

Introduction

Pudae tchigae is a bubbling, reddish stew consisting of chunks of processed meat, vegetables, spices, and red pepper paste. Often translated as “army base stew,” “GI stew,” or even “Yankee stew,” the dish takes its name from the way hungry Koreans in the 1950s boiled leftover food from U.S. Army bases—some donated, some pulled from the trash—to feed themselves and their families.¹ Although an unscavenged form of *pudae tchigae* is popular today and continues its flexible model of culinary integration by incorporating contemporary consumer products such as ramen noodles and thinly sliced American cheese into its spicy broth, its origins in South Korea’s (hereafter Korea’s) impoverished, war-torn past are not lost on those who consume it.

In November 2008 I shared a pot of *pudae tchigae* with Su-yŏn, a soprano and church choir director in Seoul. As we dined, she explained that when she ate this stew, she was reminded of Korea’s history and occasionally felt sad. She said that Korea’s history was extremely sad and that the dish was obviously associated with that fact. For her, it still had the taste of poverty. Then she added, with a characteristic chuckle, “We still like to eat *pudae tchigae*, even though these days we should not be sad.” “Why should you not be sad?” I asked. She replied, “Because we have God’s grace [*ŭnhye*].”

After dinner, we walked to the nearby Seoul Arts Center to hear her friend sing. The scene at the massive performing arts and education complex, which was completed in 1993, was a stark contrast to that

conjured up by our dinner: children played by a fountain with moving spigots synchronized to well-known classical music tunes; families peacefully strolled the concrete grounds, laughing and eating; well-dressed patrons walked across the plaza from Café Mozart to the concert hall to hear European classical music sung in foreign languages. Su-yŏn's friend had recently returned from study and professional work in Germany and was giving a "homecoming recital" (*kwiguk tokch'anghoe*) of songs and arias by Bach, Brahms, Mozart, Strauss, Verdi, and Puccini. At the end of the recital, for her final encore, the soprano sang a Christian hymn, known in English as "Higher Ground" or "I'm Pressing on the Upward Way." The Korean lyrics of the song are as follows:

*Chŏ nop'ŭn kot ŭl hyanghayŏ nalmada naa kamnida.
Nae ttŭt kwa chŏngsŏng moduŏ nalmada kido hamnida.
Nae Chu yŏ nae pal puttŭsa kŭ kot e sŏge hasosŏ
Kŭ kot ŭn pit kwa sarang i ōnjena nŏmch'iomnida.*

I look to that high place, and every day I go forward.
Every day I pray with all my mind, heart, and soul.
"My Lord, seize my feet and let me stand there."
In that place light and love always overflow.²

As the soprano sang the hymn, Su-yŏn clasped her hands together, closed her eyes, and bowed her head in prayer. Others in the audience did the same. Had we not been in a concert hall, the appearance of the audience and sound of the music emanating from the stage would have suggested that a church service was taking place. After the hymn, some members of the audience even called out, "Amen!"

This is a standard format for classical vocal music in Korea: a recital of classical songs and arias that ends with a hymn delivered as a final encore. The hymn makes explicit for the singer and the audience alike that European-style classical singing in Korea is basically a Christian form of vocal practice. The final hymn makes this social fact clear by framing the recital as an inherently Christian event. Furthermore, the qualities perceived in the European-style classical voice are precisely those of the "higher ground" described in the hymn above—the sound of light and love, the sound of grace. For many Korean Christians, the transformation from memories evoked by *pudae tchigae* to the experience of the prosperous present is embodied and expressed by the cultivation of this kind of voice. It is the voice of Korean Christian aspiration.

This book is an ethnographic study of the human voice in a particular stratum of Korean Christian culture. At the heart of my analysis is

the way the European-style classical voice is a privileged nexus of phonic and sonic practice for Christians. This voice is treated as a qualitative emblem of a broader cultural transformation from a suffering, war-torn nation to one that has received “God’s grace.” While many are still drawn to the qualities of sadness and roughness as familiar, if now somewhat quaint, features of past expressive forms—indeed, of past culinary forms, if we consider Su-yŏn’s account of *pudae tchigae*—they nonetheless hold as their ideal a Korean social world in which ethnonational sadness and suffering may be remembered, even memorialized, but not experienced directly. This ideal world is captured in the moment when an audience listens to a hymn sung in a Western classical style (*sŏngak*) and utters, “Amen.”³ In the following pages, I show how the cultivation of the human voice—specifically, the ideal qualities of the voice as a *phonosonic nexus* (see below)—in churches and music schools throughout Seoul instantiates this transformation.

The empirical questions that led to my ethnographic research began five thousand miles away in Germany. In the winter of 2002, I flew from Munich to Berlin to audition for two music conservatories: the Universität der Künste (UdK), in western Berlin, and the Musikhochschule Hanns Eisler, in eastern Berlin. I was working as a writer and editor for a technology services company in Munich and was taking voice lessons on the side. On the suggestion of my teacher at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München, I joined singers from around the world in trying to get one of a handful of spots at one of these schools. I was not accepted. I was disappointed. But besides my own disappointment, perhaps the strongest impression I took from that experience was that more than half of the people auditioning with me were from South Korea.

The presence of Korean singers at a European audition was no surprise. I had encountered many Korean musicians, both Korean nationals and Korean Americans, in New York City (where I had gone to college) and elsewhere in the United States.⁴ The numbers were remarkable, but beyond that, two things astonished me. The first was how well all of the Korean singers seemed to know one another and how comfortable they seemed in this competitive environment. While many prospective students stood alone in the hallway, nervously awaiting (and perhaps dreading) our turn to sing, the Korean students walked in large convivial groups through the hallways of the music building, chatting and even laughing. They seemed—to me, at least—to be at ease. The second was how well the Korean singers performed in the auditions.

Many of the singers called back for the second round of auditions were Korean. And, after listening to a few of them, my surprise turned into admiration and respect. I remember standing with other singers in the hallway at the UdK during one Korean tenor's audition and looking at one another, amazed at the size and beauty of the voice that emanated from the room.

