

The Ideological-Educational Characteristics of *Saemaul Undong* Songs



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ABSTRACT: Launched in 1970s South Korea, the *Saemaul Undong* (New Community Movement) was a state-led rural modernization campaign aimed at overcoming poverty. To ensure its success, national unity and collective dedication were essential. Two official songs—*Saemaul Song* and *Let's Live Well*—served as powerful tools to inspire shared identity and voluntary participation. These songs significantly contributed to the movement's outcomes, yet their ideological and pedagogical roles remain understudied. This paper addresses this gap by applying the theories of Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas to examine how music functioned as a medium of civic education and cultural integration.

KEYWORDS: civic education, folk music, ideology, *Saemaul Undong* (SU), South Korea.

1. INTRODUCTION

Initiated in the 1970s South Korea (hereafter Korea), the *Saemaul Undong* (SU) or New Community Movement was a national campaign aimed at modernizing rural villages, alleviating poverty, and fostering economic self-sufficiency (Lee, 2013). It was a government movement complemented by local participation; therefore, SU managed to achieve a balance between state control and local involvement, which produced remarkable changes in living standards, infrastructure, agricultural productivity, and other facets of life. Although many studies have focused on SU's economic impacts and its political mobilization (OECD, 2016), its elementary ideological and pedagogical aspects, especially the role of music in value propagation, are largely neglected in SU discussions.

The existing scholarship regarding the relationship between music and politics, particularly during the rule of Chung-hee Park (1917–1979), has advanced understanding of state-sponsored musical propaganda in various ways. Eun-young Kim analyzes state-sponsored singing competitions and the selective appropriation of folk music traditions toward nationalistic sentiment (Kim, 2020). While her work is helpful, references to the SU are scant and not tackled in a nuanced way. Similarly, Gisun Park's important study on unapproved songs under the regime explores the underlying mechanisms of musical censorship, yet it overlooks the more localized cultural narrative of the SU embedded within this wider analytical framework (Park, 2021). Jung Min Lee (2020) provides an interesting critique of "*könchon kungmin kayo*" or "healthy popular songs" as instruments of ideological indoctrination, but the scope of her study does not include the cultural and educational aspects of SU.

This study seeks to address aspects of the SU that have been either overlooked or insufficiently examined in previous research—specifically, the movement's contribution to shaping national consciousness through an idealistic, constructive, and voluntary framework. By positioning SU within the normative triad of work, self-help, and cooperation, the study underscores the movement's emphasis on internal motivation and collective effort, in stark contrast to more coercive ideological mobilizations such as China's Cultural Revolution. A central contribution of this study lies in its critical analysis of the ideological function of music—particularly state-produced and disseminated songs like *Saemaul Song* and *Jal Sara Bose* ("Let's Live Well"). These songs were not merely motivational compositions but served as pedagogical tools that communicated core values and national ideals to a wide audience. Through detailed examination of their lyrics, musical composition, performance settings, and dissemination strategies, the study explores how such cultural media contributed to the internalization of SU's ethos and the consolidation of a

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shared civic identity. By illuminating this underexplored cultural dimension, the research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how the SU operated not only as a policy framework but also as an ideological and symbolic movement deeply embedded in the everyday lives of the Korean populace.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research employs two analytical frameworks: Antonio Gramsci (1971)'s notion of cultural hegemony and Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Gramsci's theory is helpful to examine how the Korean government under President Park sought to instill a dominant ideology that rationalized and encouraged voluntary participation in state cultural production, especially through the composition of mobilizing and patriotic songs. Within the framework of hegemonic formation, music served to transmit ideology and simultaneously reframed SU ideals—such as industriousness, self-help, and cooperation—as internalized national virtues rather than as externally imposed imperatives. Habermas (1984) argued that social coordination requires rational discourse and participatory communication. This study examines the extent to which SU's educational music, while undeniably top-down in structure, encouraged voluntary compliance by cultivating an internalized sense of collective obligation. In order to delineate the ideological contours of SU with greater precision, this study engages a preliminary comparative paradigm, especially in juxtaposition with China's Cultural Revolution, which will be examined more thoroughly in a subsequent section. As Dikotter (2017) argues, Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution was predicated upon violent, coercive ideological mobilization; he distinguishes between constructive ideological campaigns and authoritarian impositions. While the slogans of the Cultural Revolution demanded obedience, SU songs promoted self-initiative and self-sufficiency, reinforcing an educational system that combined ideology and action.

