

North Korean Lives Matter, Why Dokdo Matters, and the Ongoing Global Peace Projects and Research

Mina Cheon

One of the greatest public problems a global Korean can focus on is the ongoing conflict between the two Koreas, which echoes the many worlds politically, economically, culturally, and religiously divided. We see global conflicts everywhere. With the escalation of threats between North Korea and the USA, Korean unification seemed impossible until the displays of hope and peace during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea. There, athletes from the two Koreas not only marched together under the flag of unification—Korea's third flag—but also played as a joint team in women's ice hockey. Today's mantra is "One Korea".

Perhaps the unification flag is an "agitprop" signifying a new kind of Korea for both the North and South. Moreover, even if it serves as a mere charade and political propaganda, it is a good sign to see the symbol of peace and cultural diplomacy over military threats. At the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games, when the North and South Koreans marched with the flag of unification (a silhouette of the undivided peninsula in cerulean blue), they made multiple statements: Korea is strong, Korea is united, Korea is peaceful, Korea is technologically savvy, and Dokdo is ours, that *Dokdo is Korean*.



Eat Choco•Pie Together, 10,000 Choco•Pie installation for audience to eat, Ethan Cohen Gallery, exhibition *Choco•Pie Propaganda: From North Korea with Love*, 2014. Image courtesy: Ethan Cohen Gallery and Mina Cheon.

(Page 143) *Eat Choco•Pie Together*, 2014, detail. Image courtesy: Ethan Cohen Gallery and Mina Cheon.

I am Kim Il Soon (a.k.a. Mina Cheon) a Korean-American artist who dreams of unification, who paints about North Korean liberation, and has made American audience taste North Korean desire by creating artwork like *Eat Choco•Pie Together*, with 10,000 Choco•Pie¹ snacks for the public to eat in a gallery. My exhibition, *Choco•Pie Propaganda: From North Korea with Love* (23 January–28 February 2014), organised at the Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York, comprised my North Korean social realist paintings and an installation that covered the entire lower level of the Ethan Cohen Gallery with Choco•Pies. It (Choco•Pies) became an overnight sensation and the number one smuggled good in North Korea. The Orion Corporation donated 10,000 individually wrapped Choco•Pie cakes in support of the Choco•Pie art installation and the call for Korean reunification. In my artist statement, released with the exhibition, I wrote:

As a Korean, the idea of having two artistic identities, South Korean Mina Cheon and North Korean Kim Il Soon, is an obvious reflection on the country's state of being divided. It makes all the sense in the world that if a country is split so should the artist in practice....

While the Korean peninsula may be demarcated by a 38th Parallel, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the history and culture is nevertheless shared, the country is united by one country's people and language. Moreover, Korea is ubiquitously tied by the never-ending heated debate on reunification and national identity, whether we are at war, armistice, trade, or peace. This is our business.²

Comparable to the American Twinkie, Choco•Pie has been sought after in North Korea, ever since South Koreans gifted Choco•Pie to the North Korean labourers at the Kaesong Industrial Complex as a token of appreciation for their hard work since giving money or tip would be considered bribery. Symbolically, the Choco•Pie has opened up North Korea and formed a loving exchange between the North and South, something that even the Korean governments have failed to do. Truly, this is a postmodern, viral, and an addictive kind of co-national cooperation. The Chinese character "Jung" on the packaging means love and friendship and these went into North Korea in thousands. At the exhibition, Choco•Pie was shared for connecting North Korea, South Korea, and America through art, i.e. *Eat Choco•Pie Together*. "Hanguk" (meaning Korea) signifies "one country", and is commonly used to address both states. While most of the world has been focused elsewhere, this covert operation of sharing Choco•Pie initiated Hanguk's "Sweet Revolution", which can eventually lead to the two Koreas opening up to each other.

The ongoing North Korean awareness project aims to change the world's impression of North Koreans. The North Korean government/regime is one thing, but ordinary citizens have the right to access information like the rest of the world, the right to be educated, and even learn art history. Original and creative, artist-driven art projects can influence North Korea to be more receptive, thereby contributing to the anticipated Pyongyang Spring.³ Since the American and North Korean political leaders are not proactively encouraging cultural diplomacy, cultural





Umma Rises: Towards Global Peace, 2017, Yves Klein Blue Drip, on archival digital print on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Image courtesy: Mina Cheon Studio.

agents and activist artists must help promote a future of the Koreas to work in cooperation, and by setting an example, help us look towards a future of resolution and global peace.

