. This patriotic song traces its origins back no later than the late 1930s; it was composed by Ahn Eak-tai (1906–1965) in 1935, when he was studying in Vienna, Austria. The first ROK government officially designated the song, with a new melody composed by Ahn Eak-tai, as the Korean anthem.

1. 동해 물과 백두산이 마르고 달도 북돋우  
2. 남산 위에 거수우왕의 울음  
3. 가을 하늘이 맑아도 울음  
4. 이기 상과 이맘으로 총성 울다

하느님이 보우하사 우리나라 만세  
바람서리 불변-할손우리 기상일세  
피로우나 울겨-우나 나라 사랑하세

(#)무 - 궁화삼 - 천리 화려강 - 산

대한 사람 대한으로 길이 보전하세

**Figure 2.** Korea’s National Anthem sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” (left) and that composed by Ahn Eak-tai (right)

Source: Academy of Korean Studies (Hangukuk jungang yeonguwon) and Ministry of the Interior and Safety (Haengjeong anjeonbu).

As a recent study by Stanley Waterman (2019) illustrates, national anthems have a unique power over people. They are examples of a situation where people, wholly unknown to one another, utter the same verses to the same melody. This situation effectively and efficiently allows *each* person to sing the music of the *whole* nation with *all* other citizens. National anthems are now a single—but powerful—part of the paraphernalia of national packaging. Yet although the words of these songs are often banal and their tunes mediocre, simultaneously singing them seems to bring people together. National anthems are serious and earnest compositions, and that is why they are played and sung at the most solemn occasions dedicated to displaying or honoring a nation's spirit. Concluding as it does with Korea's national anthem, *The Rose of Sharon*, therefore, makes an appeal to the common destiny of the Korean people, whether they be in Hawai'i or Korea.

### **Musical Activities of Koreans in Hawai'i as Model for the ROK**

Euro-American classical music symbolized the newly established southern Korean nation-state's social progress. The musical genres of the West that had been introduced to the Korean Peninsula during the Japanese colonial period became a barometer of civilization. *The Rose of Sharon* embodies this notion. South Koreans watching *The Rose of Sharon* were reminded that the newly established Korean nation formed their own community at home and abroad based on their common interest in the "nationalist agenda of making and developing the Korean nation-state" (Im 2008, 101). To connote the nationalist agenda, the images of Hawai'i in *The Rose of Sharon* not only justified the ROK's alliance with the United States but also represented the model the Korean people should follow. The Korean community in Hawai'i is described as a modern society where ethnic Koreans enjoy hymns, opera, and even representative local culture like hula. Through scenes in which diasporic Koreans appreciate Western and local Hawaiian culture, the Korean-Hawaiian community is made emblematic of a developed society.

### Hymn

*The Rose of Sharon* includes a scene of the Korean Methodist Church Choir singing a hymn in the gardens of the Korean Methodist Church. This church is where the father of the film's director had once ministered. The scene's narration stresses the religious life of the Koreans in Hawai'i:

Second- and third-generation Koreans sing a hymn under the direction Miss Ahn...This Korean Methodist Church has a program where the Korean youths study the Bible through religious paintings. The way they are learning the Bible with pure eyes represents peace itself; we can see that their life is full of hope and happiness. (*The Rose of Sharon* 15:43–16:34)

The hymn symbolized the ethnic Koreans' assimilation to Christianity, itself representing mainstream American culture. Along with the Korean national anthem, Christian worship songs—in most cases sung in Korean—often comprised part of the program of political events related to the Korean independence movement. Even some songs celebrating the March First Movement were sung to the tune of Christian hymns (Zhang and Shin 2019, 12–13). At the 1919 Philadelphia Korean Congress, as an example, singing hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers,” in addition to the Korean national anthem, was an important part of the event. The hymn in *The Rose of Sharon* indicates the continued strategy Koreans employed to appeal to American society. Singing hymns was no longer for national independence; after Koreans' long-cherished dream of independence was realized, musical activity became a symbol of the pro-American nation-state of South Korea.

As Henry Em has pointed out, both the modernization and freedom narratives were constructed at the height of the Cold War. Between them, the freedom narrative appeared soon after Japan's defeat in World War II, when US forces occupied the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. In authoring the freedom narrative, as in the formation of South Korea, Christians both within and outside of Korea played a key role. They provided rhetorical, institutional, and material support to the totalitarianism



vs. freedom paradigm that would justify the American military presence in South Korea, Asia, and elsewhere (Em 2020, 8). Missionaries, Korean Christians, and their transnational networks, to a surprising degree, were involved in designing “the *architecture* of South Korea” (Em 2020, 10–11).