What I observed in 2002 was not a quirk. For example, in the first round of the 2007 auditions for the voice department of Berlin's Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler, 104 out of 164 applicants were from Korea.⁵ And the successes of Korean singers have not stopped at conservatories. At the Rocca delle Macie International Opera Competition, fifteen of the thirty finalists between 1999 and 2006 were from Korea.⁶ In 2009, the first-, second-, and third-prize winners at the biennial Neue Stimmen International Voice Competition were also Korean.⁷ Given the obvious interest in this genre of vocal arts, I assumed at first that there must be a thriving public arts scene that supported and encouraged this type of music. But when I arrived in Korea in 2005 for my first research trip to explore this phenomenon, I was surprised to find that concert halls were basically empty at each of the performances I attended. Why were these singers flying across the world to learn to sing if there was no one to listen to them in Korea? Why put in so much effort abroad and then return home if there was no work at home? Why spend time, money, and other resources on cultivating this particular kind of vocal sound if there was no clear public appreciation for it?

In 2005, I went to Seoul looking for an explanation for the wild successes of Korean opera singers in conservatories and at competitions around the world. I expected to find a culture of rigorous, disciplined practice organized by discourse about vocal technique: a system of semiotic awareness and control that allows singers to manipulate their bodies to produce particular kinds of sounds. What else could account for their successes? I expected to arrive in Seoul and find the singers there already able to explain the ways they produced the sounds I had heard years before in Berlin. But this was not the case. Although the singers I met on this early trip had a few things to say about how they sang and how much time they spent in the practice room, many were much more interested in talking about another set of motivations: Christianity, God, Jesus Christ, church, faith, and evangelism.

It wasn't until 2006, when I returned for a second research trip, that I realized how central the church was to the lives of these singers of *sŏngak*. Just as these singers demonstrated no pervasive or detailed or

even consistent technical register for talking about singing or the voice, so too was a register of connoisseurship among audiences absent. Although there were numerous *sōngak* performances throughout the city, the audiences were rarely full, and those who attended seemed hardly engaged in the performance (except, as above, when there was a Christian hymn). In contrast to Japan, where the arts market for operatic singing is quite developed and the fans are known to be very passionate (despite the fact that there are far fewer world-famous Japanese opera singers), in Korea there is not much of a “public” for *sōngak*. I learned that most members of concert audiences had some kind of first- or second-degree institutional relation to the performer—family members, church members, or school friends. Their attendance was motivated primarily by personal obligation, and these listening audiences demonstrated no great interest in the cultural categories of aesthetic judgment and critique that one encounters in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, such as technical virtuosity or artistry or intelligence of singing. If people happened to be interested in the music, this interest was expressed primarily in terms of the way the singing made them *feel*. And this feeling was largely related to the role of *sōngak* as an overwhelmingly, if still somewhat implicit, Christian register of communication in Korea. And so for a year of fieldwork beginning in early 2008, I sang with one of the choirs at the large, wealthy, powerful Somang Presbyterian Church and attended classes in Seoul National University’s (SNU) Department of Voice, one of the most selective programs in the country.

The vast majority of students and professionals of *sōngak* not only described themselves as Evangelical Christians but also characterized *sōngak* in both direct and indirect ways as a mode of evangelical training and Christian activity. Singers repeatedly told me that they were singing for God, that even secular art music could be used for evangelism, and that the *sōngak* method of sound production was chosen explicitly to bring out the natural, and therefore “God-given,” voice in each person. My informants consistently told me that 99 percent of university students majoring in *sōngak* were Christian and mostly Presbyterian—in a country where Protestant Christians usually are estimated to account for only about 20 percent of the population of around 50 million. In my own interviews I found the numbers to be a bit lower: at least four out of five were Protestant and the remaining were mostly Catholic. But it is telling that the singers themselves see their own field of *sōngak* as dominated by Protestant Christians. According to these same informants, just

over half of the classically trained instrumentalists at universities are practicing Christians. This difference between the study of *sōngak* and the study of Western musical instruments—both the rough statistical difference and people’s perceptions of difference—disrupts the easy sociological notion that Christianity and classical music are connected in Korea simply because both are “Western” and therefore status-raising, modern, and instrumental in Korea for social mobility and class reproduction, or that the thousands of Korean students who study Western music in Korea or abroad all do so for the same reasons.

Although class and gender do play important roles in shaping the social landscape of *sōngak* singing, I have chosen to weave the treatment of these categories into my broader argument regarding the relationship between Christianity and *sōngak*.⁸ I have found the explicit role of faith and its institutionalization through particular communicative practices illuminating for an understanding of voice in this context, in large part because some relationship between religion and vocal style was clearly understood and articulated by the singers I met, Christian or not. This was profoundly different from my own experience in singing classical music in the United States, where I have participated in it since childhood in the completely agnostic way in which I was raised. My contact with music in church came only much later, when I was hired as a paid member of an all-professional choir in an Episcopal church during graduate school in Chicago. While the professional experience with the church choir prepared me—to a point—for fieldwork, singing in these two religious environments was dramatically different. In the church in Chicago, there was no expectation on the part of the church that the classically trained singers in the choir be members of the church, let alone profess any particular faith. We were paid to sing well, plain and simple. In the churches I observed in Seoul, however, Christianity provided a specific ideological frame precisely in terms of which singers cultivated their classical voices and thereby shaped the voices and influenced the uses to which such voices were put.

In this book, I examine the way Christians in South Korea treat the human voice as a God-given tool for praise and evangelism. I argue that these Christians strive through vocalization to exhibit certain idealized qualities of contemporary Christian personhood, using European-style classical singing as their model. I show how their aim is to cultivate a “clean” voice, a specific cultural form of aesthetics and ethics, expression and embodiment, which comes to stand for Christian progress more broadly. In this framework of cultivation, progress is achieved by

purifying the nation of residual elements of a superstitious, unenlightened Korean past and by softening the feelings of suffering and hardship that can be heard in the voices of older generations. An advanced nation is joyful, healthy, stable, and clean—and so should its voice be. But this book is much more than a study of singers. In the pages that follow, I trace the voice through multiple sites, some not explicitly religious or musical, to offer an ethnographic view into South Korean Christianity, its linked institutions, its rituals and practices, and the people for whom it is a *raison d'être*. Additionally, this book offers an ethnographically grounded and semiotically informed theorization of voice that accounts for the relationship of sound to body, speech to song, and everyday vocalization practices to higher-order social voicings of perspective and personhood. A major piece of this account is organized around locating the *sōngak* voice in the cultural time and space of Christian Korea and examining the kinds of social relations that are mediated by this voice and framed by this cultural model of ethnonational time-space.