As an artist, I have been sending contemporary art history lessons as video art into North Korea on/through USB flash drives for quite some time now, and have also exhibited at the Ethan Cohen Gallery in a solo exhibition titled *UMMA: MASS GAMES—Motherly Love North Korea* (20 October 2017–11 January 2018). The art history lessons include themes of Art and Life, Food, Power, Abstraction and Dreams, Feminism, Social Justice, Technology, and the Environment. My videos on contemporary art history covered artists from all over the world such as Marcel Duchamp, Nam June Paik, Ai Weiwei, Shirin Neshat, Mark Bradford, and Kim Sooja. The art history lessons, transmitted into North Korea in video art form, are supported by anonymous North Korean defector-led NGOs in South Korea and by people who have made it their life's mission to help liberate North Koreans.

These defectors, the collaborators of this aspect of the work, believe that this kind of information has the power to educate North Koreans about foreign culture and media. They are sending the work on USBs directly to people they know, such as friends and family members, as a part of care packages. These care packages, which include information, entertainment, and basic needs, are for ordinary citizens of North Korea and not for those belonging to the elite society of Pyongyang or the government. Sending art into North Korea was not done with the assumption that "North Korea" needs these contemporary art videos; it is actually a very unique and creative exchange.

Some key scholars/historians, the known pioneers of Korea Studies, such as Bruce Cumings, Victor Cha, Charles K. Armstrong, and Hyun Jin Preston Moon, inspired this work. Some of these pivotal writers have studied North Korea, predicted Pyongyang Spring, and the immanent internal implosion of North Korea. Professor Seok-Hyang Kim from the Ewha Womans University studies the words of North Korean defectors. While oral history is questioned in the academia, her work of documenting and interpreting interviews by the defectors includes North Koreans' consideration of human rights. The interviews reveal North Korean psyche and ideological measurement of where they fit in when it comes to *lives mattering*. The *invisible strength* of Professor Kim's work prepares the ground for my work to take place in very specific ways. With the availability of critical research and studies on North Korea, it is natural for an artist like myself, interested in working on North Korean awareness, to participate in an already existing media penetration into the hermit kingdom.

Since the Choco•Pie hit the black market of North Korea and became the number one smuggled good, hundreds of helium balloons, transporting Choco•Pie, have been sent into North Korea over the border between the 38th parallel, followed by USBs through China—with bribery for