Christianity, in short, provided the foundation for most of the ideologies that shaped Korean society in the post-war period (K. Kim 2020, 55). The pro-American foreign policy of the ROK’s first president, Syngman Rhee, as demonstrated by his connection to American missionaries and confirmed by his study and exile in the United States, persisted during his regime under the Cold War system (H. Park 2020, 175–176). *The Rose of Sharon* does not include any music or musical activities seemingly connected to Buddhism or shamanism that were pervasive in Korean folk culture (Y. Lee 2003). Even in the scene of the “dance of Korea,” mixing Korea’s court dance and folk music, makes no hint of Korea’s non-Christian religions. The hymn-singing scene in *The Rose of Sharon* symbolizes a *utopian* land based on Christianity.

### *A Song from La Bohème*

Western classical music spread quickly in Korea south of the 38th parallel during the USAMGIK period. The everyday musical experiences of South Koreans accordingly became distinct from those available to North Koreans (H. Park 2019, 77). The Goryeo Symphony Orchestra, the first Western-style orchestra made up entirely of (South) Korean musicians, was organized in September 1945 with the aid of the Culture and Education Department. Korean musicians considered Western music, especially the European classical music that had been introduced to Korea under Japanese colonial rule, to be advanced culture (H. Park 2019, 84–85). Reflecting this notion, *The Rose of Sharon* includes a scene of ethnic Koreans enjoying a piece from *La Bohème* sung by a Korean female opera singer. The scene is orchestrated as if the singer had appeared on a Korean-American popular variety show. A description of KNA political activities is followed by a scene of Korean women getting together to watch the show. The opera singing begins simultaneously with the narrative voiceover: “Here is a Korean-language TV

show in which the program begins with Ahn Suk-ja performing from *La Bohème*.”

The singer, Ahn Suk-ja (1919–2005), is the same person who appears in the scene of the Korean Methodist Church Choir as its conductor. Thus, her singing represents the ethnic Koreans’ complete mastery of Western culture. Ahn, also known as Florence Ahn, was a well-known opera singer in America. She began her long and illustrious pursuit of a singing at the age of fourteen when she sang the lead role in an operetta called “Aunt Drusill’s Garden” while attending McKinley High School in Honolulu. As a graduate of the Julliard Graduate School of Music, Ahn was the first Asian American to sing in the Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) vaudeville theater stages in New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, and Florida (*Los Angeles Times* 2005). During World War II, she toured with benefit entertainment companies, principally for the United China Relief. She had a series of concerts in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Jersey, Nashville, Wisconsin and New York during the war. She also appeared in various other shows, radio networks, and night clubs in New York (*Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 1946). Luckily, she was in her hometown, Honolulu, when *The Rose of Sharon* was being filmed and was frequently featured in the film. Ahn’s opera scene lasts longer than the above-mentioned scenes with no burst of narration or



**Figure 3.** Ahn Suk-ja singing from *La Bohème* in *The Rose of Sharon*

Source: *The Rose of Sharon*, Korean Film Archive (Hanguk yeongsang jaryowon).

headlines. As seen in Figure 3, her appearance in a black dress was in contrast to that of the Koreans at the Aloha Festival.

Depictions of famous ethnic Koreans finding remarkable success on the Western music scene had been used as a tool to attract American sympathies for the cause of Korean independence, especially during World War II (for example, *Gungminbo* 1942a, 1942b). At morale-boosting events that Koreans in Hawai'i hosted for US troops, professional second-generation Korean performing artists—including Ahn Suk-ja—performed classical Western music and dance. The stage performances were aimed at showing the Koreans' unswerving loyalty to the United States and assimilation into American society. After the realization of the dream of a freed Korea, overseas Korean professionals in the Western classical music field were used to exemplify modernized and Westernized Koreans as models for the people of the ROK.

Ahn Suk-ja was suggested as an exemplary cosmopolitan citizen in both the South Korean and Korean-Hawaiian contexts. To the minds of both South Koreans and Korean-Hawaiians, cosmopolitan citizens could enjoy modern and Western culture, rather than it being restricted to those who lived in or traveled to international locales. Ahn's career as Honolulu's famed Korean soprano, performing hand in hand with "white people" (*baegin*), was successful enough as to be touted as a "star" (*seuta*) by Korean Hawaiians (*Gungminbo* 1946). To peninsular Koreans, those who appreciated Western culture like Ahn were perceived as having higher educational, economic, and social status (see K. Lee 2011). In this sense, Ahn's mastering Christian and operatic songs represents cosmopolitan citizenship—with emphasis on encounters with Westerners or Western culture—which is presented as a model not only for Korean Hawaiians but also for South Koreans.

### *Hula*

Hula is a form of storytelling dance native to the Hawaiian Islands. Thus, younger generation ethnic Koreans enjoying Hawai'i's local culture implies their assimilation into the host society. The hula-dancing Korean girls,

according to the scene's voice narration, were on stage at a kindergarten event. Alongside girls representing Korea, students of different ethnic backgrounds stand side by side to dance to Hawaiian music. What messages might be conveyed to the people of the ROK through this hula-dancing scene? What is crucial to note here is that Hawai'i was an American territory.