A CHRISTIAN AESTHETIC OF PROGRESS

After the devastation of the Korean War (1950–53), South Korea went from being one of the poorest countries in the world to being one of the richest. This transformation followed half a millennium of rule by the Yi royal house and a neo-Confucian elite formed of scholarly bureaucrats, the *yangban*, during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) and decades of colonial rule by Japan during the first half of the twentieth century (1910–45). For South Korea, the second half of the twentieth century was a period of painful national division, combined with rapid industrialization, urbanization, economic growth, and political transformation from military dictatorship to democracy.⁹ Korean Christians take much credit for this transformation and see individual conversions, widespread spiritual enlightenment, and ethnonational advancement as part of the history and influence of Christian institutions.¹⁰ The story usually begins with Protestant missions to Korea in the late nineteenth century. It emphasizes the role Christians played in establishing schools and hospitals, their participation in nationalist efforts under Japanese colonial rule, and their staunch anti-communism. The story culminates with the rapid growth in the number of Protestants after the Korean War, the membership numbers of contemporary Korea's Protestant churches, and the global reach of Korean evangelical missions. Newspapers regularly

report that some of the largest Christian congregations in the world are located in Seoul, including the largest single congregation in the world—the Yoido Full Gospel Church (Yöüido Sun Pogüm Kyohoe), with an alleged membership of more than eight hundred thousand. And with estimates upward of twenty thousand evangelists working around the world, Korea is said to be outnumbered only by the United States in sending missionaries abroad.¹¹

The triumphalist narrative of Korea's Christianization celebrates a number of fundamental shifts in Korean society: the shift from Confucianism, shamanism, and Buddhism to Christianity; from superstition to enlightenment; from dictatorship to democracy; from suffering to grace; from sickness to health; from poverty to wealth; and from dirtiness to cleanliness. As I show throughout this book, these shifts are expressed in music schools and the wealthy Presbyterian churches of Seoul through a particular kind of singing voice—a European-style classical voice, the *söngak* voice—and are embodied in professional and semiprofessional soloists as well as in the members of church choirs. The aesthetics of this singing voice are also related to styles of speaking, praying, and preaching, thus shaping the overall soundscapes of Christian environments.

Each week, *söngak* singers perform for audiences of tens of thousands at various churches throughout Seoul. A typical singer's Sunday might begin early in the morning to prepare for the first service of the day, followed by travel to other churches in the city, and last well into the afternoon or evening. At school and elsewhere, Christian singers form mission groups and raise money to travel outside Korea and evangelize through song. By the time they go abroad for study—a necessary step in the legitimization of a *söngak* singer in Korea—some of them will have given performances of both secular and Christian songs in multiple languages for hundreds of thousands if not millions of people. By generalizing from these specialists, I draw on one of the great strengths of ethnography, which is to penetrate such powerful, influential points of cultural orientation in order to explain broader social phenomena. Although I do not claim to tell a story of absolute cultural coherence—certainly my account does not apply to all churches, all Christians, or all singers—I do understand these highly specialized voices to be saturated with a particular Christian aesthetic, serving as emblems to which many people orient and for which they aspire.

In their ritual instantiations of explicitly Christian soundscapes, churches serve as aesthetic sites, as well as affective and ethical sites, of

authorization for singers as they evaluate their own voices and the voices of others. By aesthetics, I mean the institutionally anchored and ideologically distilled systems of judgment immanent in the use, apprehension, and evaluation of, in this case, vocal sound. Aesthetics concern the way experiences of qualities are shaped and structured by semiotically mediated frameworks of value.¹² For the singing style that has emerged as a standard in many Christian churches in Korea, what is at stake in this Christian aesthetic is not just the problem of beauty but also more generally the successful performance and reproduction of the naturalized values of powerful institutions and their members through sensuous vocal form. One of these values is progress, which for many Korean Christians is both beautiful and natural.

In the Christian churches of Seoul (as in contemporary Korean society more generally), everyone is expected to sing, regardless of technical or musical ability. And as specialists among millions of Christians—all of whom sing in some respect—trained *sōngak* singers strive to produce a clean voice. Vocal cleanliness refers to the suppression and removal of two types of unwanted sounds: the “fuzz” caused by pressed vocal cords, abrasions on the vocal cords, or other forms of what we might call “obstruence” along the vocal tract; and the “wobble” of unstable vocal adduction, “shakiness” from habituated muscle tension, or an “artificial” vibrato. Such “unclean” sounds are associated with the voices of the past—someone from the older generation who has lived through the suffering of Korea’s recent history and lives on as an embodied representation of it. In these churches, classical singing often combines with preaching and prayer to materialize as the veritable voice of modern Korea. As a key part of the Christian soundscape, the clean voice is an emblem of personal and national advancement, an aesthetic horizon against which singers judge their personal development and the development of their country. To be clear, my aim is not to reproduce well-known arguments about cleanliness and modernity, colonial sanitation projects, or purified sacred spaces. Instead, I aim to understand thoroughly the significance of “cleanliness” in the Korean context by demonstrating ethnographically how cleanliness as an aspirational quality is linked with other valuable qualities via the semiotics of vocalization within Korean Christian culture.

The Christian aesthetic of progress also reveals a basic contradiction: although Koreans are supposed to have “in-born” (*t’agonan*) or “God-given” voices, precisely the attributes seen as most “traditionally” Korean (e.g., a “harsh”-sounding singing style) must be removed in the

process of cleaning the voice. (Ultimately, singers are expected to study and work abroad in order to truly clean the voice.) In the same way, contemporary conservative Presbyterian Christianity cultivates Koreans' purportedly in-born tendency toward spirituality by seeking to expunge from believers' religious faith and practice all traces of a superstitious, unenlightened Korean past. Yet these Christian ideals often seem to evade the grasp of singers whose voices, lives, and country aim toward a future horizon that cunningly recedes from view, while the residue of Korea's troubled past stubbornly persists. The following ethnographic portrait of singers as they move through different institutional contexts—especially the church and the school—illuminates the central tension inherent in their position, namely, that their great success as Christian singers is attributed to the Koreanness of their voices, while residual Korean sociocultural traits seem to hold them back from their Christian aims.