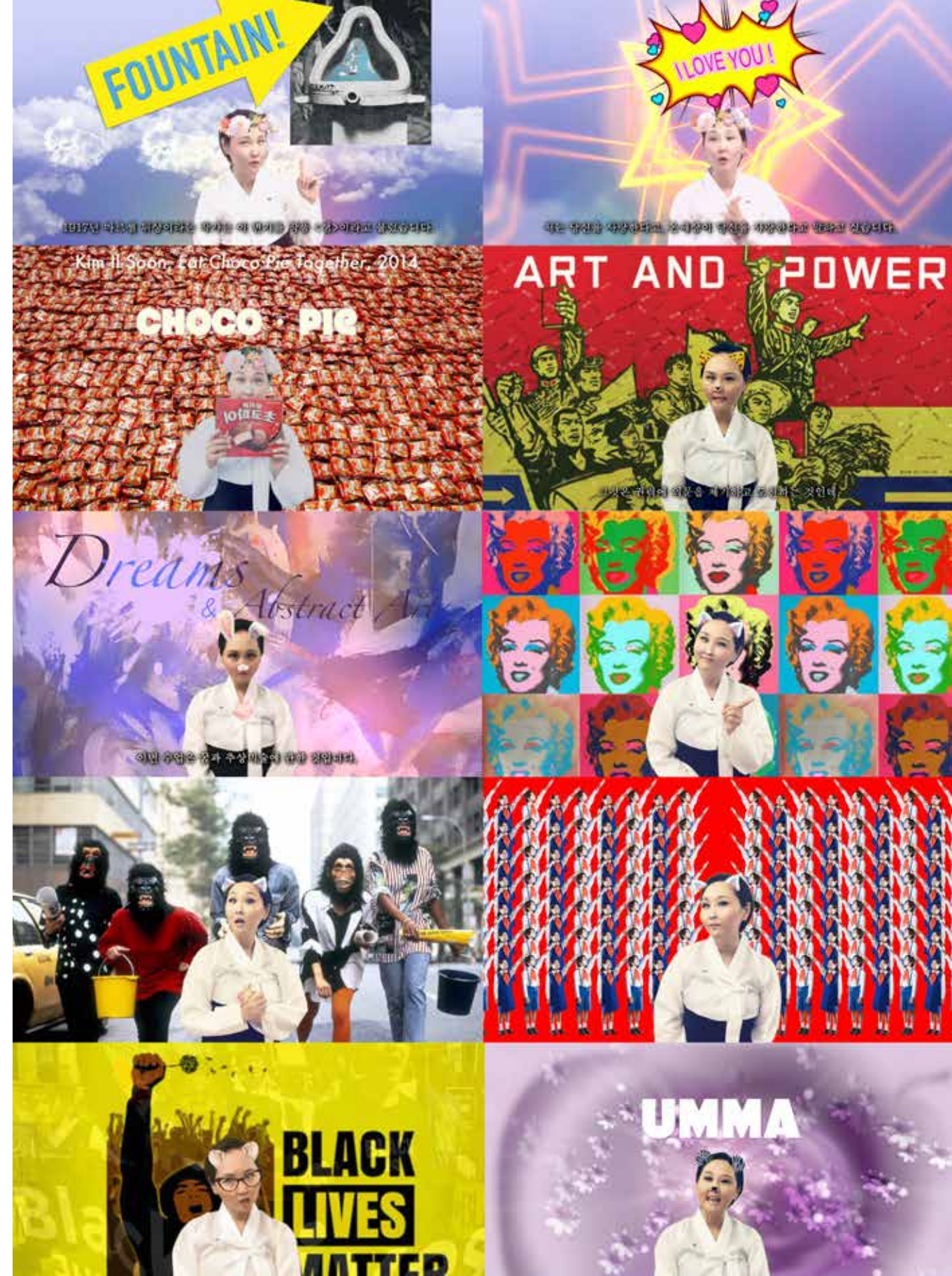


Display of 10 netel players that played the 10 videos of *Art History Lessons* by Professor Kim, exhibition *UMMA: MASS GAMES—Motherly Love North Korea*, 2017–2018, Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York. Image courtesy: Ethan Cohen Gallery and Mina Cheon.

(Page 147) Video stills, *Art History Lessons* by Professor Kim, exhibition *UMMA: MASS GAMES*, 2017–2018, Ethan Cohen Gallery. Image courtesy: Mina Cheon Studio.

(Page 149) *Umma and Mass Games: Flagging Unification*, 2017, Yves Klein Blue Drip, on archival digital print on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Image courtesy: Mina Cheon Studio.

(Pages 150–151) Gallery shot of exhibition *UMMA: MASS GAMES—Motherly Love North Korea*, 2017–2018, Ethan Cohen Gallery, New York. Image courtesy: Ethan Cohen Gallery and Mina Cheon.



safe passage—via the underground network. However, the covert operation—sending the USBs with the care packages—could not be revealed to the press during the exhibition, as its disclosure would halt the operation, jeopardise the project, and expose the people involved. As an artist, I was conflicted between disclosing the project and proper promotion.

Umma vs. Mass Games are almost oppositional. Mass Games is the rigid presentation of the ability to cohere, and *Umma* (mother in Korean) is the indefinable terrain of the unknown, highlighting cultural liminality. Here, I am thinking of Victor Turner's postulations on the subversive power of symbolic liminality in ritual spaces.⁴ South Korea's overnight modernisation is also attributed to mothers getting together and creating an internal banking system, called *getdon* (gyedon in Korean⁵). The idea that development occurred with what is known in Korean as Umma's *chima baram* (skirt wind—by the wind of the skirts) is important. This signifies all the mothers and women who have worked and sacrificed for the development of the nation. This type of historically unrecognised feminist wave and power is about passage, movement, strength, and solidarity. So, the concept of Umma (instead of Dear Father/Leader) should be understood as a catalyst, and not a defining point or the ultimate solution.

The Rock-iness of Dokdo (aka Takeshima): Between Nation-“Ness” And Nation-“Less” in Global Media Culture

In early February 2018, the media highlighted Japan's discontent regarding the inclusion of the Dokdo Island (literally a small ink dot you can barely see) on the Korean unification flag, displayed during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games. Dokdo stirs up a lot of tension between the two countries. The set of islets that raises the geopolitical conflict between Korea and Japan is known as Dokdo in Korean and Takeshima in Japanese—Dokdo is also known as Liancourt Rocks, a name given by French whalers in 1849.