The first musical source under examination is *Saemaul Song*, which has its dissemination and public reception from the 1970s captured in a KBS-produced video (KBS, 2015). The second, *Jal Sara Bose*, was performed in a grand open-air concert broadcasted live on national television featuring renowned soloists and a huge choir, which turned into a sing-along with thousands of the citizenry present at the square (KBS, 2022). This research is also based on 37 documentary videos produced by the *Saemaul Undong* Central Association, which collected and preserved moving testimonies from the people who participated in the movement (SUCA, n.d.). These materials offer incredible visual and narrative materials illustrating how ideological education in the SU sought to assimilate people not only through formal education sessions but also through cultural channels like organized displays, mass singing, and government-funded broadcasting. Analyzing the footage, it becomes evident that the movement sought to go beyond basic rhetoric – developing comprehensive strategies for fostering active engagement in the modernization of rural areas. Since the original audiovisual documents are rich in empirical information, there is no need for enhanced charts or figures. Readers of this study have direct access to the materials cited, to further engage with the information presented.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This case study has shown that patriotic and ideologically infused songs and slogans serve as an effective educational mechanism for molding the consciousness of a nation and further, changing its economy and society through direct action. In the case of Korea, this method helped to create a national vision around the mobilization of mass participation and embedding developmental ideals at the operational level in daily life. Unlike conventional policies, which often rely on emotionless rhetoric and complex enforcement mechanisms, policy-oriented music functioned as an immediate, affective, and impactful tool for ideological reinforcement. This served to ensure that the core values of the nation which included hard work, self-help, and collaboration were not preached but actually practiced. The SU initiative exemplifies how an ideology when consistently reinforced through cultural production can cultivate a sense of purpose, strength, and responsibility. By placing these musical pieces alongside state-led education programs, these songs underwent a profound transformation from passive listening to active participation in communal labor, infrastructure development, and economic self-sufficiency. Furthermore, SU's success suggests that lasting social change becomes feasible when participatory engagement is accompanied by ideological instruction. It can be concluded that emerging economies in search of modernized blueprints to follow may utilize ideological tools—such as music, slogans, and participatory education—to foster a shared identity and mobilize collective progress under the banner of patriotism. Through cultural education and the promotion of self-reliance, hard work, and group effort, developing countries may be able to sustain themselves economically and socially in the long term. The research indicates that SU's effectiveness lay not merely in policy formulation, but in the implementation of ideology-driven action that framed progress as a shared national responsibility.

4. SONGS AS AN IDEOLOGICAL AND EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR THE SU

Mobilizing the resigned rural populace required a form of inspirational education that President Park deemed essential for realizing the goals of the SU. To cultivate civic motivation, he emphasized cooperative teamwork and an unyielding work ethic as

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the foundation of national development. These values were internalized through accessible and repetitive means—most notably, the use of songs—which conveyed the message that meaningful progress was possible through collective diligence. In pursuit of this vision, he on his own composed the lyrics of *Saemaul Song* on April 21, 1972, and his daughter, Geun-ryeong Park, composed its melody (Park, 1972). This song was not just a cultural performance but a calculated teaching device to foster values through constant repetition in schools, businesses, and civic gatherings. By being a central slogan of the movement, it uniformed the purpose of SU and helped achieve a social and cultural system in which its ethos was absorbed at a national level. The song with a vigorous march-like rhythm was highly memorable and appealing to emotions. It became part of Korean society in the 1970s just like a national anthem, promoting unyielding spirit, and social solidarity.

The *Saemaul Song* lyrics encapsulated all the objectives of the movement and worked alongside SU's core tenets while serving as a testament to how a socio-political ambition in conjunction with music and literature can shape society:

The morning bell has rung, a new dawn has come,
Everyone, rise up and cultivate our *Saemaul*.
Remove thatched roofs, widen village roads,
Create green hills, trim and tidy them with care.
Help one another, work hard with sweat,
Increase income, and make our village rich.
Let us all fight bravely while we work,
Work while we fight, and build a new nation.
Chorus: A prosperous village, made by our own hands (Park, 1972).