This book centers around the anxieties, successes, and failures of singers who strive to achieve the idealized voice of an advanced Christian nation. I explore the semiotics of vocal communication, ranging from the linguistic and musical to the material and anatomical dimensions of voice. I follow singers as they negotiate the soundscapes and bodily practices that are part and parcel of modern Korean Christianity. And I explore ethnographically how the clean voice emerges in a post-colonial, postwar, postdictatorship Korean society; through institutionalized Christianity on a massive scale; as a part of the globalization of the culture industry; and as a product of and catalyst for shifting expressive forms in contemporary Korea. In this way, I show how a Christian aesthetic of progress is powerfully exhibited through the human voice.

VOICE AND VOICING

My central ethnographic concern in this book is the human voice as a medium of communication, an object of cultivation, and a qualitative emblem of ethnonational advancement for Protestant Christians in Korea. This ethnographic concern poses the analytical, and hence methodological, challenge of positing the voice as an anthropological domain of inquiry. Whenever I introduced myself in Korea as an anthropologist doing research on the voice, most people responded positively. I usually began by touching my throat and saying something general, such as "*Moksori e taehan yŏn'gu rŭl hago issŏyo*" (I am doing research on the voice) or, even vaguer, "*Moksori e kwansim i issŏyo*" (I am interested

in the voice). My Korean interlocutors generally replied as if I had said I was studying the weather, Korean history, or mechanical engineering. And they often followed with a statement about how Koreans love to sing. Then they would ask if I knew about *p'ansori* (Korean story singing), if I had ever heard of Jo Sumi (Cho Su-mi), the famous soprano, or if I had ever been to a *noraebang*, the ubiquitous song rooms where friends and colleagues meet to drink and sing together.¹³ To most people I talked to in Korea, my research interest in the voice was no surprise.

In North America, this has not been the case. When I have told people that I am an anthropologist doing research on the voice, I have met confusion, puzzled expressions, and sometimes hostility, as if I were being intentionally opaque. There are almost always further questions about what exactly I “mean” by *voice*. The metaphorical productivity of the term in English—and its appropriation in both everyday usage and social and literary theory—makes my fairly literal usage of the word seem threateningly vague. People often ask, “Do you mean a political voice?”; “Do you mean finding one’s own individual voice?”; “Do you mean a literary voice?”; “Do you mean the voice of a people?” My normal response has been: “No, I mean the voice voice,” hoping that reduplication will suffice to clarify my usage of the term. More often than not, it fails to do so.

There are actually two words for “voice” in Korean. The most common term is the native Korean word *moksori*, which is a compound of the words for “throat” (*mok*) and “sound” (*sori*). The Sino-Korean term, *ŭmsŏng*, is usually used in technical registers (e.g., phonology, voice pathology, etc.) or as an honorific term to refer to the voice of someone of relatively high social standing, such as an elder relative, a teacher, or a god. While the word *voice* in Korean can be used tropically in the same way it is used in English, members of the native stratum of the Korean lexicon are more metaphorically productive than those of the Sino-Korean stratum that belong to more restricted technical registers. Therefore, the tropic uses of the word *voice* in Korean are built upon *moksori*, not *ŭmsŏng* (e.g., *minjung ŭi moksori*, “voice of the people”; *munhak ŭi moksori*, “literary voice”). Yet despite these usages, the word *moksori*—perhaps because of its rather clear compound of the existent lexemes *throat* and *sound*—generally did not generate further questions from my Korean interlocutors as to my meaning. Not only was the term referentially clear, it was also rather unsurprising. It seemed self-evident to most Koreans I met that if I was interested in the

voice and vocalization I might come to Korea to study it. Some even insisted that to talk about Korea and Koreans, one must talk about the cultural importance of the human voice.

But let us ask: What is the voice as an object of anthropological study? Or rather, what *ought* it to be for the purpose of sociocultural analysis? In the pages that follow, I treat the voice as an ongoing intersection between the phonic production, shaping, and organization of sound, on the one hand, and the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world, on the other. I give this practical, processual intersection the name *phonosonic nexus*. As I show throughout this book, the pragmatically productive concept of a phonosonic nexus allows us to analyze systematically two important facts: that the voice concerns both sound and body, and that it links speech and song. Furthermore, this concept clarifies the relationship between literal understandings of “voice” (e.g., a laryngeal setting involving vocal cord adduction, a material locus of human sound production, an instantiation of a speaking or singing individual, etc.) and more tropic understandings of “voicing” (e.g., a metonym of political position and power, a metaphor for the uniqueness of an authentic self or collective identity, an expression of a typifiable persona, etc.). These two related views consider voice as a ubiquitous medium of communicative interaction and channel of social contact and as the positioning of a perspective within a culturally meaningful framework of semiotic alignments.¹⁴

By organizing this ethnography around the concept of the phonosonic nexus, I show how voice in the concrete sense and voicing in the tropic sense are scalar relations of the same thing from the point of view of semiotic function. Voice as phonosonic nexus and voicing as the discursive alignment to a socially identifiable perspective are linked semiotic phenomena by which persons and groups situate themselves in worlds of significance.

There is a persistent fantasy that there might be something we can call “voice” prior to, apart from, or beneath the semiotic, communicative, social, or cultural. An otherwise ethnographically grounded Edward Sapir indulged in this philosophical fantasy when he wrote, nearly a century ago, “What we ordinarily call voice is voice proper plus a great many variations of behavior that are intertwined with voice and give it its dynamic quality.”¹⁵ Despite positing a voice proper, Sapir admitted, “The voice is a complicated bundle of reactions and, so far as the writer knows, no one has succeeded in giving a comprehensive account of what the voice is and what changes it may undergo.”¹⁶

The voice proper with which Sapir was concerned has continued to serve as a prized but elusive object of research. His notion begins with the problem of sound as an isolable medium of communication and its locus of origin. This anticipates a common definition of voice in linguistic phonetics, namely, that “voiced” sounds are “sounds produced when the vocal folds are vibrating.”¹⁷ This understanding is the basis for determining glottal phonation as a distinctive feature in languages.¹⁸ The various modulations of this act of glottal phonation according to laryngeal setting (“modal voice,” “creaky voice,” etc.)—normally called “voice quality”—Sapir called “voice dynamics” and treated them as the first step from a voice proper into the sociality of voice.¹⁹

