IQAS Vol. 57 / 2026 1, pp. 105–134

A Playlist for the Revolution: Protest Music in Youth-Led Movements in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea

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Abstract

Music plays a significant role in shaping social mobilization, including student and youth-led movements around the world. In East Asia specifically, over the last decade music has served as a significant tool for voicing political dissent and fostering a sense of belonging. Using content analysis, this study examines how music was utilized in Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, Hong Kong's 2019–2020 pro-democracy protests and South Korea's 2024–2025 impeachment demonstrations. Focusing on the background, lyrics and imagery of songs sung by protesters, the study identifies similarities across these three socio-political contexts in the transformation of individual grievances into collective action through music. This article argues that collective singing fosters solidarity across social classes and protest settings, while music also functions as a transnational instrument of protest through spillover effects and the translation of songs across contexts. The recurrence of similar songs across the three cases points to common symbolic repertoires of contention, underscoring how protest music can connect locally rooted movements with broader regional and global struggles for democratic participation. At the same time, however, significant differences emerge in the degree of artists' direct involvement and support for demonstrators, as well as in the confrontational character of protest music, which appears to be shaped by perceived threat levels. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the dual role of music as both a form of cultural expression and a political resource within contemporary youth-led movements.

Keywords: East Asia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, protest music, protest songs, Sunflower Movement, democratic participation, youth movements, impeachment

Across the globe, numerous countries endure repression, prompting activists and mobilized civil societies to pursue justice, democracy and freedom. Even established democracies face the threat of authoritarian drifts, with civil society serving a vital function in protecting democratic principles. In these contexts, music often plays a significant role, particularly in protest cultures, serving

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DOI 10.11588/iqas.2026.1.28250

not only as artistic expression but also as a unifying force that shapes collective identity, fosters emotional solidarity and fuels political engagement. From this perspective, Ian Peddie (2011) emphasizes that music serves as a vital source of hope, particularly amid calls for human rights, and has a direct and substantial impact on societies in times of uncertainty and struggle. Pro-democracy movements across Asia, including those in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Republic of Korea (hereinafter referred to as South Korea or Korea), have strategically utilized music to mobilize youth, express dissent and assert democratic values in the face of authoritarian pressure. Recent examples, from Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Movement to the 2019 Hong Kong protests and the 2024 civic mobilizations in South Korea, show how music has amplified calls for justice, freedom and democracy.

This paper adopts ethnomusicological perspectives articulated by J. Lawrence Witzleben (2002), who draws on Anthony Seeger's concept of "musical anthropology" in regarding music as both a cultural product and a sociopolitical practice. The study examines the evolution of protest music in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea, focusing on changes in genre, lyrics and performative function in response to shifting political contexts. The use of ethnomusicology is useful for the current research, as it does not merely examine music as a supporting product of sociopolitical events but also sheds light on how musical performances are "part of the very construction and interpretation of social and conceptual relationships and processes" (Seeger 1987: xiii–xiv). According to Mark Mattern (1998), music encompasses multiple social dimensions, with a notable emphasis on its physical character, as seen in practices such as moving the body to the rhythm or clapping and singing along. Corporeal engagement is especially evident in live performance contexts, for example concerts and other shared spaces of musical experience, where it occurs irrespective of venue size, thereby distinguishing music from many other art forms. This physicality enables musicians and listeners to share emotions, even during large-scale events like protests, establishing music as a particularly powerful medium of communication.

In demonstration contexts, these accessible forms of participation, such as singing, dancing and clapping, facilitate engagement among both committed protesters and the general public (Manabe 2015: 13). Additionally, in both style and content music functions as a magnifying glass on the identities and histories of people, since it carries the weight of their struggles. Consequently, the experience of an individual musician often reflects collective experiences that have been internalized and expressed through performance, fostering a sense of collective belonging (Mattern 1998: 17–18).

According to scholars such as William Danaher (2010), Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1998), music also creates, interacts with and connects movements to historical legacies through the revival or reinterpretation of older songs,

allowing contemporary activists to draw strength from past struggles and evoke vitalizing emotions (Danaher 2010: 813). In fact, music can bring back memories of past injustices, places or situations. This dynamic interplay between protest and popular culture enables movements to create emotionally resonant narratives that transcend generations. Music serves not only as a medium through which political ideas are articulated and disseminated, but also as a dynamic force that gives tangible shape to those ideas within cultural and social contexts (Street 2012: 1). Indeed, it can create and claim public spaces for "subcultures to become countercultures" (LeVine 2015: 1278).

Another interesting aspect is that alongside its openly revolutionary role, music can also gain power from its frequent perception as harmless entertainment. This understanding enables artists to embed messages of resistance and social change within their compositions, facilitating the safe integration of these ideas into mainstream discourse and expanding their audience (Woo 2024: 2). Furthermore, songs may acquire political significance when listeners interpret metaphorical or relatable lyrics in a sociopolitical context. Within this multilayered framework, the relationship between music and protest is multifaceted, operating across forms and functions that frequently overlap in practice. As Eric Drott (2023) points out, categories such as music as protest, music in protest and music of protest are conceptually distinct, yet they are empirically intertwined and often merge depending on context and purpose.

From this perspective, songs that were not originally intended to be political may become integral to protest movements when performed or played at demonstrations, rallies or activist gatherings. Accordingly, acknowledging that protest music now stretches far beyond songs with clear political messages is fundamental. As Eric Drott and Noriko Manabe (2025) highlight, tracks with subtle or ambiguous meanings, along with a variety of sonic practices, help to shape the vibrant soundscapes of modern protests. Often the political power of this music lies in its context, the way it is used, the emotions it stirs and the collective experience it creates, rather than in direct statements. While delivering a message remains central to protest music, it is only one of the many ways music can energize and transform political activism (Drott / Manabe 2025).

In terms of music genres, while folk music has historically voiced grassroots struggles, today's movements also employ popular genres – such as rap and reappropriated pop songs – as modern equivalents to energize, encourage support and attract media attention. Importantly, in recent years social media has played a pivotal role in shaping protest music by allowing activists to spread messages, share songs and protest playlists, organize demonstrations and amplify their causes to a global audience (Woo 2024: 5). As the following sections will demonstrate, protest music cannot be confined to a single genre. Rather, individual movements – both across different countries and within the same country over time – engage with musical styles that reflect their specific socio-

political contexts. Through music, protesters foster solidarity, maintain momentum and articulate a shared vision of democratic transformation.

This paper will focus on the latest major student- and youth-led protests in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea: the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, the 2019–2020 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, and the 2024–2025 impeachment demonstrations in South Korea, respectively. Building on Agnes Ku's (2021) comparative cultural sociology study on Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, the analysis of the three distinct cultural trajectories and their entanglements with power and resistance offers a valuable framework for understanding protest music as an element wherein these dynamics of collective dissent are expressed, circulated and institutionalized across different East Asian societal contexts (Ku et al. 2021).