In tandem with President Park's "*Saemaul Song*," "*Jal Sara Bose*" ("Let's Live Well"), composed by Hee-jo Kim and penned by Un-sa Han, likewise gained prominence as a widely disseminated mobilization song for the *Saemaul Undong* campaign. It carried powerful messages directed towards economic self-reliance, unification, and growth. The resolute tone woven into the lyrics instilled a spirit of patriotism that spread throughout the nation:

Let's live well, let's live well,
Let's all strive to live well once and for all.
This golden land, our beautiful nation,
If we cultivate it with a united heart,
Frugality and diligence will bring joy,
Wealth and honor shall be ours.
Let's work hard, let's work hard,
Let's all strive to work hard once and for all.
The nations beyond the great seas,
Did they become prosperous overnight?
If dust can gather into a great mountain,
How could we ever spare our sweat and blood?
Let's march forward, let's march forward,
Let's all strive to move forward once and for all.
The windows of our closed nation
Shall open wide to the world,
Let's learn all that is good,
How could we ever afford to lag behind? (KNB, n.d.).

The ideological essence of *Saemaul Song* and *Jal Sara Bose* is best understood through a thematic breakdown of their lyrical content. What follows is an analysis of the core principles embedded within these compositions, each representing a critical dimension of the SU's civic and moral education.

4.1. Emphasis on the value of labor

The most noteworthy characteristics of these songs are the value placed towards work as a cornerstone towards national reconstruction and self-reliance. Phrases such as "Everyone, rise up and cultivate our *Saemaul*" from *Saemaul Song* and "Let's all strive to work hard once and for all" from *Jal Sara Bose* served not only as slogans but also as educational tools which promoted

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hard work as well as sincerity. These pieces were intentionally crafted in a way that would foster a sense of discipline and resolve so as to ensure that work is not merely viewed as a means of earning a living, but rather as a vehicle towards national growth and development.

There is no doubt that Korea experienced harsh difficulties during the 20th century, including the Japanese colonial rule from 1910 up until the Korean war from 1950–1953. Korea was one of the poorest nations in the world at that time (Chung, 2003a, b; Chung, 2004 a, b; Seon & Chung, 2025). Poverty levels were extreme, with the streets overflowing with beggars and a majority of laborers and farmers not being able to afford even three meals a day (Chung, 2010; Chung et al., 2021; Kim & Chung, 2023). In response to these issues, the SU framed labor education within an ideological context that treated work not only as a socio-economic activity, but rather as a moral imperative capable of transforming individuals and entire communities. The songs did not only emphasize the value of hard work; they strategically instilled the notion that success was guaranteed “through labor” as a form of societal education aimed at changing attitudes towards work. These beliefs were widely disseminated through schools, workplaces, and social gatherings, ultimately playing a decisive role in forming a broad national consensus.

4.2. Community spirit and cooperation

The two songs served to methodically transmit a critical value rooted in community cohesion and collective cooperation, thereby reinforcing the movement’s overarching discursive structure. The *Saemaul Song*’s “Help one another, work hard with sweat,” and *Jal Sara Bose*’s “If we cultivate it with a united heart” served as educational instrumental aid to nurture civic-mindedness and responsibility and collective action. These songs underscored Korea’s rural transformation temporally, capturing the critical juncture when impoverished, agrarian villages were evolving into self-sufficient, modernized communities, working together for local development and national progress (Chung, 2025a; Go et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2021). The songs and the associated training came hand-in-hand in changing perceptions toward communal efforts, inspiring cooperation toward greater individual and collective self-reliance. Diverging from narratives that prioritized private accomplishment, these songs cultivated social responsibility. Within the context of songs taught in schools, workplace gatherings, and village meetings, the citizens were educated on the importance of maintaining solidarity. This encouraged a mindset in which community development was seen as a collective responsibility rather than a personal undertaking. The SU succeeded in civic education by interweaving ideology, music, and schooling, reinforcing the core social value of mutual support, which proved essential for both individuals and the nation during Korea’s rapid modernization.