But the sounds produced when vocal cords vibrate are not limited to a simple fundamental pitch, nor are they determined merely by the vibrating vocal cords. A focus on the vocal cords alone is reasonable within a systematic study of the anatomical components of phonation.²⁰ However, the voice that is heard and made meaningful to researchers and everyday listeners alike—the “voice voice,” as I put it earlier—is a processually achieved complex of a fundamental pitch and peaks of acoustic energy, called formants, which are shaped by the resonating surfaces and points of articulation along the vocal tract, the entailments of which are perceived by listeners within, and in terms of, a particular acoustical space where certain kinds and arrangements of vocal sounds are the norm (e.g., preaching in a megachurch in Seoul, chatting in a subway in New York, yelling in a park in Lawrence, Kansas).²¹

The problem of where the voice as sound begins and ends is further exacerbated when we look at various singing practices and their attendant phonic requirements. Let us take an example that is relevant to the rest of this book. At its most basic anatomical level, the European-style classical vocal technique employed for the performance of opera, oratorio, art song, and choral singing (accounting for the different demands of these different compositional genres) is based on a combination of low subglottic pressure, a lowered larynx, reduced muscle tension in the throat, tongue, and face, and an expanded pharyngeal cavity.²² The basic formula for this coordination involves two main actions that redirect local effort from the site of phonation (the glottis), to the sites of respiration and articulation. When a singer reduces air pressure beneath the glottis, it allows the larynx to relax and descend in the throat, a position from which the vocal folds can phonate without also “holding back” air from the lungs. The singer also must expand and shape the resonators in the pharyngeal and oral chambers to create certain

combinations of vowels, pitch, timbre, and amplitude. The lower the breath pressure, the lower and more relaxed the larynx, the more agile and enduring the vocal cords, the more space for resonance, the more “efficient” the singing will be. The corresponding aesthetic norms demand a “concentrated” tone, “unforced” production, “free” movement, and “legato” phrasing.²³ An important feature of European-style classical technique is its cultural emphasis on a kind of vocal economy: it is designed to produce the most prosthetically unamplified sound in an acoustically favorable environment with the least amount of stress on the bodily sources of that sound. And so to phonically engage with, align with, and contribute to the aesthetic values of *söngak* is to align one’s body to sound. The values associated with corporeal and acoustic sensations become linked indexically through specific modes of phonic-sonic engagement, alignment, and contribution.

Many have noted that what we call “voice” is not sound alone. In particular, Roland Barthes, in his essay “The Grain of the Voice,” famously discussed the auditory perception of anatomico-material processes in the singing of classically trained European baritones—one of whom had been his own teacher.²⁴ That “voice is among the body’s first mechanisms of difference” is an important concluding point of a programmatic article on vocal anthropology by Steven Feld and three colleagues.²⁵ In the final paragraphs of the piece, the authors introduce the notion of the body to argue that “the physical grain of the voice has a fundamentally social life.”²⁶ If so, then how should we study this social life? How should we carry out a sociocultural anthropology of the bodily aspects of the voice in its thoroughly social, interactional role in communication?²⁷

Regarding the bodily aspects of the phonosonic nexus, my approach in this book has been to focus, on the one hand, on the anatomical dimensions of vocalization as well as on reported corporeal or sensorial experiences of what Charles S. Peirce termed “firstness,” the realm of “feeling” and its empirical form, “qualia.” In using the term *qualia*, I am not referring to the subjective, mental experiences of quality, the status of which has long been debated in Western philosophy. My use of the term *qualia* refers to the actual instantiations of culturally conceptualized sensuous qualities that people orient to, interact in terms of, and form groups around.²⁸ The term *quality* refers to abstract attributional categories of qualitative experience (e.g., “softness” or “roughness,” which can transcend specific modalities or sensory channels), while the term *qualia* refers to actual instantiations of sensuous

quality, such as the particularly soft give of a pillow or the particular style and decibel level of a performance of music. Whereas a quality like cleanliness becomes valuated as an overarching abstract property attributed to multiple objects, events, and experiences, the qualia of one's individual voice are tuned and manipulated phonically to align with a sonically experienced framework of value. (I call this "qualic tuning" in chapter 5.)

On the other hand, I examine processes of bringing the voice in its various qualitative dimensions into awareness as "embodied principles."²⁹ And I do so both in the sense of materialization in observable bodily practice and reported qualitative experience of individuals (e.g., vocal cleanliness), as well as in the emblematic forms of higher-order categories of value that can be embodied in a voice and, by extension, the person or people who emit it (e.g., cleanliness as an emblem of advancement). The voice is revealed to be as much body as it is sound, as much inalienable and personal as it is shared and social, as much private and interoceptive as it is public and exteroceptive, and as much a medium of communication as it is an object of cultural reflection that can lie beyond the realm of denotational representation even while it serves as an object of conscious manipulation and cultivation. Because the voice, as a materially achieved intersubjective point of mutual orientation is inherently bound to, produced through, and culturally conceptualized in terms of communicative interaction, this is where I begin the investigation.³⁰

Any quest for Sapir's voice proper (wherever it is thought to lie) leads only to obscurity.³¹ Such an investigation forces one to strip so much from the voice that it no longer resembles the object that one originally intended pursue.³² My initial bumbling ethnographic steps in Seoul, when I looked solely for vocal technique and was blind to other cultural dimensions, were an example of precisely this problem. As a channel for human communication and sociality, as a thoroughly bodily process with anatomical regularities, as a means of self-reflexive personal and collective expression, the practical social action of the voice cannot be divorced from its ongoing cultural conceptualization. The bodily dimension of voice, much of which flies far under the radar of awareness, is anchored to the communicative dimension of voice, which itself provides the framework in terms of which vocal expression finds a meaningful form between people. By viewing vocal communication in terms of semiotic registers, that is, as cultural models of social behavior, we can see how the relatively more "embodied" or more "expressive"

dimensions of voice are really two sides of the same semiotic token—and this token is inherently social.³³ Voice is not merely a sonorous extension of an embodied individual or the natural expressive outlet or externalization of interior emotions, but also, and centrally, a channel-emphasizing phatic mode of social contact.³⁴ Whereas sound may be delinked logically from the social (as a tree falling in the forest), voice, as I understand it, never can be.