The cases were selected for analytical comparability rather than temporal proximity, allowing for a study of how musical strategies diffuse and evolve over time in the East Asia region. This approach reveals how diverse political dynamics and levels of contentiousness shape the use of music in articulating political claims. In all these protests, young people played a crucial role in leading and structuring the movements. Moreover, in all three events music was a notable part of the protesters' identities, contributing to varying degrees to the developments of the protests and even their outcomes and aftermaths. On the same note, there was also some spillover in the choice of protest music, whether locally or internationally, across the three events, highlighting common strategies and the youth's claims against authoritarianism.

Furthermore, these three contexts demonstrate varying degrees of contentiousness between authorities and citizens, ranging from strong to minimal. This variation constitutes a significant analytical dimension, as differences in political contexts, governmental structures and the role of civil society influence the functions of music in protests, the sonic forms employed and the types of mobilization that emerge. For these reasons, a comparative analysis of the mentioned protests in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea can serve as an interesting example to examine not only how music contributes to shaping and supporting local protests, but also how music can travel across borders, regionally and internationally, in the universal battle against dictatorship and democratic backsliding.

From the analysis of the chosen songs, we argue that while collective singing fostered solidarity across social classes and protest settings, music was also employed as a transnational instrument of protest through spillover effects and the translation of songs across contexts. This phenomenon highlights the active participation of young people in the fight against authoritarian regimes and their shared struggles and aspirations along the way. However, the study also points out that fundamental differences existed among the three contexts, particularly in terms of the politically confrontational nature of the music and

the artists' involvement. These elements seemed to be mainly dictated by the perceived threat of the oppressive regimes in question.

We begin with a short historical overview of protest activities involving music in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The discussion then turns to the specific protest events selected for analysis before investigating how music has been mobilized across these three contexts. Through textual and contextual analysis of songs associated with the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan, the 2024–2025 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and the 2024–2025 impeachment demonstrations in South Korea, we conclude by reflecting on both the convergences and divergences in the use of music as a medium of resistance in each case.

Research methods

This study utilizes qualitative content analysis to investigate protest music in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The corpus consists of songs associated with Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, Hong Kong's 2019–2020 pro-democracy protests and South Korea's 2024–2025 impeachment demonstrations. In the absence of a compiled playlist published by those involved in the analysed protests, song selection was based on newspaper reports and other published sources. For Taiwan, we collected songs from ETtoday (2014), SET News (2014), James X. Morris (2019) and Meredith Schweig (2022: 175). Regarding Hong Kong, our identification of songs was carried out through a consultation of sources that documented the music used during the protests, including Vivienne Chow (2019), Coconuts Hong Kong (2019) and AFP (2020). In the case of South Korea, we gathered songs from music streaming platform playlists using keywords such as *tanhaek* (impeachment), YouTube protest videos, X (formerly Twitter) posts, Instagram reels and Korean newspapers, including *The Korea Times* and *The Korea Herald*.

We manually analysed the collected songs to identify key themes, narratives and forms of political or social contention. Our analysis was inspired and guided by Tim Rühlig's (2016) paper, which analysed the songs and their music videos used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Understanding that singing songs is a way to construct a protest identity, Rühlig not only pays particular attention to various musical elements such as lyrics, melody and tone, but also emphasizes the imagery used in the music videos accompanying the songs, as well as the contextualization of the music linked to its very creation and development (2016: 60–61). Accordingly, our analysis focused primarily on lyrical content, with particular attention to direct or indirect references to resistance, collective identity, social criticism and political engagement.

Through iterative readings, we categorized songs according to musical genre and the degree of contentiousness expressed in the lyrics, ranging from indirect or symbolic forms of dissent to explicit political critique and calls for collective action. In addition, songs were classified according to their relationship with protest movements, distinguishing between those originally composed as protest songs and those that acquired protest significance through later appropriation, reinterpretation or repurposing by protesters in specific political contexts. Musical characteristics, including rhythm and performance style, were also considered. By combining lyrical, musical and contextual analysis, this approach facilitates a systematic comparison of how protest music articulates social and political resistance across different East Asian settings while remaining attentive to local cultural and historical contexts.

Music in past protests in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea

The history of protests in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea reveals a shared trajectory in which student-led activism and music have evolved into powerful tools for modern democratization or the assertion of sovereignty. In Taiwan, early anti-Japanese sentiments transitioned into campus and folk music movements in the 1970s that reclaimed local identity (Ho 2006: 131–132), eventually culminating in the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, where indie-rock anthems like "Island's Sunrise" signalled a bold stance on sovereignty.

South Korea has a long-standing tradition of student demonstrations, including the March First Movement against Japanese colonial rule in 1919 and the April Revolution of 1960. This tradition is closely associated with music, a connection that became even more pronounced during the 1980s, particularly in the aftermath of the Gwangju Uprising. During this decade *minjung gayo* (people's songs) gained prominence, including the iconic song "March for the Beloved" (Lew 2000: 23, Hwang 2022: 135). Songs such as "Morning Dew", though not originally political, came to be embraced as pro-democracy anthems because of their metaphorical lyrics. As the styles have modernized by transitioning from traditional percussion (*pungmul*)[1] and folk to the use of K-pop hits like "Into the New World" during the 2016 Candlelight Revolution (Pyo 2024b), young K-pop fans participated actively in recent demonstrations, using lightsticks and singing K-pop songs, marking a new integration of fandom culture with democratic activism (Kim 2022: 57).

1 *Pungmul*'s instrumental nature and subtle political messaging rendered it less vulnerable to state repression. Student activists, often from urban backgrounds, valorized *pungmul* as embodying rural *minjung* ideals, reviving it through fieldwork and university clubs. This understated politicization distinguished *pungmul* from other artistic forms, such as *madanggeuk* (yard theatre), which was seen as more explicitly political (Lee 2009: 262, 267).

In a more recent transition, Hong Kong followed a path from colonial political apathy to a sudden awakening during the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, which turned the Cantopop scene somewhat political (Cheng 1989: 459). By the time of the 2014 Umbrella Movement music had shifted from celebrity-led songs to grassroots, viral anthems, often composed and performed by young underground artists, which solidified a distinct "Hong Kongese" identity (Rühlig 2016: 63). The use of protest music helped to politicize Hong Kong's music scene (Ho 2000: 349), a trend that continued into the 2019 Anti-Extradition Bill movement and beyond. In all three contexts, music has consistently provided a collective voice that bridges the gap between student activists and the broader civil society to force political change.

Protest music under a comparative lens

The three contexts under examination demonstrate varying degrees of democracy, sovereignty and institutional stability, as well as the differing capacities of civil society to navigate and challenge structures of power and authority. These differences have resulted in distinct kinds of protest environments, each generating a unique soundscape and influencing specific practices of musical expression. To understand the particularities of these settings we examined the music employed across various media, including videos, shared playlists and songs performed or circulated during protests.