4.3. Overcoming rural backwardness

The SU songs functioned as both educational and motivational tools, particularly for students, with lyrics like “Remove thatched roofs, widen village roads” (*Saemaul Song*) and “The windows of our closed nation shall open wide to the world” (*Jal Sara Bose*) articulating clear pedagogical intentions aligned with the movement’s broader goals of rural modernization and national revitalization. These songs shared a consistent message: meaningful progress required active, constructive engagement in transforming rural areas. Rather than being imposed through direct propaganda, the songs were softly woven into the fabric of daily life—through schools, village meetings, and public campaigns—encouraging the rural population to internalize modernization as both feasible and aspirational, in line with the government’s developmental agenda.

During the 1960s and 1970s, rural development and infrastructure expansion were among South Korea’s highest national priorities. The SU was not merely an agricultural reform campaign, but an educational and ideological initiative that sought to shift the rural mindset from passive subsistence to active participation in national development (Jeong & Chung, 2021). This transformation was achieved through a combination of government policy, material aid, and the use of ideology—often embedded within songs. By framing modernization as an inevitable and natural progression, these songs helped reconstruct rural identity and fostered a sense of purpose, growth, and national pride (Chung, 2023; Kim & Chung, 2024a, b).

4.4. Emphasis on economic independence

The other important theme of the SU was self-reliance, particularly the goal of achieving independence from government assistance and external aid. This theme was reinforced through the SU songs. The line “A prosperous village, made by our own hands” from *Saemaul Song* and “How could we ever spare our sweat and blood?” from *Jal Sara Bose* emphasized that both individual effort and communal solidarity were essential for economic advancement. Within the context of rural villages, this attitude of self-sufficiency was carefully nurtured through comprehensive education programs (Jeong, 2009). The songs were widely used as instructional materials in *Saemaul* training centers and local gatherings, further reinforcing the message that modernization was a task to be accomplished by the people, not granted by the state. They also served as tools of economic education, communicating to farmers and laborers that prosperity hinged on diligence, innovation, and perseverance—not on foreign aid, particularly from the United States (Kang et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; USAID, 2020). The ethos of self-help fostered

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through *Saemaul* education became one of the fundamental drivers of Korea's rapid economic rise. Through both ideological messaging and practical training, rural communities came to embrace self-reliance. The formulation of this educational strategy transformed the abstract concept of self-sufficiency into a tangible reality, laying the foundation for South Korea's long-term economic development.

4.5. SU as strategy: linking economic growth and national security

Following the Korean War, South Korea faced not only the daunting task of reconstruction but also a persistent security threat from the North. One notable incident occurred on January 21, 1968, when 31 North Korean commandos attempted to assassinate President Park. Though they were intercepted less than a kilometer from the Blue House, the event sent shockwaves through the nation. Only one of the assailants survived—Shin-jo Kim, who later defected to the South. His statement, "We came to cut off Park Chung-hee's head," left a chilling reminder of the country's vulnerability (Kim et al., 2022; Lee & Chung, 2024). Since the 1953 armistice, South Korea has remained in a state of alert, wary of any aggression from the North. In this atmosphere, fostering civic responsibility through ideological education became a national imperative (Kim & Chung, 2024, a, b). The Park's regime envisioned the SU as both an economic initiative and a strategic means of mass mobilization designed to reinforce national security amidst persistent threats from the North.

Within this broader ideological framework, The *Saemaul Song* and *Jal Sara Bose* operated not only as motivational and instructional tools, but also as subtle vehicles for civic mobilization. Their lyrics underscored the idea that individual sacrifice and communal effort were essential to both national development and the safeguarding of national security, thereby reframing economic progress as an urgent, shared patriotic duty rather than a private endeavor. Lines like "Let us all fight bravely while we work, work while we fight, and build a new nation" expressed the combined demand for national defense and economic reconstruction. Similarly, "Wealth and honor shall be ours" reinforced the notion that discipline and resilience would ultimately ensure national prosperity. These songs were consistently played during national events, leadership programs, and government-led education initiatives, solidifying the ideological foundation of the SU. Beyond their entertainment value, the lyrics broadening listening horizons functioned as mnemonic techniques that ingrained the idea that a citizen's work was essential in reconstructing and fortifying the country during difficult and perilous times.