With this in mind, I proceed by accepting the fullness of the anthropological problem: there is a culturally conceptualized, sociohistorically normative, prototype-based voice that has to do with sounds produced when the vocal folds are vibrating but also has to do with the shaping of these sounds along the vocal cavity, with the coordinated role of the body in respiration, phonation, and articulation, with the acoustic space in which voice is emitted, with culturally meaningful soundscapes into which such emissions are supposed to fit, with formal genres in which it is expected to be used, with ritual sites in which these forms and genres are authorized and from which they emanate, with the ideological frames in terms of which vocal sound and its processes of sound making are evaluated and categorized, and with the various conceptually anchored analogies that it generates. It is on account of these multiple interacting layers that people describe the activity of making certain sounds with the body as “a” voice, or “someone’s” voice, or “the” voice, or “a type of” voice, with respect to the other sounds in the world (those that it resembles and those from which it can be distinguished), as meaningful activity that, in one way or another, establishes or is modeled on social contact.

We now can see how what we call the voice is, as Sapir noted, indeed the product of “a great many variations of behavior” as well as interacting acoustic spaces of different sorts (the vocal tract as well as the space in which a person is vocalizing, etc.). Furthermore, when a voice is identified as such, when we extend the referent, *voice*, we normally do so through metapragmatic framings of communicational acts.³⁵ That is, we do not normally refer to the voice as the vibrating of vocal cords or even as a decontextualized sound; rather, we identify a person’s voice and interpret its sound in terms of particular kinds of social acts, in terms of descriptive labels such as “to speak” or “to sing,” “to yell” or “to whimper.”³⁶ Socioculturally speaking, conceptualizations of voice emerge from participation in, anchoring to, and reflection upon events of communicative interaction. And such acts are interpreted in terms of their indexical relation to context. So although it might be tempting to deconstruct the

various dimensions of voice to arrive at the voice proper, as Sapir and others hoped to do, we can see that in fact this voice proper does not exist as such. It is not merely that the voice is always “intertwined” with something. Rather, the voice itself is a constant intertwining.

This intertwining is continually articulated as a combination of formants (which affect everything from the perception of vowels to the qualia of voice), conditioned by the shape and resonant surfaces of the vocal cavity, sustained by the coordination of bodily activity, emitted in a particular acoustic space, linked to particular forms of semiotic production, locatable in social activity of all kinds, and culturally conceptualized, experienced, and reportable *as voice*. When we look closely at voice as sound, it is not clear where the voice begins and ends. Likewise, when we look closely at voice as a bodily mechanism or an act of sound production, it also is not clear where the voice begins and ends. This leaves us then with the view of voice as an ongoing intersection between the phonic production, shaping, and organization of sound, on the one hand, and the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world, on the other. The voice as phonosonic nexus is a medium through which we orient to one another, not directly, but through phonic engagements with sonically differentiated frameworks of value that shape our social interactions.³⁷

The question for the ethnographer of voice is how to view the intersection of particular phonic and sonic dimensions in terms of a broader sociocultural analysis. The voice as sound is related to other kinds of sounds in the world (a human voice versus the sound of a tractor’s engine), different vocal sounds are related to other vocal sounds within a phonological system of differentiation (vowels versus consonants), types of vocal activity are related one to another (singing versus speaking), and so on, all at different levels, and in different dimensions, of cultural meaningfulness. In its more expressive dimensions, the voice serves as a locus of signal forms available to the perceptual fields of people beyond the agent or agents of sound production. In its more embodied dimensions, the voice is understood to reside in or emanate from a body or bodies, to have a material site of origin or instantiation, or to be experienced corporeally but not always directly available to the sensorial experiences of others. By examining the sociocultural intertwining of the phonic and the sonic, we make available for systematic analysis the voice as a practical channel mediating the social world.

The voice, when conceptualized as a phonosonic nexus, becomes a lens through which we can view these different inner configurations of

sound and sound production. This conceptualization allows us to view the voice as linking related forms of communication like speech and song and culturally relevant ontic dimensions like sound and body. Furthermore, it helps us better understand how the more literal “voice voice” can afford more tropic extensions of “voicing” that project cultural notions of the authenticity, particularity, authority, subjectivity, political position, or intentionality of singing or speaking bodies onto distinct, potentially generalizable identities.

The literal voice is a phonosonic medium through which a discursively engaged individual can place herself within and in relation to a number of meaningful semiotic realms at a number of different scales, both explicitly linguistic and nonlinguistic. It is a primary medium through which a person situates herself in worlds of significance, which makes the configuration of social lives, in all of their acoustic and corporeal dimensions, congruent and in dialogue with presupposable social configurations of some sort, at different scales. As I show throughout this book, individuals and groups align themselves with and adjust to the different contexts of their social worlds through the phonosonics of vocalization.

From this semiotic recasting of the human voice as phonosonic nexus, we can now move to the question of how this nexus can serve as a kind of representational trope. In Korea, as elsewhere, certain kinds of voices, or vocal attributes, can lead people to make characterological assumptions about the speaker or singer.³⁸ The assumptions usually equate the qualia perceived in the semiotic form with the qualities thought to belong to the agent of semiotic production.³⁹

I will give empirical evidence for this phenomenon in chapter 2, when I analyze the sermon of a Korean Presbyterian pastor, in which he pitted the voices of the Pharisees against the voice of Jesus. Through the qualic tuning of voice, the pastor set up a duality of positions, as social types in a social universe that members of the congregation would be able to experience as real.⁴⁰ In this manner, the literal “voice voice” as a phonosonic nexus can be related to its various tropic extensions by considering voicing as a manifestation of the inherent relationality of utterances and semiotic forms representing ascriptive intentionalities.⁴¹ The congruent alignment of the voice as phonosonic nexus and the voicing structure of a pastor’s reported speech positions the perspective of the narrator (the pastor) within a social world of competing perspectives. By manipulating the qualitative features of the phonosonic voice in his performance of these different perspectives and by reducing the

prosodic differentiation between his own sermonic voice and one of the narrated voices, the pastor is able to align his own perspective with that of one of the voices he is narrating (Jesus)—and thereby instruct his congregation to do the same. The phonosonics of vocalization in this event of voicing link particular qualities or attributes to different moral perspectives.