The pro-American ROK government, not to mention the US government, must have gloated over the scene of the multi-ethnic girls absorbing the Native Hawaiian culture because of its symbolism of ethnic unity in the American territory. There is no scene in *The Rose of Sharon* depicting the US occupation of the Hawaiian kingdom in the 19th century; as mentioned above, Hawai'i in the film is described as an anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and peace-loving place. There is even the narration inserted into a scene of a beautiful beach with sun-bathers, "Hawaiian natives rarely preserve their 'barbarian' (*wonsijeok*) ways and now live a civilized life." In a similar vein, the multi-ethnic girls' hula-dancing scene seems an effective tool for counteracting the vociferous criticism of the US and the USAMGIK for their "capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism" that existed in both Hawai'i and post-colonial Korean society (Im 2008, 94). The scene of the Korean girls dancing hula was meant to suggest a utopian society. To peninsular Korean audiences, the scene served as a reminder of fellow overseas Koreans enjoying the American territory's local culture, which might lead to a positive image of the United States.

The Hawaiian hula dance itself has ample room for interpretation. One way to understand this is to apply the principles of "othering" put forth by Edward Said in his most famous work, *Orientalism*. In that work, Said argued that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1978, 1). Just as the narrative of the Orient was constructed by Westerners, so too was the narrative of a mystical Hawai'i. Hawai'i is one of many regions where exoticizing-narratives, constructed by Westerners, have long supplanted and obscured the factual reality of daily life on the ground to the world at large. The most well-known narrative, a recurring theme in both the present day and the

past, is that of the “hula girl” (Medeiros 2018, 217–223).

The hula girl narrative led to the sexualization and objectification of the Hawaiian girl as a means of promoting tourism to the islands. For native Hawaiians, the practice of hula was once a deep and meaningful tradition. Hula was originally a cultural dance, an artistic extension of an intrinsic feeling of connectedness (Stillman 2001, 188). Hula itself did not disappear, in part due to its popularity in hotel performances, film, and photographs. However, its authenticity diminished by the importation of Western conceptions to the point that its cultural significance was nearly lost. The hula-dancing girl was included in *The Rose of Sharon*, understandably with no indication of its historical context, to represent the pro-American citizen, whose cultural tastes even incorporated the representative, albeit reconstructed, culture of Hawai‘i.

Therefore, Ahn Suk-ja and hula-dancing girls in *The Rose of Sharon* represent cosmopolitan and settler images, respectively, all of which are somewhat indicative of the US colonial heritage in Hawai‘i. With the historical context concealed and the pro-American sentiments brought to the fore, the musical elements of the film were well suited to the meet the publicity needs of the South Korean government.

## Conclusion

This study investigated how musical elements in *The Rose of Sharon* aligned with the ROK’s political agenda and the nation-state’s cultural identities. The film provided a blueprint for the ideal community of ROK citizens, and this was the Koreans in Hawai‘i. Musical elements of the film were indicative of two prominent features for the Korean nation-state: a transnational Korean community sharing the same culture and a pro-American society fully appreciating Western/American culture. The former was presented by ethnic Koreans’ appreciation of the traditional dances and anthem of Korea, while the latter was exemplified in their performance of Christian hymns, opera, and hula. These musical elements were a crucial means of publicizing the political agendas of the new ROK government established under American

hegemony.

A newspaper review of *The Rose of Sharon* criticized the film's mediocre image quality and musical shortcomings, as well as the lack of explanations about the institutions and customs of Hawai'i (*Joseon jungang sinmun* 1949). Although its technical aspects left much to be desired, the film incorporated a variety of music of overseas Koreans in keeping with the newly established ROK government's political goals. The music was an attempt to instill ethnic and pro-American sentiments into the hearts of people of the imagined community of the ROK. This finding suggests the importance of musical elements in film.

Director Ahn Cheol-young emphasized the role of non-fiction film in the establishment of a state. Ahn's aspiration to grasp the tendency of world cinema, represented as American cinema, had a lot to do with the future of Korea's national cinema. What's more interesting is that the main players in *The Rose of Sharon* were mostly members of the KNA, the erstwhile political opponents of Syngman Rhee. They longed for a unified Korean government, not a separate South Korean government. Interestingly, *The Rose of Sharon* produced by the overt support of KNA members premiered in 1949 under the auspices of the Rhee regime. To the KNA members' disappointment, *The Rose of Sharon* was not released for a united Korean audience; instead, it became a nation-building publicity film only for the southern half of the Korean Peninsula due to its aptness—even in its musical elements—for serving the ROK's political agenda.

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