In brief, these two songs were more than lyrics; they functioned as instruments of social inclusion, value transmission, and political engagement. The SU was not just a government policy, but a nationwide, multidisciplinary educational campaign designed to secure broad-based public participation. These songs helped foster willing engagement, shape public perception, and motivate people to actively participate in the development of their country. It represented a complete change from the conventional agrarian society's paradigm to a modern economic system, where songs served as ideological justifications and instructional materials to accompany the shift. By nurturing feelings of national unity, pride, and faith in the citizenry, the songs built the ideological framework of Korea's rapid development fueled through education and cultural dissemination.

5. IDEOLOGICAL COMPARISON: THE SU VS. THE CCR IN EDUCATION

In the case of Korea, the government implemented the *Saemaul Undong* as a means of modernizing rural areas through education, ideological guidance, and practical skill training. By contrast, China underwent a more radical transformation during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (CCR), which was spearheaded by Mao Zedong (1893–1976). While both the movements sought to mobilize the populace and transform the national consciousness, the fundamental differences in ideology, education systems, and results were pronounced. One of the most notable differences is the use of music and slogans along with education, and in this case other subjects that combine learning with entertainment. SU national songs had a greater purpose beyond serving as music. It was also a form of ideological education that fostered achievement, collaboration, and even economic independence. The lyrics became lessons, teaching rural folk that hard work, and indeed, practical knowledge, would bring about modernization of agriculture, infrastructure, and economic prosperity. Through schools, leader training sessions, and village meetings, this collection of songs, along with the messages contained in courses, were taught and memorized collectively and applied in the educational society. This resulted in an education system where ideology and action were harmoniously united. Although Koreans often endured difficult times due to hard labor and voluntary service, this education through songs played a significant role in fostering optimism and a sense of shared responsibility among the people, ultimately contributing to a lasting positive impact.

In contrast, the CCR's ideological education was built on radical slogans and coercive indoctrination rather than constructive learning. A key slogan of the Red Guards, "Break the Four Olds" (破四舊)—a call to eradicate traditional Chinese customs, culture, habits, and ideas—reflected an education system focused on ideological purity rather than practical skills or economic development (Dikotter, 2017). Whereas the SU's developmental vision emphasized self-reliance, gradual self-improvement, and nation-building through civic cooperation, the CCR actively fomented class struggle as a central ideological goal. During this period,

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politically radicalized youth—often deprived of formal education and systematically indoctrinated with revolutionary ideology—were mobilized to participate in coercive campaigns through violence. The remnants of the golden, pre-commie era had to be systematically dismantled. The blitzkrieg style of parenting and teaching rampaged across the nation. Students started attacking teachers, children turned on their parents—all while adults found “freedom” through public humiliation, forced manual labor, or catastrophic demise. The lack of education set goals for the nation but the enforcement of CCR ideology systematically destroyed China’s economy, de-intellectualizing schools, while paralyzing the nation’s infrastructure.

The songs, as well as the educational activities of the SU, focused on promoting resilience, cooperation and progressive meritocracy, which stimulated healthy competition amongst villages and encouraged group productivity. Modern practical skills—like farming, self-sufficient economics, and strategic village planning—were taught alongside ideological values so that participants possessed the skills required to enact the movement’s objectives. In contrast, the sloganeering of the CCR served as an ideological warfare toolkit that fragmented society, enabled political purges and cultural genocide. The Cultural Revolution’s fanatical insistence on ideological uniformity brought about the collective exile, imprisonment, or silencing of intellectuals, educated professionals, and skilled workers, which severely set back China’s educational and economic development.

As was already evident, the contrast between the constructive educational initiatives of the SU and the radical Red Guards’ ideological orthodoxy captures the essence of both movements. The SU adeptly integrated ideology into the educational system and directed it toward achieving national change, providing developmental opportunities that were both incentive-based and skill focused. On the other hand, the CCR manipulated ideology into oppression, fracture, and authoritarian stratagem that prioritized blind loyalty over political, educational, and economic focus. SU serves as a model of what development-oriented governance looks like, while CCR is a case study of the uncontrolled ideological fanaticism stripped of education and practical skills at the most fundamental level.