Taiwan

Political discontent in Taiwan intensified during President Ma Ying-jeou's term (2008–2016) due to policies favouring economic collaboration with the People's Republic of China (PRC), sparking fears of eventual reunification. The Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), signed in June 2013, aimed to open a wide range of sectors to mainland Chinese investment, including sensitive areas such as tourism and medical services (Lee / Knoerich 2023: 209). While previous agreements had passed easily, the secrecy of the negotiations around the CSSTA drew criticism from politicians and civil society, with opposition mounting in the summer of 2013.[2] The threatening "China Factor" – the PRC's potential infiltration in Taiwan's politics and beyond – loomed large, and the tipping point came on 17 March 2014 when the ruling party Kuomintang (KMT)

2 Subsequently, in September 2013 the ruling KMT and the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) agreed to hold a number of public hearings over the details of the CSSTA involving academics, civil society and relevant trade sector representatives. However, half of the meetings were held without inviting several groups and organizations from impacted industries. More noticeably, the KMT tried to speed up the consultative period by organizing a number of public hearings within only a few days (Ho 2015: 79).

attempted to pass the CSSTA without the agreed-upon clause-by-clause legislative review (Ho 2015: 79). This move triggered immediate sit-in protests, leading to students, academics and activists occupying the legislative building overnight. Hundreds occupied the chamber with thousands more outside, broadcasting their occupation live to mobilize support (ibid.: 82). Activists quickly organized rallies demanding adherence to the review process.

After intense negotiations, in April 2014 then-President Wang Jin-pyng of the Legislative Yuan[3] promised to postpone the CSSTA review until a supervision mechanism was implemented. The protesters then vacated the chamber, ending their 24-day occupation (Cole 2014). The Sunflower Student Movement marked a new era of student activism, fostering a "sunflower generation" committed to Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic values, with the chosen flower seen as both a symbol of hope and an allusion to previous movements. It also spurred new political alliances, for example the New Power Party, which later gained legislative seats (Gerber 2016). More importantly, the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP's) return to power in 2016, winning both the presidency and the legislative majority, signalled heightened cross-strait tensions.

On 19 March 2014 the popular Taiwanese band Mayday shared a music video of their 2009 song "Rise Up" on their Facebook page (ETtoday 2014). Within a few minutes the post received over a thousand likes and dozens of shares, being interpreted as a call for Taiwanese people to stand up and oppose the trade agreement. The song was then used as a protest anthem in the early days of the Movement. However, it was later withdrawn after the band had declared their non-involvement in the matter, likely due to a boycott by Chinese fans and the PRC over its perceived subversive connotations (ibid.). Indeed, as the title suggests, the song emphasizes perseverance through dark times and ultimately standing on one's own feet.

The use of naturalistic imaginaries to describe difficulties is prevalent, including "strong winds and rains" and "waves". These hardships may be so insurmountable that one may give up trying to overcome them; indeed, the song is full of lines that reflect on human weaknesses, despair and hopelessness. However, towards the end of the song it becomes clear that there is some light of hope at the end of the suffering, and courage is what is needed to fight against struggles. The song comes to an end with a repeated call to "rise up". In general, the reason why the song was chosen as a protest anthem in the early days of the Movement might be that it represented the struggles and fears of Taiwanese people in the face of imminent external threats, and it called on them to fight back with all their might and force. However, the band's change of attitude led protesters to turn their backs on it completely and adopt a newly written song instead.

3 The Legislative Yuan is the unicameral legislature of the Republic of China (Taiwan), located in Taipei, and corresponds to the parliaments or congresses of other countries.

The new song "Island's Sunrise" was then composed, and came to be considered the anthem of the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement. More recently, it was also played at the 2024 Bluebird Movement protests in response to a series of controversial parliamentary reform proposals, reaffirming its consolidated status in the Taiwanese protest music scene (Xin-yun Wu 2024). Composed by the Taiwanese indie group Fire EX. during the height of the student occupation of the Legislative Yuan in late March 2014, the song drew inspiration from the band members' direct involvement in the protests and the encouragement of some student leaders. On 27 March 2014 the band and the students who had been involved in creating the song visited the occupied Legislative Yuan to teach the song to protesters and record their voices and visuals (SET News 2014). These materials were then given to art and film students from Taipei National University, who created a music video for the song which was released on 29 March 2014. The video featured footage recorded in the occupied Legislative Yuan and was accompanied by English subtitles (ibid.).

The first notable point about the song is that it was written in Taiwanese Hokkien, also known as Taiwanese, the language spoken by many people in Taiwan. This linguistic choice may reflect the band's aspiration to highlight Taiwan's uniqueness and separation from mainland China, especially when Mandarin Chinese is the primary language used in many areas. Indeed, the use of an indigenous language as a symbol of minority / local identity has long been a common strategy in resistance movements against dominant and/or colonial entities (Nguyen / Lampacrescia 2024). In terms of the lyrics, since the song was dedicated to the Movement it focuses on raising the morale of student protesters and expressing optimism about a better future for Taiwan. It begins with a heartfelt message from sons and boyfriends to their mothers and girlfriends, respectively, explaining that they cannot fulfil their ordinary responsibilities due to their commitment to fighting oppression and threats. Such self-exhortations express the student protesters' willingness to prioritize the collective fight for Taiwanese sovereignty over their personal love and family responsibilities. It is worth noting that East Asian values are prominently referred to at the beginning of the song, since family love and responsibilities are extremely important values for individuals. However, the protesters' commitment to the national cause takes precedence.

The hardships they are experiencing require young people to be strong and brave as they persevere through the dark times and continue the work done by previous generations. The song then delves into young people's struggles, and also their aspirations and hopes. It continues by calling on them to unite in the fight, as victory will mean that they can return home and be reunited with their loved ones. Family reunification and affection are again used as one of the "by-products" of independence. The song ends with an affirmation that "[t]oday is the day, the brave Taiwanese." In general, these words, full of emotion,

highlight the growing responsibility of Taiwanese youth to be political and stand against imminent aggression.

Expressing these overtly political messages, the song was sung at various sites during this period. In the evening of 30 March 2014, during a large-scale rally, the band led a mass of 500,000 protesters in singing "Island's Sunrise" and "Good Night, Formosa!" as the audience swayed to the music, using their smartphones or flashlights (ETtoday 2014). The song also spread to other rally sites in Taiwan and abroad. It was later released as a single, and eventually won "Best Song of the Year" at the 2015 Taiwan Golden Melody Awards. However, the live broadcast of the announcement and the band's acceptance speech was censored in mainland China (BBC 2015).

In addition to "Island's Sunrise", "Good Night, Formosa!", also composed by Fire EX., was another key song that was played during the Movement. Written in Taiwanese Hokkien, this song is another example of the band's aspiration to advocate Taiwan's independence and separation from mainland China. Such intentions can also be seen in the band's use of Formosa, a name given to Taiwan by Portuguese sailors dating back to the sixteenth century. The band released the song in 2009, but it gained greater popularity among protesters during the Movement for its optimistic tone and messages. It starts with a dark picture of Taiwan, describing the country as long mired in hardship.