Insofar as voicing describes the relations among, and interpenetrations by, different perspectives indexed by semiotic form, we can see then how one is not merely a speaker or an addressee, a singer or an audience, in an isolated communicative event. Rather, one is summoned to roles within an inner configuration of role possibilities, which then are further linked to a higher indexical order of social positions within a cultural framing of generalizable forms of personhood.⁴² These roles have indexical relations one to another and may also be understood to possess specific attributes.⁴³ These roles are inhabited interdiscursively; we inhabit previous communications in which we have engaged or that we have observed. This inhabitation takes place through the location of the self with respect to denotational, musical, or other textual forms produced during communicative situations.⁴⁴ What appears as a system or an array or a repertoire of social voices is really a model for observing the sociohistorically situated and morally saturated interdiscursivity of such semiotic alignments in particular cultural contexts, in which “identity” can be seen as interdiscursive continuity and “alterity” as interdiscursive contrast.⁴⁵ Just as the phonosonic nexus is known in part by its acoustic overtones in particular spaces, the interdiscursive histories of utterances and reported speech can also be said to result in their giving off “contextual overtones.”⁴⁶

As I show through numerous examples throughout this book, the scalar relationship between the voice, as phonosonic nexus, and voicing, as semiotic alignment to perspective within an immanent narrative structure, is made evident by the way the phonosonic nexus facilitates the inhabitation of roles within a culturally framed social world of discursive interaction.⁴⁷ Sociality is unavoidably semiotically mediated, and this semiotic mediation, as a material presence in the world, continually compels people to repeat and revise themselves and others as they interact with one another. In interaction, we are confronted by and are potentially always ready to report on our own events of communication (speech, song, etc.) as well as those of others; in so doing, we align with, or distance ourselves from, the perspectives indexed by these communicative forms. That is, we are continually confronted with

narratable voicing structures as metapragmatic framings that situate our own selves in relation to and in terms of the pragmatically inhabitable roles available to us through meaningful social behavior.

This book is in large part about apperception—the landmarks of perception that bias one’s classificatory abilities and assimilation of experience.⁴⁸ Specifically in the case of voice and voicing, culturally shaped apperception conditions not only what is heard but also how it is heard. Sapir recognized that sound shapes have a “psychological background” for speakers, which makes them recognizable and interpretable as a meaning-differentiating signal within the inner configuration of a system of indexical relations and distinctions.⁴⁹ In a similar manner, Bakhtin observed that “every utterance is oriented toward [an] apperceptive background of understanding, which is not [merely] a linguistic background but rather one composed of specific objects and emotional expressions.”⁵⁰ From the level of voice as phonosonic nexus to the level of voicing as perspectival alignment with respect to communicative media (denotational, musical, or otherwise), these different scales of semiotic production both figure into and gain meaningfulness in terms of some culturally stipulated inner configuration—whether it be a phonological or a musical framework of sonic values or a social universe of positional values. Voice and voicing are thus scalar relations of the same thing from the point of view of semiotic function. In the social world of Korean Christianity depicted in the present ethnography, the former is framed by aesthetic discourse and the latter by ethical discourse—although these two discursive areas often bleed into one another.⁵¹

Seen this way, it becomes clear why the voice as phonosonic nexus should be capable of such powerful metonymical and metaphorical extensions in the form of political position and power, communicative agency and recognition, authenticity and individuality, personal attributes and expressive style, in particular sociohistorical contexts. These extensions are different ways of looking at an ongoing and emergent self-location in sociosemiotic space, whether this reflexive self is shaped by an emphasis on personal individuation or group-level identification and differentiation. Structures of voicing give a psychological or apperceptive background—a cultural background—to meaningful, recognizable social behavior.

Just as there is no pure or isolable “voice proper” at the level of the phonosonic nexus and its psychological background, there is no “neutral utterance” at the level of voicing and an utterance’s apperceptive background.⁵² In considering how each phonosonic token or uttered

phrase or social act can have a specific richness, a particular character, a powerful cultural significance, a notable social effect, and yet be recognizable as “like” something else, we return via voicing to where we began with the phonosonic voice—by considering the play of overtones that constitute both voice dynamics and the dynamics of culture.

My aim in the present analysis is to explore the semiotic overtones—both acoustic and sociocultural—produced by Christians in South Korea to elucidate the relationship between the everyday phonosonic voice and a higher-order cultural narrative revealed by structures of voicing. By focusing in particular on the European-style *sōngak* voice in Korean megachurches and schools of music as a normative voice for these institutions and their members, I systematically explore how the discursively engaged, qualically tuned voice becomes a medium through which the qualities and interests of Korean Presbyterian Christianity are expressed and embodied by individuals, groups, and entire institutions. From the body to sound, from sound to society, and back to the socialized body, I show how *sōngak* singing as a phonosonic register of communication mediates the invocation of a particular form of Christian identity and instantiates its value within a pervasive and powerful Christian aesthetic of progress.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book consists of two parts. Part one, “The Qualities of Voice” (chapters 1 through 4), deals with the features and practices of the voice and their moral backing in Christian South Korea. Part two, “The Sociality of Voice” (chapters 5 through 7), deals with the role of the voice in mediating social relations in Christian South Korea.

Chapter 1 is an ethnographic introduction to the central themes and theoretical claims of the book. It focuses primarily on the transformation of the qualia of voices and the relation of this transformation to coded emotionality. The aesthetic dimension of sound and the ethically charged treatment of the body become points of orientation within a Christian ideology of progress. Specifically, I explore the way an aspiration for a voice that does not sound like suffering engenders new forms of sociality, ideally created around the absence of pain as a departure from the past, but also produces nostalgia in those who cannot access the voices of the past. The ethnographic glimpses offered in this first chapter serve as concrete examples of the relationship between voice and voicing that I explore in greater detail in later chapters.