6. THE EVOLUTION OF THE SU

The SU began in 1970 when the government distributed 335 bags of cement to 34,267 villages, allowing them to decide independently how to use the materials to improve local infrastructure (Kim & Kim. 2012). The outcome was remarkable. While the government’s expenditure on materials amounted to ₩41 billion, the combined value of villagers’ contributions—including cash, land, and voluntary labor—was significantly higher, totaling ₩81 billion. In the end, this massive public participation led President Park to, in September 1971, announce SU, which was previously deemed a rural aid program, as a national modernization campaign, thus transforming it into an all-encompassing development program. The further development of the SU initiative made it possible for the rest of Korea to experience its transformable effect. By the mid-1970s, considerable progress had been made in the following areas: the thatched cabins were mostly gone, rural roads had increased in size, and there was swift progress in the provision of electricity. There was a tremendous shift during the 1970s in the income disparity between rural farmers and urban workers. For instance, in 1970, the average annual income of a rural household was ₩256,000, while urban workers earned significantly more, with an average income of ₩381,000. This gap remained in 1973, when rural income rose to ₩481,000, yet continued to fall short of the ₩645,000 earned by their urban counterparts. The turning point came in 1975 where the trend began to shift. Rural households reported that their mean income was ₩873,000, slightly above what urban workers earned at ₩859,000. This was further supported in 1977 when the average rural income increased to ₩1,433,000 and also surpassed the urban average of ₩1,405,000 (Kim and Kim. 2012). These statistics indicate that there was rapid narrowing of the previously existing income gap which in the end favored the rural population during the second half of the decade.

A study on the SU identifies Munseong-ri in Gigyemyeon, Yeongil County as a compelling case (Im & Im, 2013). In the early 1970s, it was among the most impoverished villages in North Gyeongsang Province. In 1971, it was selected as a model community for the SU despite its severe underdevelopment. The village consisted of 68 households and 409 residents living in harsh conditions: over two-thirds of the land was mountainous with a steep incline, and the area was prone to frequent droughts (Im & Im. 2013). As a result, agricultural productivity was extremely low, causing many to abandon the village in search of better opportunities. The community’s morale was equally poor—residents were often apathetic, lacked initiative, and were poorly educated, with fewer than 5% having completed middle school. Social problems such as gambling were common, and aspirations for a better life were virtually nonexistent. In order to resolve these issues, the village leaders started a process of mental and cultural renewal which targeted value transformation and collective responsibility.

One of the first actions was a campaign to eradicate idleness. Alongside this campaign, a pumping station was also constructed to transform the unreliable upland paddies into irrigated farmland. This project was successful due to the great collaboration of villagers who were able to secure groundwater and overcome the region’s chronic droughts. Because of this, rice production was able to triple, producing 120 tons by 1971 compared to 40 tons in 1967. Additional income was also estimated to be around ₩7 million from mulberry farming and ₩1.2 million from poultry operations in 1970. In October 1970, during the agricultural off-

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season when farming activities were typically suspended, the community took the opportunity to focus on infrastructural development. One of the pressing needs was to expand the village's entrance road, and the most difficult challenge was acquiring 748 pyeong (approximately 2,470 square meters) of land. Sun-pyo Hong, a SU leader, who was also the village chief, undertook the task of soliciting landowners so that they might be willing to give their land for usable public space. Residents were more than willing to donate the land even though it was their most valuable asset as Hong explained the importance of the public good. By the 15th of January 1971, road access was possible magnetically enabling the use of carts, and setting the groundwork for mechanized farming for the village. The government only supplied cement for these initiatives while other resources and labor were all sourced locally. It fostered an attitude of self-help and self-reliance. The road project was followed by the replacement of thatched roofs to modern materials which lessened maintenance work while also providing straw for feeding livestock, weaving mats, and growing mushrooms.