This opening recalls Taiwan's lengthy history of oppression and division, dating back as far as the Dutch colonization. As the song progresses, uncertain times are captured in two questions that resonate with student protesters and Taiwanese people, who may not know what the future holds for them amid the political turmoil: "Worried about your future, where you will go? / Where is happiness?" On an optimistic note, the song goes on to raise hopes for a better future, as the Lord of Heaven (天公伯) is said to be watching over the Taiwanese people. Even though this figure is familiar across sinospheric cultures, the use of the term commonly employed in Taiwan highlights the Taiwanese particularity of the lyrics. The song then ends with a blessing for Taiwan, although a sense of uncertainty and doubt remains.

Another song on the playlist for the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement is "Do You Hear the People Sing?", the English version of the French-language song from the musical *Les Misérables*. The song has been used in various protests around the world, often translated into local languages. In Taiwan the protesters not only sang the song in English but also favoured its translated version in Taiwanese Hokkien. Full of humanistic and exhortatory expressions, the song is considered a lever to uplift people's solidarity and call on others to join forces for the collective cause (Morris 2019). The localization of the song was shown in the fact that not only was it translated into Taiwanese Hokkien, but also the reference to France was replaced with Formosa. Again, the choice of language and the historical name both hint at the idea of Taiwan's uniqueness.

As can be seen from the songs analysed above, the music used in the 2014 Sunflower Student Movement served an explicitly political purpose: expressing a distinctive collective local identity and resistance against oppression while maintaining high hopes for a better future. From an ethnomusicological perspective, as employed by Seeger (1987) and Witzleben (2002), the protest music in the Taiwanese context went hand in hand with the period of student activism, directly interacting with it and becoming part of its very construction.

In addition to the above-mentioned songs, it should be noted that some Taiwanese rappers and hip-hop artists were also active in the mobilization during the Movement, including Dwagie and Kou Chou Ching, who have long been political and explicit about their pro-independence stance through their music, composed in the local language and incorporating traditional cultural elements. In particular, members of the local hip-hop band Kou Chou Ching performed their earlier composed songs "Civil Revolt, Part 1" and "Civil Revolt, Part 2" in the occupied Legislative Yuan (Schweig 2022: 175), contemplating Taiwan's history of external domination and failed uprisings and arguing for people's solidarity. As the Sunflower Student Movement was closely watched by a number of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists (Yang 2014), they may have taken inspiration from their Taiwanese counterparts for the use of music in the 2014 Umbrella Movement and again during the 2019–2020 protests.

Hong Kong

In February 2019 Hong Kong's government proposed the Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance (Amendment) Bill. This move followed a murder in Taiwan involving one Hong Kong citizen killing another, highlighting a legal loophole as Hong Kong and mainland China lacked extradition agreements with Taiwan. The bill aimed to allow the case-by-case transfer of fugitives to any jurisdictions with which the Hong Kong government lacks agreements, including mainland China (Griffiths 2019). This sparked widespread concern among Hong Kong's pro-democracy population, fearing further deterioration of democracy and human rights due to Beijing's influence. By mid-March 2019 peaceful sit-in protests, largely led by university students, erupted outside government headquarters (ibid.). The protests escalated, with police firing tear gas at protesters (Lomas 2019).

Subsequently the suspension, but not the withdrawal, of the proposed bill sparked widespread protests. On 1 October 2019, clashes escalated during the PRC's seventieth anniversary. The Chief Executive invoked emergency powers to ban face masks, aiming to curb protests (BBC 2019). The movement quickly intensified following the death of a student from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, leading to disruptive strikes and criticism of police brutality (South China Morning Post 2019). In November 2019 police fired

tear gas and rubber bullets into university campuses and there were prolonged clashes at the University of Hong Kong, prompting brief student occupations (Lok-lei 2019). Tensions continued at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where police stormed the campus and made arrests.

A major blow to the pro-democracy movement came on 30 June 2020 when Beijing unilaterally imposed a national security law on Hong Kong, targeting secession, foreign interference, terrorism and subversion (Al Jazeera 2020). This led to the disbanding of some pro-democracy organizations as well as arrests and trials targeting some activists (ibid.). Despite their ultimate failures and restrictive aftermaths, the 2019–2020 protests marked a significant peak in youth mobilization against authoritarianism in Hong Kong, notably characterized by extensive social media use and protest musical compositions.

A number of songs were composed and came to popularity in response to the police brutality in using tear gas and violence to suppress the protests. Even though already existing songs, including "Do You Hear the People Sing" and the 1974 Christian song "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord", were widely used, they were seen as insufficient (Victor 2019). On 26 August 2019 a composer named Thomas posted an instrumental version and lyrics of what would later be called Hong Kong's national anthem, "Glory to Hong Kong", to a student-frequented forum used by protesters. From the forum, in addition to modifying the lyrics he also collected audio versions, which were then compiled to create a cohesive chorus sound. Indeed, the song's style resembles a classical national anthem, featuring "bass-heavy backing and soaring lyricisms" (ibid.). Furthermore, the song draws inspiration from Christian liturgical hymns, as suggested by the word "glory" in its title (ibid.), which may resonate with the fact that a large proportion of the Hong Kong population identifies as Christian.

The song starts with the lines: "We pledge: No more tears on our land / In wrath, doubts dispell'd we make our stand / Arise! Ye who would not be slaves again: / For Hong Kong, may Freedom reign!". These urgings are reminiscent of the words of many national anthems in response to a history of colonization and authoritarianism. Indeed, the song calls on the people of Hong Kong to overcome their fears and worries and fight against oppression. The tone becomes increasingly dramatic and heroic, with the last stanza of the song being full of exhortations, determinations and aspirations for a people-led Hong Kong: "Break now the dawn, liberate our Hong Kong / In common breath: Revolution of our times! / May people reign, proud and free, now and evermore / I wish glory to return to Hong Kong!"

The anonymous composer of the song once revealed that, based on suggestions from the student-populated forum, he incorporated into the song a popular slogan used by social movements in Hong Kong since 2016: "Liberate our Hong Kong; revolution of our times" (Chow 2019). The use of the slogan, which

reemerged during the 2019–2020 protests, might help to equate the social movement to a traditional revolution, which are often aimed at dethroning oppressive rulers and placing the oppressed people on the throne. The ultimate aim of such a revolution would be a free and democratic Hong Kong ruled by Hong Kong people for their own future. The song concludes with a heartfelt wish for glory to return to Hong Kong. It is unclear what this intended return may be; however, the lines might hint at the period before the handover of Hong Kong to China, when the region was still under British rule.

Some days after the publication of the song, an accompanying video was published on YouTube with scenes from the protests in which the police were shown beating up protesters, who started to wear black clothing as a sign of opposition against police brutality (Suen 2019). The video was accompanied by English subtitles, written in the description section. Over time other versions of the song and translations into various languages have emerged on social media, receiving widespread attention. The song has sparked controversy for its explicit political content, including an injunction from the 2024 Hong Kong Court of Appeal for its "separatist and anti-government" tone (Willa Wu 2024).

