

# North Korea Project

A Work in Progress

By Joyce Kwon

Saturday, April 4, 2009

2:00 pm in 125 Morrison, UC Berkeley

### Introduction to the North Korea Project, a work in progress

A unified realization of everything I have learned and experienced as a Berkeley undergraduate, the North Korea Project grows out of my three passions: music, social justice and Truth. Initially, I artificially separated these passions, mistakenly viewing them to be exclusive of each other, neatly shelving music aside for enjoyment (as well as agony), pondering over some ethereal solution for social justice while dozing off in political economy lectures, and basking in religiosity, more than spirituality, in my search for Truth. But I have come to realize that my three passions become truly meaningful when I allow them to merge naturally.

Through intimate interactions with my campus community, I saw that the Truth leads to cries for social justice, and those cries, in turn, compel me to make music. I began to understand my role as a musician in a broader sense, as an arranger provided with compositional sketches of my own trajectory and an improviser who must respond to completely unexpected circumstances, even in the midst of an already chaotic existence. In particular, improvisation and composition classes with Myra Melford and Ken Ueno triggered these epiphanies; they pushed me to redefine the musical medium, stretching my mind to see that the non-musical, from other art forms to life experiences, could belong in the domain of the musical. I would like to further explore this liberated concept of music, integrating other art disciplines, as well as Korean music, sometime in the future, aiming to expand our thinking on North Korea and push beyond a shallow conception of a brainwashed nation under a lunatic leader.

My project, in its current work in progress state, seeks to create space for dialogue on North Korea through hybrid musical improvisation/composition, fusing elements of jazz, contemporary improvisation and traditional Korean music. In an environment imbued with misleading perceptions, fostered largely by the American media, we must strive to break out of convenient and simple notions of the “rogue state” and be willing to see North Korea through new, albeit challenging perspectives. I believe improvisational music can serve as a tool to explore and reflect on the cultural, social and political aspects of North Korea in a way that promotes dialogue and helps to deconstruct passively accepted and unexamined perceptions of the country.

Through composition and performance of pieces for musicians and improvisers that provide historical background and act as metaphors for North Korean idiosyncrasies, I hope to convey an alternative point of view in order to contrast it with that of North Americans and spur dialogue on the legitimacy of different perspectives. In doing so, I seek to construct a new framework to examine North Korea. My project has implications beyond the deconstruction of ill-founded notions of North Korea, as we need to challenge and question uncontested stereotypes that plague our own society, such as the idea that only men belong in the realm of musical composition/improvisation or that Asian-Americans are better suited for certain quiet careers, and not meant to be heard as activists, artists and performers. We need a paradigm shift in our social consciousness to extinguish these sexist and racist norms, as we need a paradigm shift in understanding North Korea. I hope to shatter all of these presupposed ideas as I compose, improvise and perform, as an Asian-American woman, reexamining my own beliefs and ideas in the process, visceral pieces that critically engage my complex and evolving feelings about my divided home country.

### About the Improvisers

A native of South Korea, **Joyce Kwon** reluctantly played classical piano for many years before she miraculously found herself singing jazz in high school and starting to compose music. Now a graduating senior at UC Berkeley, she has also happily embraced contemporary improvisation, under the mentorship of Myra Melford and plans to apply to graduate school in composition and improvisation in the near future. She hopes to learn more about Korean music and continue working on this project in the future, incorporating other artistic disciplines, including dance and theatre. In addition to improvisation/composition, Joyce likes to sing along to Charlie Parker's bebop solos and groove to Brazilian music.

**Amy Shen** began playing piano and studying music at the age of 7. She soon discovered her affinity to wind instruments and took up clarinet, saxophones, and flute, playing in a variety of ensembles in high school and college. Amy enjoys composing and arranging music inspired by a wide range of artists, most notably Wayne Shorter and Debussy.

A pianist that incidentally studies mathematics at UC Berkeley, **Charles Chen** currently studies under Peter Horvath, and has played in venues such as Yoshi's, the Jazzschool, and Anna's Jazz Island. His heart lies in traditional jazz and bebop, but he's capable of expanding his horizons to any kind of music. His favorite kind of ice cream is vanilla, but he's also capable of expanding his horizons to any kind of flavor.