Dokdo comprises 2 large islets and some 30 smaller parts that cover 46 acres in the East Sea (aka Sea of Japan) between Korea and Japan. To this day, the island keeps bringing out the historical grievance of Japanese colonisation of Korea (1910–1945), and resurrects the colonisation history, echoed in the unsettled debate on whose island it is.⁶ Although, Dokdo was recognised as Korean territory before it was annexed by Japan in 1905, yet its return to Korea—after the colonisation and the end of World War II—has become a continuous point of contention. Japan views Korea's claim for Dokdo as illegitimate as the island was not listed for return in the San Francisco Peace Treaty (1951). Some Korean protestors believe that Dokdo was created to handle Cold War strategies of power and presents this idea as a move against the West.⁷

While both South Korea and Japan are known for their high tech modern society, there is







Travelling to Dokdo, video stills, three-channel video installation. Image courtesy: Mina Cheon Studio.

something antiquated about the way in which South Korea protests regularly against Japan for the right of Dokdo as its property, and people get Dokdo-happy in media and organise events as patriotic gestures across the land, selling nationalism as commodity.⁸ While Japan wants it as a safe haven for its people during North Korean missile testing, South Korean radical leftist activists, outdoing the conservative powers (such as the radical activist group Uri Madang⁹), claim Dokdo as the prime location for North and South unification. Both Japan and South Korea are using Dokdo as political and military decoys, either to take over or create a safe haven for their own kind. Moreover, North Korea also considers Dokdo as its own since Korea used to be one country. So, who owns Dokdo? With technology, everyone has a piece of Dokdo.

Dokdo is also recognised as the pinnacle of East Asia's contested space that resonates other symbolic spaces of conflict such as the three-country dispute over the uninhabited island chain known as the Senkakus in Japan, the Diaoyus in China, and the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan. Dokdo's actual site is relatively primitive and only includes a small number of residents; the more recent official occupancy is merely by one Korean couple, a fisherman and his wife. The narrative of staking claim to the island, however, furthers the multinational tension on information and media war. Whether it is the actual fishery line or natural resources that are being fought over, new tourism is polluting the environment around the island, generating more hype and interest by global environmentalists today. It is obvious that politically, each country uses its version of reality of the island as placeholders for co-national anxieties. Dokdo is the perfect example of a contemporary political and ideological decoy used to produce fear of the other and in propagating co-national rivalry.

The frenzy over ownership and the consumption culture surrounding Dokdo draws our attention to the international Law of the Seas and to question whether sea lines subvert or promote cooperation and global peace. This is going to be the next phase of my research on Dokdo, to further understand its cultural implications and geopolitical history explained by law.

My video, *Travelling to Dokdo* (45 minutes looped), one of the three single-channel video art pieces shown as an installation, was first exhibited at the Sungkok Art Museum in Seoul, South Korea, during my mid-career solo exhibition *Polipop: Political Pop Art* (13 January–11 March 2012). It highlights the symbolic meaning of getting to the desolate islets—physically and virtually. The symbolic meaning, however, that raises the issue of nationalism, tied to territory, is far greater than the contested physical property.

The video footages in the piece include travelling to Dokdo by boat and via Google Earth, online 3D tour, and Second Life. It also includes footage of myself running the Dokdo Marathon



Travelling to Dokdo, three-channel video installation, Sungkok Art Museum, Seoul, South Korea, exhibition *Polipop: Political Pop Art*, 2012. Image courtesy: Sungkok Art Museum and Mina Cheon.

in Seoul on 25 October 2011 wearing a spy camera and capturing all the people running to celebrate Korea's National Dokdo Day. This video is juxtaposed with an overlapping inner video frame of myself as "URKorean", a Korean tiger avatar, roaming around Dokdo in Second Life.

Many other layers of documenting Dokdo are shown as a way to reconstruct the idea of the islets, which is experienced through media and the imagination, as larger than life, yet paradoxically miniscule in actual scale. The sounds range from breathing during the demonstration run, water waves hitting the boat travelling to Dokdo, to downloadable K-pop music soundtrack *Daehanminguk*¹⁰ as well as the famous song *Dokdo is Our Land*.¹¹

I plan to work with the Imaging Research Center, at University of Maryland, in order to create a virtual and augmented reality art installation. This project would recreate the experience of Dokdo as "the global peace island", a space of unity between North and South Korea, a place of cooperation between Korea and Japan; it will also signify change in spaces of cultural divides. The immersive virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) environment will be a myriad of imaginative navigational paths with great plasticity, where audience can participate to reshape the space and experience of conflicted geopolitical space. With the collaboration of other experts in the fields of law and social science, we hope to create an artwork that can help influence policy and cultural diplomacy towards global peace.