Following the Cantopop tradition of this unofficial anthem, another popular protest song during the 2010–2020 demonstrations was "Fly with you", released on YouTube in late August 2019 by a group of anonymous Hong Kong artists collectively credited simply as Hong Kongers. The video ranked ninth among the most viewed on the platform in Hong Kong in 2019 (Coconuts Hong Kong 2019). Referring to the July 2019 sit-in at Hong Kong International Airport, the song emphasizes the protesters' exhaustion since they were unsure how long the struggle would continue. However, despite "these absurd, chaotic times" the song ends with an optimistic message of continuing determination and perseverance: "There's a kind of love that transcends time and fortune, linking our weary hearts together." It can be understood from this that the love in question is love for one's homeland – that is, for Hong Kong. This kind of love can help protesters overcome "violent storms and howling winds", and they will be remembered by history. To accompany the song, a music video, published on YouTube on 21 August 2019, features footage of protesters struggling against the police.

Police brutality against protesters and political oppression are common topics of songs written for this movement. Other local artists were also active in addressing the topic in a more direct, explicit and discursive manner through rap and hip-hop. Two locally produced songs that garnered particular attention were "W.T.F.H.K." by JB and "FUCKTHEPOPO" by JB and some other musicians. The video of the former ranked sixth on Hong Kong's list of most-watched music videos in 2019 (Coconuts Hong Kong 2019). Both profanity-laden, the two rap songs both threw explicit and direct jabs at the police and the Hong Kong government.

The song "W.T.F.H.K.", written in Cantonese with profanity in English, criticizes the local government for funding pointless infrastructure projects and aligning with the business elite. In particular, the composers stated that Hong Kong was falling apart under the government's rule due to the local lawmakers' lack of competence across various areas. The song contains various insults and defamatory statements, some of which are also xenophobic against "new immigrants"; this may be understood as referring to mainland Chinese citizens migrating to Hong Kong. In the same tone and style, the song "FUCKTHEPOPO" harshly criticizes the Hong Kong police and proclaims the protesters' determination to fight against oppression. It specifically defames Stephen Lo, the Hong Kong Commissioner of Police from 2015 to 2019. The heavily profane language and the prosaic method of expression used in these two rap songs – typical characteristics of this music genre – were a direct confrontation to the Hong Kong authority, especially its police department.

Hong Kong's protest music scene during this period also featured parodies mocking pro-Beijing politicians and public figures, one of which was called "Fat Mama Has Something to Say". This was a remix of a speech given by Maria Cordero, a Macanese celebrity based in Hong Kong, at a pro-police rally in July 2019, and Sia's international hit "Chandelier". The speech, which was rearranged and autotuned, was blended with anti-police rhetoric and immediately gained widespread attention online. Laden with harsh criticisms and slurs against the police, it was sung at various demonstrations and became a new rallying cry (AFP 2020).

In addition to the context-specific songs analysed above, some protesters also sang the classic Korean protest song "March for the Beloved". Evoking hope and resistance in times of hardship, this has also become a common choice for labour and pro-democracy movements across Asia (Park 2019). In particular, the song was sung by a protester in Cantonese on 14 June 2019, during a crowded rally at the height of the protests in Hong Kong. The other participants responded by humming and swaying their cell phone flashlights (Lee 2019). Compared to the music used during Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, Hong Kong's protest music scene between 2019 and 2020 was even more politicized and confrontational. In this sense, music was not only an instrument for the expression of collective identity, but also a fundamental aspect of the social agitation itself (Seeger 1987: xiii–xiv).

South Korea

During President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration in South Korea, public dissatisfaction intensified. This discontent was fuelled by several high-profile incidents involving the president, his family and members of his cabinet.[4] A pivotal moment leading up to the events of December 2024 was the legislative elections held in April of the same year, which were regarded as a mid-term assessment or an "implicit referendum" (Cha et al. 2024) on President Yoon's administration. The elections resulted in the opposition Democratic Party maintaining its parliamentary majority, while the escalating instability ultimately culminated in the President's declaration of martial law on 3 December 2024 at around 10:30 p.m. KST – the first such measure in South Korea since 1979 (Lam 2025: 1).

Under Article 77 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, the President may unilaterally declare martial law in cases of war or serious threats to national security, such as armed conflict. In this case the President justified the declaration by citing threats from North Korean communist forces and other so-called anti-state actors. However, no active conflict or immediate crisis existed to justify such an extreme measure (ibid.: 1–2). Civil society mobilized immediately after the declaration of martial law, with hundreds of citizens gathering outside the National Assembly that same night to protest. Lawmakers quickly arrived to carry out their constitutional duties, while the demonstrators resisted military forces, blocked vehicles and helped legislators to access the building (Jeong-In Yun 2025: 2). The President was ultimately impeached on 4 April 2025 (Lee 2025). In the months leading up to this decision, civil society, including university students, held widespread protests demanding the President's removal and defending democratic values (Jung-joo Lee 2024).

Although South Korea cannot be directly compared to contemporary authoritarian regimes, its long-standing democratic consolidation was challenged by these events, described as a "stress test for Korea's democracy" (Bee Yun 2025). While concerns grew over the President's increasingly authoritarian leadership, democratic institutions ultimately resisted these pressures (Ahn 2024). Still, it is crucial to examine how citizens, especially students, were rapidly mobilized in response to the perceived erosion of democratic values, and how they employed music as a means of protest.

From the analysis we identified four primary categories of songs in the Korean demonstrations for President Yoon's impeachment: *minjung gayo*, musical soundtracks, K-pop songs, and Christmas carols. While many of these are non-political in origin, the categories often overlap, as individual songs may belong to more than one group. A prominent example is the K-pop song "Into the

4 Notably, the government's mismanagement and lack of preventive measures during the 2022 Hallowe'en festivities resulted in one of the most devastating crowd crushes in the nation's history (Rashid 2022). Additionally, allegations of corruption involving both the President and the First Lady further eroded public trust (Hyo-jin Lee 2024).

New World" by Girls' Generation, originally released in 2007, which has become a key anthem for political and social movements in South Korea since the mid-2010s and is now considered part of the evolving *minjung gayo*. The song originally focused on perseverance, but it was later reinterpreted through a political lens (Song 2024), much like "Morning Dew" in the 1980s. It featured during protests calling for the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and in mobilizations by other social movements, such as women's rights demonstrations (Yim 2022). On 5 December 2024 it was sung during candlelight rallies demanding President Yoon's resignation at the National Assembly and Seoul National University (Song 2024).