In chapter 2, I show the specific ways in which a Christian narrative of progress in Korea combines a story of ethnonational advancement with one of spiritual enlightenment. In 2008 these two dimensions were amplified by two major events. First, when Lee Myung-bak (Yi Myŏng-bak), an elder at Somang Presbyterian Church, assumed the office of the Korean presidency, he announced that South Korea had finally reached the status of an “advanced nation” (*sŏnjin’guk*). And then, months later, when large-scale public protests erupted against his government, the head pastor of Somang Church, in a series of sermons, characterized the protests as holding on to the frustrations and lamentations of the past and indirectly reprimanded the protesters for discounting the vital role of Christian institutions in bringing democracy and social progress to the country. Using these events and their discursive entailments, I show how this narrative of progress can be “heard” in the human voice: both in terms of the voice itself and in terms of the way Christians are instructed to voice themselves in respect of (i.e., align themselves to) the narratives of their political and spiritual leaders.

Chapter 3 builds on the link between the sensuous qualities of voice and the institutional values of voicing by demonstrating the way in which *sŏngak* singing constitutes a semiotic register of communication. I detail the phonic and sonic specifics of *sŏngak* in terms of the Korean Christian culture that I encountered and show how it was anchored to the broader practice of evangelism that was being forged in the church. I do this in three parts. First, I locate the role of singing for Korean Christians, both historically and institutionally, as a privileged form of social action, focusing on how *sŏngak* sits at the intersection of singing and evangelism, serving the parallel claims of Koreans’ supposed “in-born” capacity for song and for spirituality. Second, I explore how the systematic differentiation of voice qualities between *sŏngak* and sounds considered to be more traditional relies on and produces higher-order social categories that belong to the Christian narrative of progress described in chapter 2. Finally, I look at aspects of variation and change in vocal aesthetics that connect the relatively more expressive or audible dimension of voice to the relatively more embodied or proprioceptive dimensions of voice in the contexts of its Christian enregisterment. The voice becomes an emblem of progress for these Christians, a communicative medium spanning bodily manipulation and sonic entailment to exhibit the idealized qualities of larger-scale social change in Korea.

Chapter 4 focuses on a core aesthetic and ethical quality of the *sŏngak* voice: cleanliness. In Korea, people commonly use the notion of a clean voice in their descriptions of singing and speech. I trace the attribute of cleanliness and related notions of sanitation, hygiene, and health in Korean social history to illuminate this metaphor's place in Korean Christian culture and history. My discussion hinges on the way the concrete qualia of vocal sound are linked to the more abstract quality of cleanliness (and healthfulness) of bodily practice. Expanding the discussion of expression and embodiment to a broader Christian aesthetic of progress, I show how these qualitative attributes are related and polarized according to a narrative of development that positions the unclean, murky, unhealthy voice at an undeveloped stage (most clearly represented by markedly traditional forms of singing) and the clean, clear, healthy voice at the more developed stage.

Moving to the sociality of voice in chapter 5, I show ethnographically how the lives of Christian singers in Korea are anchored institutionally to the church and the university (or, simply, the school, *hak-kyo*). The school provides the credentials and authorizes individuals to sing; the church provides the audience and authorizes the performance events. Despite this complementary relationship, there is an enormous contrast between the two institutions, which presents challenges for singers as they move between them and “tune” their voices accordingly. At church, singers are expected to be disciples of Jesus Christ, exemplifying Christian service and modeling Christian personae through their voices in praise and worship, as well as in secular classical music. At school, in contrast, singers are expected to be disciples whose vocalization should always be performed in emulation of and deference to their professors. At church, then, they cultivate what they consider to be the God-given voice as Christian service; at school, they emulate the voices of their teachers as a kind of filial servitude. Although school ostensibly is where singers are transformed into specialists of voice, the impetus to sing classical music usually comes from the church. And although the school is the authoritative site of European-style classical singing, its pedagogical framework is considered to be backward and destructive for singing—more focused on teachers’ status and income than on students’ personal development. As students and professionals move between these competing and complementary sites of social interaction, their voices become key loci of contestation, with a “grain,” so to speak. The qualic tuning of their voices expresses and embodies competing institutional identities and ideologies and reproduces in social space a

temporal narrative of progress that links a seemingly corrosive past to an idealized, aspirational future.

Chapter 6 is an analysis of the “homecoming recital” (*kwiguk tokch’anghoe*), a ritual that reincorporates singers into Korean society after an enforced separation abroad for study and professional experience. By recasting “private” relations (kin, school, church, or otherwise) within a “public” setting, singers are presented as public professionals to an audience of intimates and institutional relations. And by ending these recitals of secular art music with an unscripted (but expected) Christian encore (e.g., a hymn), the markedness of Christian faith and worship—something nearly all those involved in the recital share—is erased and presented as a general, unmarked feature of public life in South Korea. In so doing, the ritual characterizes contemporary South Korean Christianity as an inherent attribute of modern Korean publicity.

Finally, chapter 7 deals with the way Christian conceptualizations of *maŭm* (heart-mind) are central to practices of faith and voice among Korean singers. I explore the notion of *maŭm* to understand what it means to have a clean voice and sing “with feeling” in Christian Korea, that is, to align personally felt emotional experiences with culturally meaningful modes of expression and communication. In this model, a *maŭm* that is stably and sincerely directed toward God allows one to emit a voice that is consistently in the service of God. In this way Christian singers aim to achieve a kind of calmness and maturity of presence that they say affords them the capacity to stir the emotions of others. According to these singers, this is a shift from earlier forms of emotional expression, in which the pain and torment of individual performers were channeled directly into the laments that they performed and then passed on to audiences—leading to an overall aesthetics of suffering. For contemporary Presbyterians featured in this book, a new framework of emotional expression has emerged in which a joyful *maŭm*, reflected by a clean voice, is central to leading a modern life, contributing to worldwide evangelism, and placing Korea at the spiritual center of the Christian world.

In the conclusion, I return to the problem of aspiration as it both fuels and frustrates the Christian culture of *sŏngak* in Korea. For those determined to achieve a clean voice, there remains both a stubborn history to be overcome and a horizon of progress toward which they constantly strive. Increasingly, in the short memories of Korea’s younger generations, the stubborn history is not just of poverty, hunger, and war but also of striving itself—of the “pushing” and “struggle” toward

advancement. These aspirational practices can work against the idealized qualities of the stable, mature, naturally emergent *sōngak* voice. For those who have achieved this voice, as with those who would rather not achieve it at all, there is an unsettling feeling of something missing, of something passing by, of something lost when they can hear but no longer produce the sounds of the past.