**Jesse Engel** is a guitarist, a producer, a multi-instrumental tinkerer, and a graduate student. He plays many styles of music including Rock, Jam, Reggae, Hip Hop, Jazz and Electronic. He owes much of what he's learned over the years to his great teachers, Mimi Fox, Calvin Keyes, Andre Bush, Art Lande, and Myra Melford. When not playing with Joyce Kwon, he spends his time playing in various improvisational music groups, and making strange music with his computer.

Born in Japan and currently based in the Bay Area, **Marié Abe** is a classically trained pianist-turned accordionist and a Ph.D. Candidate in ethnomusicology at UC Berkeley. On the accordion, she has been actively performing, recording, collaborating, and touring with a wide array of musicians including Aaron Novik's Thorny Brocky, the Japonize Elephants, the Lark, Ramon and Jessica, Tango No.9 (San Francisco), Marzouk Mejiri, Gnut, Daniele Sepe (Italy), and Cicala Mvta, Ett, and Midori Hirano (Japan.) She has been greatly influenced by the mentorship of Marcantonio Barone (piano performance), Gerald Levinson (composition) and Myra Melford (improvisation). Marié is also the founder and leader of the zany improv/Balkan groups Four Flea Circus (Berkeley) and Chichûike (Osaka/Kyoto).

Currently a graduate student of linguistics at Stanford University, **Stephanie Shih** plays vibraphone, percussion and piano in jazz and classical settings. As an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, she studied English and music in addition to linguistics, and actively performed as a vibraphone player in UC Jazz Ensembles. Other than her research interests in phonology, prosody, rhythm, meter, poetics, music (esp. language-music interface) and processing, Stephanie also enjoys baking and listening to Chick Corea.

Program Order

**Society Red** (music by Dexter Gordon/ lyrics by J Kwon)

Joyce Kwon, voice and Amy Shen, saxophone

Charles Chen, piano, Joe Costantini, bass and Benny Amon, drums

**Rewind (to Kim Il-Sungism)**

Joyce Kwon, voice & piano

**“The best censorship is not so much to suppress speakable or usable words but not to give the words at all, which automatically circumscribes the potential circuit of linguistic expression.”**

Jesse Engel, guitar & Marié Abe, accordion

**Juche**

**Sehyah Sehyah** (Traditional)

**Six-Party Talks**

**Faminesori**

Joyce Kwon, voice

**Jamae**

April Paik & Jessica Ling, violins

Jeff Kuo, viola

Brady Anderson, cello

*All compositions by J Kwon, except where noted otherwise*

## **Society Red**

Dexter Gordon/ lyrics by Joyce Kwon

I penned lyrics to Dexter Gordon's sax solo on his tune, Society Red, to give a broad overview of the history of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Here it is below.

Now here is some history  
on a place that's mystery  
On a state that's stayed true red  
throughout all of these years

It began as three small kingdoms - Shilla, Paekche and Koguryo  
existed before Birth of Christ, unified by 918 to form Koryo Dynasty  
then Joseon, in 1392.

However, in the year 1910, Japanese took over the peninsula,  
using violent tactics to oppress a neighboring nation.  
Colonized until the end of World War II, on August 15th of 1945,  
when Japan surrendered, battered from the US bombs.  
Liberated, though not free of imperialism.  
Still under rule, of the towering giants,  
USSR and the US fighting over a piece of Korea in their ideological war  
that was fought on the wrong country's soil,  
further stirring up turmoil in a civil war that blew up on June 25th of 1950.

This war was already well on its way  
from border clashes near the ill-drawn 38th Parallel  
to the tension between capitalism and socialism.  
Divided by Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel on August 9th, 1945.

USSR did agree. It claimed its share north of the parallel.  
On October 3rd, 1945, it set up a new thing -  
the Soviets' Civil Administration to control foreign policy and guide the North to their  
own strain of communism until it was fully shut down three years later, on September 9th  
of '48.

That day was the birth of a bleeding red nation,  
a day that will go down in history.  
The Democratic People's Republic of Korea  
was established with three main factions all vying  
to have influence in the new nation until leader Kim Il-Sung wiped out Chinese and  
Soviet factions so that everyone would be solely devoted to his cause and worship him as  
a quasi-god.