The song has gained symbolic significance for its message of resilience and solidarity in the face of injustice. The enduring appeal of the song in protest contexts stems largely from its emotionally resonant lyrics, such as "Don't wait for a special miracle / There's a rough path in front of us / Might be an unknown future and obstacles / But I won't change, I can't give up", "Walking the many and unexpected paths / I follow a dim light / We'll stay together until the very end / Into the new world" and "Just the thought of you makes me stronger / Help me so I won't cry / We'll share the feeling of this moment together". Combined with the song's choral performance, these lines foster a sense of unity and mutual encouragement among participants. As Matthew Del Nevo (2022) observes, a key factor in the song's widespread relatability is the indeterminate nature of the pronoun "you". This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations, making the song meaningful both to individuals who have endured adversity and to communities seeking collective hope and determination for a better future.

BTS's song "Fire" was also prominently played during protest gatherings, invigorating participants and reinforcing the collective spirit of resistance. Initially released in 2016 as part of the album "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Young Forever", the track embodies themes of rebellion, resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity – values that closely resonated with the motivations behind the demonstrations: "(Fire) Those who are scared, come here / (Fire) Those who are suffering, come here / (Fire) With bare fists raised, All night long / (Fire) in marching footsteps". The significance of the song's title "Fire" operates on two distinct levels. First, the Korean title "*Bultaoreune*" (translatable as "burning up" or "flaming") does not advocate violent unrest. Instead, it metaphorically captures a passionate determination to challenge the status quo and envision a renewed national future. Second, the English title "Fire" was the subject of a pun among protestors. During the impeachment protests the word "fire" was interpreted as the verb "to fire" or "to dismiss", creating an ironic and powerful call for the President's removal. This wordplay enhanced the song's symbolism and matched the protests' generally humorous tone.

It is also worth noting that some protest songs originated from musical theatre. Among these, "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from the musical *Les Misérables* stands out as a widely used anthem. Another significant example is "*Danjidongmaeng*" ("Pledge") from the Korean musical *Hero*, later included in the soundtrack of the 2022 movie of the same title, which also held symbolic meaning and was embraced by demonstrators in South Korea. Hero is a Korean musical that premiered in 2009 and is based on the life of Ahn Jung-geun, a prominent Korean independence activist. The musical portrays his resistance against Japanese colonial rule and his eventual assassination of Ito Hirobumi, the first Japanese Resident-General of Korea. The lyrics of the song are deeply evocative, capturing the spirit of those who have fought – and continue to fight – for the country, speaking directly to the emotional intensity and collective resolve of the people. Lines such as "Today, in this very moment, I make a solemn pledge / Our passion for our homeland, / the moments we shared together here / we will never abandon them" speak directly to the emotional intensity and collective determination of the people.

Additionally, other songs featured in the protests were the same ones historically sung by pro-democracy movements as part of the *minjung gayo*[5] or during the protests for the impeachment of President Park in 2016–2017, including "March for the Beloved", "People are More Beautiful Than Flowers" and "When That Day Comes", reflecting a sense of continuity with past civil society struggles for democracy. By reviving these songs, demonstrators not only honoured previous movements but also created intergenerational links, allowing younger participants to connect emotionally with the historical legacy of resistance and draw inspiration from earlier acts of collective activism.

As the major demonstrations in 2024 coincided with the holiday season, a striking instance of music employment in Korean protests was the widespread appropriation of Christmas carols. In the context of protests, well-known songs such as "Silent Night" and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" were reimagined, with upbeat melodies and transformed lyrics to convey political messages. They were then performed collectively to amplify solidarity and visibility. Among these, the most remarkable example was the song "Feliz Navidad", originally composed by José Feliciano in 1970. A protest version titled "*Tanhaegi Dabida*" ("Impeachment is the Answer") emerged, repurposing the carol's familiar melody with pointed new lyrics. Performed first by longtime protest singer Baekja at a candlelight rally outside the National Assembly the day after martial law was declared, the song included satirical and direct lines such as "Yoon Suk Yeol needs to get lost for a Merry Christmas" and "Hurry up and impeach him!".

5 Regarding *minjung gayo*, it is worth noting that, amid concerns about the declining resonance of these songs among younger generations, activists have sought to renew their relevance within contemporary protest culture. Even prior to recent demonstrations, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions launched a crowdfunding campaign for a compilation album titled "New Song", aimed at "putting new clothes on old songs" to preserve the genre's legacy in a rapidly changing society (Park 2024).

Baek, who has participated in demonstrations for decades, had previously reworked "Feliz Navidad" during the Park Geun-hye impeachment crisis and again in Yoon's first year with the refrain "Resignation is the Answer". In 2024 the updated version rapidly went viral on social media (Kim 2024), becoming both a humorous and effective symbol of resistance.

The analysis indicates that in recent years South Korean protesters have integrated both the legacy of *minjung gayo* and a range of other musical genres into their demonstrations. Although the use of these genres diverges from traditional conceptions of protest music, their presence in non-contentious demonstrations can be elucidated by the broader evolution of protest culture and the role of music within it. The recurrence of pop songs (such as "APT." by Blackpink Rosé) despite their general non-political nature and their effective adoption in protest settings can be explained by R. Serge Denisoff's (1972) broader typology of protest music. Denisoff distinguishes between rhetorical songs, which convey explicit political messages, and magnetic songs, which foster solidarity and attract participants.

The latter are typically marked by accessible melodies and repetitive structures, lending themselves well to collective singing and emotional resonance. In this light, the use of K-pop in demonstrations is far from superficial; it functions as a magnetic force, capable of mobilizing crowds, reinforcing shared identity and injecting energy into protest spaces – thus serving a distinctly political role even when its content remains ostensibly apolitical.

Reflections on the similarities and differences of the music used

Based on the analysis above, several observations can be made about the similarities and differences in the use of music during the recent protests in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. The following section is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, the aim is to focus on salient points that characterize the dynamics of protest music across the three contexts.

Similarities

While each movement in the current analysis emerged from unique socio-political tensions, they are linked by a shared feature: the use of sound to transform individual grievances into collective power and tangible contestation. This section identifies the commonalities in how music was used to forge solidarity and how these sonic strategies travelled across borders, creating a regional culture of democratic resistance.

Singing as a collective act of solidarity

In terms of shared features, it is clear that music played a vital role in all the student- and youth-led movements across the three territories, being primarily used to boost protesters' morale and enhance group solidarity through melodies and conveyed messages. The use of music for such purposes was even more significant when the protests broke out during critical moments of political uncertainty and distress, which could last for an unforeseeable duration and whose consequences would be far-reaching for the future, especially in terms of democratic values and principles. On this note, Danaher (2010: 812) observes that singing during protests can evoke strong emotions and solidify a shared identity among participants by uniting them and erasing differences and gaps between groups who join forces for a common cause. Whether songs were sung in concert-like crowds in South Korea or in occupied public spaces in Taiwan and Hong Kong, they were aimed at uniting people to fight for a common cause.