In addition to being specific to Dokdo, the project has implications for understanding political and geopolitical conflicts more broadly. It makes clear how human beings latch onto specific events, places, people, or things and evolve them into symbols of division—engines of conflict that define identity and cultural difference. What are the goals (political, ideological, or otherwise) for nations and states in maintaining such conflicts? We see the binary power construct played out in US politics, struggles between Palestinians and Israelis, culturally divided East and West, as well as post-Cold War First and Third Nations positioning.

So this is where I am, making connections between North Korea and that dot on the map surfacing in global media due to nuclear threats and the Olympics. Although, the geopolitics surrounding that dot are decades old, yet it has come out as a new headline on East Asia in present times. The hype over Dokdo is about expanding territory, claiming ownership of property, nationalism, and imperialism. While Dokdo is merely a set of rocks, its rockiness is about the lack of grounded identity and its national fragility that echoes the fragility of East Asia. I am thinking of Benedict Anderson's way of considering how a nation is performative and how nationalism is created as an imagined community.¹² Alternately, we can use a semiotic read of space by thinking of Michel de Certeau's "Spatial Stories",¹³ to help us think about the



(Both Images) *Travelling to Dokdo*, video stills, three-channel video installation. Image courtesy: Mina Cheon Studio.

relationship between his idea signified fixed points in theories of place and its relationship to how the experienced narrative can be re-scripted by newly experiencing site and space. Perhaps, we have the opportunity to script a new narrative of Dokdo as a future space for global peace and to face Dokdo's many colliding histories and agendas, especially through VR and AR technologies. This is where my project must head. As a physical, metaphysical, and virtual space, it can be a shared democratic and transformative space for co-national cooperation and conversations, in legal and artistic terms. I imagine a global peace island as a place where artistic creativity is the primordial concern, and where art making takes precedence over sports and military, and global collaborations are done with creative output for securing a future of peace.

See you in Dokdo.

Notes

1. A South Korean confectionary made with chocolate, marshmallow, and biscuit manufactured by the South Korean company Orion Corporation.
2. Mina Cheon aka Kim Il Soon, "Sweet Revolution: Choco-Pie Propaganda," in *Artist Organized Art*, 23 January 2014, accessed 18 March 2018, <http://artistorganizedart.org/commons/2014/01/mina-cheon-dictation-kim-il-soon.html>.
3. "South Korean K-pop stars perform for Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang," *The Guardian*, International Edition, Sunday, 1 April 2018, accessed 29 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/01/south-korean-k-pop-stars-perform-for-kim-jong-un-in-pyongyang>.
4. Victor Turner, "Betwix and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 93–111.
5. See, <http://talktomeinkorean.com/lessons/gye/>.
6. "Profile: Dokdo/Takeshima islands," in BBC, 10 August 2012, accessed 18 March 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19207086>.
7. Hyon-hee Shin, "Japan's 'incorporation' of Dokdo in 1905 was not just about Sea Lions," in *The Korea Herald*, 3 October 2012, accessed 18 March 2018, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20121003000255>.
8. "The Commodification of Dokdo Island: Nationalism in the Marketplace," in *The Korea File*, episode 67, accessed 18 March 2018, <https://www.speaker.com/user/koreamoments/the-commodification-of-dokdo-island-nati>.
9. Kim Ki-jong, a social activist, formed Uri Madang, a group focused on studying Korean folk culture to strengthen inter-Korean ties and understanding of Korean history, in the early 1980s. Source: <https://www.nknews.org/2015/03/ambassadors-attacker-has-history-of-violent-protests/>, accessed 29 August 2018.
10. The 2010 Korea World Cup song by K-pop singers and groups known as BEG, Rain, 4Minute and more.
11. Composed by Park Inho (aka Park Moon Young) in 1982 and sung by Jeong Kwang-Tae. To this day, this song remains synonymous with the national anthem.
12. Benedict Anderson, "The Origins of National Consciousness," in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 37–46.
13. Michel de Certeau, "Spatial Stories," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 115–130.

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