He's a crucial figure in the state of North Korea, even though he has died back in 1994, revered by his entire nation.

Kim Il-Sung tactfully built his reputation as a patriotic leader, first in Manchuria then in the Soviet zone, fighting Japanese to liberate the suffering fatherland.

He was born on April 15th, 1912 in a small village near the city of Pyongyang.

Migrated to Manchuria in 1919, became well-known as an anti-Japanese partisan, for leading guerilla movements in the mountains in the 30's 'til

he moved to USSR in 1940 and was appointed captain of a Soviet troop in 1942.

88th Special Brigade- they formed the Korean Work Team and went into Pyongyang secretly without any Soviet aid, just four months before liberation was to arrive - they wanted to form their own red party.

Thus, was formed Korean Communist Party, North Korean Bureau.

Founded on October 15th, 1945, then changed its name to Korean Workers' Party, to comprise North Korean state along with Korean People's Army, the Constitution as well as the Supreme People's Assembly. After becoming chair of the Korean Worker's Party, Kim Il-Sung became more & more powerful so that no one could ever get in his way again.

To avoid another (August) Sectarian Incident, he gained control and implanted his system of Juche in the 50's, laying a sound foundation for intense socialism, leading to movements such as Chollima in '56 where one worked nearly to death. But as an outcome, they progressed rapidly and the state implanted more changes, like the Single Ideology System and the Suryong System.

And in 1972, a new constitution - that gave all power to the president, even after the son Kim Jong-Il inherited his father's nation, ruling from the 90's onward. Using Socialism of Our Style since the year 1991 and that's how it came to be a **Society Red**.

## Rewind (to Kim Il-Sungism)

After taking the class “North Korea & Modernity” at Yonsei University, South Korea in Fall 2007, I felt strongly that the totalitarian regime has endured to this day because the deceased leader made himself a deity, exploiting people’s innate yearning/void for God, the greatest good, flawless beauty, whatever you want to call it; Kim Il-Sung has taken something familiar like this and twisted it to make it serve his needs. It’s something so familiar yet completely backward, like a mirror image. With that in mind, I decided to start out by writing this piece backward, as a mirror image; I wrote the words & notes backward and also wrote in alto clef because I was not as comfortable in that clef, although still familiar. I had no expectations of the compositional process and initially, looked only toward the end product; however, the implications of the compositional process ended up turning my life upside down for a while. Below are the observations I jotted down, right after writing the piece in September 2008. I believe these epiphanies reflect something of the North Korean people’s mindset.

### Observations

- After a while, I become uncertain as to which way the letters are really supposed to go and start to almost mistaken the correct letter as the wrong way and the wrong way as the correct one.
  - I suppose if I were to continue writing this way for a long time, I would forget the correct way and think this is the right way, the norm.
- I realize that my notes are tilted the wrong way. Which way does the sharp lean?!
- I forget that I’m in alto clef and write in treble. I erase because the alto clef keeps me in line. I do it again! And erase at the reminder of the alto clef.
- It starts to bother me if I don’t write the letters backward in a backward fashion (i.e. writing the letter “o” going clockwise instead of counter-clockwise as I have always done in the past. → Totalitarian!)

Also, in this piece I use ubiquitous chords like major sevenths with some augmented and maj-min 7<sup>th</sup> chords, placing something simple like the root, 3<sup>rd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> of the chord in the melody sometimes; yet, singing the root in the melody sounds dissonant and out of place because of the progression of these “simple” chords → example of the dual nature of Kim Il-Sungism, something so familiar and accepted, yet completely out of place and discordant.

**“The best censorship is not so much to suppress speakable or usable words but not to give the words at all, which automatically circumscribes the potential circuit of linguistic expression.”**

I used this quote from “North Koreans in Japan: Language, Ideology, and Identity” by Sonia Ryang as the title and concept for this piece. The improvisers are limited in their musical vocabulary (i.e. restricted to only a few intervals) to express their ideas, as the North Koreans lack the vocabulary to critique their leader articulately. Interestingly, I have found that having a limited vocabulary generally creates more coherent improvisational pieces and I wonder what this means for people’s linguistic vocabulary.