In this sense, originally apolitical songs can be utilized for explicit political purposes through protesters' context-based musical interpretations of their lyrics and melodies, blurring the line between what Drott (2023) characterizes as "music as protest" and "music in protest". Accordingly, as shown in the previous section, songs such as "Rise Up", K-pop hits including "Into the New World" and "Fire", and the universal protest anthem "Do You Hear the People Sing?", were commonly heard during protest gatherings and parades because they could be lyrically and melodically interpreted in some way to speak to the struggles of the demonstrators.

Moreover, across the three analysed protests, music and art in general were weaponized to claim spatial occupation in public avenues. If the Korean protesters used popular K-pop songs to occupy public spaces and turn them into gatherings similar to concerts, their counterparts in Taiwan and Hong Kong went a step further, utilizing music as an instrument to claim spatial occupation of public sites. This was clearly demonstrated in the student-led occupation of the Taiwanese Legislative Yuan, during which the song "Island's Sunrise" was composed to express their aspirations and state their determination for the long battle. The fact that the song was composed and sung first at the occupation site, and that the accompanying music video included scenes shot within the Legislative Yuan during the protest period, reinforces the connection between the occupation, the Movement and the song. A similar phenomenon can also be seen in Hong Kong, with songs such as "Fly with You" and others of a confrontational nature. In the words of Mark LeVine (2015: 1278), the current paper has shown that music in these contexts had the power to create spaces, both in virtual and physical worlds, for "subcultures to become countercultures" and thereby challenge authoritarian forces.

Circulation of transnational music

Across the three protest music scenes, the song "Do You Hear the People Sing?" was embraced by protesters for its humanistic messages against tyranny and its exhortations to the oppressed to fight for a better future. These characteristics of the song resonated to varying degrees with the Taiwanese, Hong Kong and Korean demonstrators, who shared common demands and needs targeted at their respective ruling authorities, i.e. threats to fundamental values such as democracy, freedom and liberty. Similar demands are often seen in demonstrations across the world, especially those initiated and supported by students and youth, for example in Belarus in 2020 (Reuters 2020). It can be said that its anti-authoritarian lyrics make the song into "an international protest anthem". Furthermore, the song might serve to connect local social movements to an international current and spirit of student- and youth-led activism against authoritarianism.

In this context, it is essential to recognize the transnational circulation of protest music in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. Certain songs have transcended national boundaries, becoming vehicles for shared pro-democracy sentiment and solidarity. This musical spillover has included both direct translations and recontextualized performances aimed at garnering broader support. One notable example is the Korean protest anthem "March for the Beloved", which spread to Hong Kong and Taiwan as early as the 1980s (Seon 2019) and has since become a symbolic song of democratic resistance across Southeast Asia, including in Thailand and Malaysia (Lee 2019). During the 2019 Hong Kong protests the song was performed by a participant who introduced it to the crowd, sang a Cantonese adaptation titled "Umbrella March", and then reprised the original Korean version. Protesters joined in by humming and waving their phone flashlights, reinforcing its emotional and symbolic resonance.

In addition, during the 2019 protests South Korean university students demonstrated strong support for the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, which occasionally led to tensions with Chinese international students. This solidarity was symbolically expressed through banners and reflected in significant public engagement (Choi / Shin 2019). On 23 September 2019 the original author of "Glory to Hong Kong" uploaded a full Korean-language version to YouTube, where the comment section became a forum for expressions of transnational unity featuring messages of support from Korean users and gratitude from Hong Kong citizens.

Furthermore, Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement was closely studied by Hong Kong activists for its use of protest strategies, and some of them even travelled to Taiwan to speak with local protesters. Therefore, the instrumentalization of music for political purposes in Taiwan acted as a source of inspiration for Hong Kong protesters (Yang 2014). Indeed, the song "Do You Hear

the People Sing?", sung during Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, became a staple shortly after in Hong Kong's 2014 Umbrella Movement and in the 2019–2020 protests.

Differences

Despite the above-analysed points of convergence, the music employed in the three protests also exhibited some contextual particularities regarding the politicization and confrontational nature of musical compositions and artists in relation to the respective ruling regimes and their predisposition to tyranny.

Confrontational music

It is worth noting that despite the use of music in previous social movements across the three territories, musical compositions in Hong Kong stood out as the most politicized and confrontational, with pieces created exclusively for the prolonged 2019–2020 protests. Indeed, this music addressed specific and timely causes: a deep yet desperate yearning for respect for democratic values, and a cry against police aggression and mainland China's increasing interventionism. On this point, Taiwan's music was also written intentionally for the 2014 Movement, but it primarily addressed the Taiwanese people's general yearning for a stable, independent and prosperous future, without delving much into the contextual issues that had given rise to the demonstrations.

Between Hong Kong and Taiwan, even though a newly composed protest anthem, official or not, was proclaimed by protesters in both contexts, people in Hong Kong – a part of the PRC despite a theoretical high level of autonomy in a wide range of matters – were struggling personally with mainland China's concrete actions aimed at diminishing their freedoms and civil liberties. This might have led to music in Hong Kong becoming more highly politicized, geared towards highlighting the local population's specific suffering and demands. In Darci Sprengel's words (2020: 209), we can consider protest music in Hong Kong as an example of "loud politics", characterized by clear ideologies and direct engagement / confrontation with the state.

Meanwhile, despite continuing threats and infiltration from mainland China, Taiwan is more of an entity on its own, and the PRC's aggression was not so tangible as in Hong Kong, leading the protesters' claims to be more generic. However, cross-strait relations have since become increasingly strained and Taiwan's music scene has correspondingly grown more explicit, with hip-hop and rap taking a prominent role in this regard (Valentine 2025). It should be noted that, in connection with Seeger and Witzleben's ethnomusicological approaches, music in both Taiwan and Hong Kong was not only a byproduct of social agitation; it became an integral part of the very construction of the protests,

directly interacting with those sociopolitical events and reflecting the active role it had played. In the words of John Street (2012: 1), going beyond its classical role as a medium for political ideas, in these cases music acted as a dynamic force that gave tangible shape to such ideas within particular cultural and social contexts.

Among the cases analysed, the use of music in South Korea's protests demanding the impeachment of former President Yoon was the least overtly politicized, but nevertheless it was still effective. According to Professor Min Seong-jae (2025), contemporary Korean demonstrations often blend serious political messages with festival-like, creative elements such as performances and concerts, fostering a peaceful and inclusive environment.[6] This approach differs significantly from the violent confrontations of the pre-democratic era when a weak but contentious civil society opposed a powerful authoritarian state, similar to the turbulent rallies seen in Hong Kong and Taiwan. As Lee Doo Hyeong (2021) notes, this transformation reflects the lasting impact of collective memory, which has cultivated a deep respect for democracy and the effectiveness of peaceful and joyful civic participation. The democratization process in South Korea not only limited state power but also empowered civil society to become more assertive in political life (Shin 2003: 701).

It is essential to emphasize that although the 2024 protests in Korea were motivated by concerns about authoritarian drifts and shortcomings in constitutional safeguards, the demonstrations calling for President Yoon's impeachment took place within a stable democratic framework. Unlike the confrontational protests of the past, these demonstrations reflected a civic culture in which democratic values are embedded in everyday life, blurring the line between activists and ordinary citizens (The Korea Times 2024). In this context, music's role in protests has evolved from a tool of resistance against oppression to a medium for unity and democratic expression. Non-violent and inclusive rallies, which Moon Joon-hyun (2024) describes as a "festival of resistance", were marked by actions such as distributing guidelines to promote mutual respect, along with the use of humorous, colourful and creative protest flags and banners,[7] reflecting a culture of peaceful civic participation beyond traditional political actors (Moon 2024).

6 This phenomenon is not limited to the recent protests calling for President Yoon's impeachment, but echoes a broader pattern in South Korea's recent democratic activism. For example, the 2016–2017 candlelight demonstrations that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye incorporated a "flag festival" into the protests (Moon 2024).

7 Banners and flags intended to foster solidarity among citizens and express opposition to the former president often featured satirical references to fictitious organizations, such as the "Pizza Topping Research Group" or the "Movement Headquarters for Creating a Shiny World", parodying the names and rhetoric of official groups (Yoon et al. 2024). Even K-pop fans used banners like "Solidarity for Cheering Bongs", proclaiming: "Let us indulge in fandom in peace without worrying about politics" (Moon 2024).

Artist involvement

In addition to differences in the political status and the nature of the threats faced by protesters in Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea, another factor that might affect how confrontational the protest music becomes is the extent to which musicians choose to be, or are allowed to be, political. Nathaniel Amar and Romain Dittgen (2020:31) argue that well-known public musical figures in Taiwan and Hong Kong rarely voice their political support for popular causes espoused by protesters. There are several reasons for this, one of which is the fear that they might lose their participation in mainland China's lucrative market for music distribution and concert ticket sales. Taiwanese musicians face a constant dilemma: if they support Taiwan's independence they may risk losing their otherwise thriving careers in mainland China; but being vocal about Taiwan's unification with mainland China creates the danger of a boycott in their own homeland (ibid.). Therefore, neutrality and silence are strategies often adopted by musicians to avoid complications.

The story of the Taiwanese rock band Mayday is particularly illustrative. This band found itself banned in mainland China for the perceived pro-Taiwan song "Rise Up", but it was subsequently boycotted by the Taiwanese pro-independence population for its proclamation of neutrality. For Hong Kong artists, explicit support for the pro-democracy protests was even more problematic, resulting in the fact that only a few mainstream Hong Kong musicians had the courage to do so – for example, Charmaine Fong, Kay-Tse and the Hong Kong-born Canadian singer Denis Ho, who were said to have been blacklisted by government-affiliated radios in their homeland, and were certainly banned in mainland China (The Standard 2022).

This dilemma for mainstream musicians in articulating their support for popular causes in Taiwan and Hong Kong may help to explain the active participation of students and emerging local artists in composing protest songs. Many of them were (often underground) rap and hip-hop artists, and their active participation in the protests was particularly telling since these types of music, as noted by Schweig, are "narrative music", resonating primarily with younger generations and serving as a suitable means to address important socio-political issues (2022: 9, 149). The use of rap music was also a common phenomenon in some countries in the wake of the Arab Spring, as observed by LeVine (2015: 1284).

In South Korea, unlike more established and long-term performers or indie musicians, K-pop artists have traditionally remained distant from political matters.[8] However, recent protests suggest a gradual shift, with some K-pop idols

8 Generally, their active participation in political matters is still strongly discouraged, even in the present day. For instance, K-pop idols are often dissuaded from voicing opinions on international political issues and are advised against wearing particular colours or referencing specific numbers during electoral campaigns (So-yeon Yoon 2024).

showing a willingness to engage in civic discourse on particularly salient issues such as democratic resistance. Many performers expressed their support by attending demonstrations, posting (sometimes cryptic) messages on social media or offering material assistance (Pyo 2024a), prompting criticism from pro-Yoon supporters. Notably, IU, one of South Korea's most beloved K-pop singers, provided meals and hand warmers for protesters in the Yeouido area. Similarly, Girls' Generation's Yuri not only contributed in the same way but also encouraged fans to sing their group's symbolic anthem, "Into the New World," in a gesture of solidarity (Pyo 2024b).

A particularly noteworthy feature of this cultural activism was the symbolic use of K-pop lightsticks. These items were already being used during the 2016–2017 candlelight protests, but since then they have largely supplanted candles as symbols of collective identity and solidarity. Their use creates a dazzling display of glowing devices and vibrant colours, frequently reminiscent of the atmosphere of a live music concert (Hae-rin Lee 2024) where collective participation and synchronized visual performances play a central role in producing a sense of shared affect and communal engagement. As Joseph Virrey (2025) notes, these developments signal a broader shift toward visually performative and image-driven forms of civic engagement, aligning closely with the concept of "festivals of resistance" (Moon 2024) and "choreographed acts of dissent" (Virrey 2025), which increasingly define the dynamics of contemporary South Korean protest culture.

Across the three protests analysed above, some points of divergence have emerged. Indeed, we have shown that musical politicization and artists' involvement are present in all the cases under analysis, although to varying degrees depending on factors such as the tangibility of threats and political risks, as well as the level of democratic maturation. Although manifested in various ways and degrees, when they are brought together, music, artists' involvement, powerful symbols and collective youth participation bring democratic ideals to life through inclusive and dynamic public expression in common struggles against dictatorship and authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion

"Do you hear the people sing? / Singing a song of angry men? / It is the music of a people / Who will not be slaves again". These iconic lyrics of the song "Do You Hear the People Sing?" resonated through Taiwan's 2014 Sunflower Student Movement, Hong Kong's 2019–2020 protests and South Korea's 2024 demonstrations, linking these youth-led movements in a universal struggle against authoritarianism. In these contexts, as the current paper shows, students and

young people continued a long tradition of pro-democracy activism, adapting it to their particular situations and times. Music was a crucial element, as songs – both reappropriated and new – used unifying messages to evoke shared emotions, fostering solidarity and comfort. Additionally, transnational musical connections, particularly between South Korea and Hong Kong, underscore the growing regional solidarity.

However, we have also demonstrated that each movement utilized context-specific music according to its political status and stage of democratization. Hong Kong's protest music was highly politicized, addressing police aggression and government failures against the backdrop of the PRC's aggressive interventionism. Taiwan's protest music advocated for a better future, reflecting general concerns about the growing "China factor". In contrast, South Korea's 2024 demonstrations, which took place in a consolidated democracy, featured mostly non-political songs, more resembling K-pop concerts. Musicians' willingness to participate also influenced the music's confrontational nature and student involvement; while some idols in South Korea slowly became more politically involved as their democracy faced challenges, artists in Taiwan and Hong Kong often remained neutral due to the threats of political blacklisting and market risks in mainland China. This led to active participation by students and local underground artists in creating and performing protest music. These diverse stories underscore the vital role that music plays in the global fight for democracy, with young people increasingly taking the lead.

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