### **Juche**

The North Korean anthem plays majestically in the background with the sax taking the melody, while Joyce recites the text. Gradually, the sax gets screechingly loud to the point where she can no longer play the anthem majestically and it becomes incoherent and squealing/honking noises. This is like Juche ideology, majestic and idealistic, but unable to be implemented in reality, coming out incoherently. Everything becomes so pompously glorious and loud that it just erupts into cacophony and ends abruptly.

*“The establishment of Juche means holding fast to the principle of solving for oneself all the problems of the revolution and construction in conformity with the actual conditions at home, and mainly by one’s own efforts. This is a realistic and creative position, opposing dogmatism and applying the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism and the experiences of the international revolutionary movement to one’s country in conformity with its historical conditions and national peculiarities. This is an independent stand, discarding dependence on others, displaying the spirit of self-reliance and solving one’s own affairs on one’s own responsibility under all circumstances.”* Kim Il-Sung

### **Sehyah Sehyah (새야새야)**

This Korean folk song embodies the sense of 한 (Han) which the minjung theologian, Suh Nam-dong, describes as a "feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one's guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong -- all these combined." Han flows through both North and South Koreans alike, as this melody flows through the ensemble.

## Six-Party Talks

(From 2003 & before the hard-liner policies of current ROK president, Lee Myung Bak)

Each of the six improvisers represent one of the countries present at the Six-Party Talks: Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Republic of Korea (ROK), People's Republic of China (PRC), USA, Japan and Russia. They engage musically in solo speeches, duo dialogues, conversations and such, very loosely based on characteristics and temperaments of their respective nations.

## Faminesori for solo voice

This performance piece reflects on the North Korean famine from 1995 to 2008, in particular the viewpoint of the starving children and the helpless mothers. I used the contour of the UN system estimate of metric tons of grain in North Korea as the contour of my vocal piece and made a graphic score using photos of the famine. Each picture lends itself to vocal improvisation in a specific sound world.

I have found this piece extremely challenging as a well-nourished person living in a land of excess and gluttony. How could I ever know what famine is? In an effort to attain even a glimmer of understanding, this piece requires that I fast for seven days so that I am forced to reflect on hunger daily. The public and audible portion, which you'll see today, can be performed anytime in the last few days of the entire piece.

## Jamae (자매)

Another work in progress in the beginning stages, I wrote this piece for string quartet, generating material from a folk song (몽금포타령) from the northern region of Korea, before the nation was divided. It starts off with everyone in unison on an open G and quickly breaks apart to a climax of division. A haze of broken bits float around for a bit, with each part stuck to their exclusive pentatonic scale, but the spirit and pitches of the folk melody still run through the quartet as each part touches another, when they meet on the same pitch. Eventually, they all find the same melody in the same key and sing it together, but with the beauty of each of their individual voices. It concludes on an open D, fading out with the opening rhythm pulsating, until they achieve complete unity and reunification in silence. I wrote this piece thinking of the relationship between the North and South, as well as my relationship with my sister, Eunice, and appropriately titled the piece, Jamae, or sister in Korean.

Thank You!

- **You**, for being here
- The improvisers: **Amy, Jesse, Marié, Charles & Steph**
- All of the guest musicians: **April, Jess Ling, Jeff, Brady, Benny & Joe**
  
- **Myra Melford**, my advisor for this project, for being my mentor, teacher, friend, and a source of encouragement and inspiration
- **Ken Ueno**, for being an invaluable resource and inspiring me to use really long titles for compositions too
- **Jean Ahn**, for looking over the string quartet piece, listening to me ramble and directing me to the best rice cake in the bay-area
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- **Jenn Park**, my patient & perfectionist friend, for being the food team!
- **Jack Tang**, for making sure the sound is balanced
- **Eunice Kwon**, my awesome sister, for always helping me out with my shows, despite her crazy life. Please vote Eunice Kwon #83 for ASUC Senate next week, if you are a Cal student!
- **Umma, Ahppa & Jelly**, my loving family, for their consistent prayers, driving up to see me and for being able to make me laugh hysterically until I burst into tears
- **The Creator & Ultimate Artist**, who gives me the heart for social justice