Other developments included a village hall that served as a meeting place and a warehouse, a public well with a laundry basin, Gigae Bridge over a stream 126 meters wide, and increased sanitation. There were also 42 toilets constructed, the boundary walls were repaired, and 52 kitchens were upgraded. These projects were funded through community savings campaigns and the establishment of a collective purchasing scheme for materials known as the community bank. Throughout the 1970–1971, Munseong-ri realized nine major development projects with ₩109,200 from government aid and ₩676,330 raised by the residents, achieving a total value of ₩4.8 million, nearly 50 times the support, within just six months.

7. ACADEMIC EVALUATIONS AND GLOBAL RELEVANCE

Certain criticisms of the SU—particularly those positing that its authoritarian tendencies stem from President Park's militaristic background—should not be dismissed outright, as they present interpretive frameworks that require context-sensitive scholarly analysis within their historical and ideological context. Park served as a military officer under the Japanese Imperial Army during the colonial period (1910–1945), and after Korea's liberation, he continued his service in the South Korean military (Seo & Chung, 2021; Seo et al., 2021, 2022; Seok et al., 2021; Seok & Chung, 2021; Seok & Chung, 2023; Seok & Chung, 2024; Teng & Chung, 2024).

In 1961, while holding the rank of Major General, he orchestrated a military coup that brought him to power, subsequently establishing an authoritarian regime that steadily rolled back democratic processes. Scholars have argued that this strong military ethos deeply permeated the SU, shaping its top-down structure, centralized decision-making, and the moral imperative of obedience and discipline embedded in its civic education. One historian claims that the “anti-communist *Saemaul* system” resulted in part from the regime's over-sensitivity to ideological threats emanating from North Korea, which incorporated civilian defense components into rural development narratives (Hur, 2022). During the peak of the movement in the 1970s, government-affiliated village officers significantly reduced the time spent at home and allocated the majority of their weekly schedules to on-site supervision and facilitation of SU initiatives, thereby demonstrating the state's strong commitment to localized implementation. Even some high-ranking officials, and the president himself, were said to have suggested attending rural sites after hours and during weekends and holidays to stimulate activity and assist with specific projects.

While Park's regime rightly drew criticism for its suppression of political dissent and human rights violations (Chae, 2011; Yang & Chung, 2023), equating the implementation of the SU with the brutal treatment of his political opponents risks distorting the nature of the movement. It would be too narrow an interpretation to view the SU—an initiative he pursued with considerable dedication—solely as an extension of those repressive tendencies. The mechanisms of discipline and civic oversight commonly associated with the SU often emerged organically within specific local contexts—especially in communities where social cohesion was prioritized and passivity was regarded as a hindrance to collective advancement. While some critics may interpret the movement as a top-down imposition, it is more accurately understood as a blend of governmental control and voluntary civic commitment. This dual character aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which argues that dominant powers maintain authority not merely through coercion or law, but through the consensual internalization of values, norms, and worldviews embedded in everyday life. In this light, the SU can be viewed as a hegemonic project that succeeded because it, through songs, rituals, and village leadership systems, localized state ideology and mobilized the guardianship hegemony needed to win consent from rural populations. Similarly, Habermas's theory of communicative action offers another view of the SU's impact on society. For Habermas, legitimate social integration does not result from coercive or manipulative actions, but emerges from rational discussion, understanding, and consensus in the public sphere. The existence of a semi-authoritarian regime does not invalidate the authenticity of other components, such as village meetings, communal rituals, and instructional drills, which often reflected shared values and internalized consensus within local communities. From this perspective, the SU constitutes not only a vehicle of state-directed modernization, but also a context in which civic consciousness is shaped and a sense of collective belonging is cultivated. It is critical to note that recognizing the movement's disciplinary features does not disregard its other

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achievements. Describing the whole SU as authoritarian ignores the deep and lingering impacts on the existence of so many people and the society around them. The SU was instrumental in the enhancement of the rural infrastructures, as it helped to cultivate a sense of self-help and cooperation which bridged the gap between urban and rural development. Although the SU played a significant role in Korea's modernization, it also exhibited certain structural weaknesses that warrant balanced evaluation. For instance, the widespread replacement of traditional thatched roofs with asbestos-containing slate roofs—a well-intentioned but ultimately hazardous choice—later imposed substantial health and financial burdens on rural communities (Chung, 2025b, c).

The oral histories are striking in how the SU, and especially its music, resonated with the emotions of citizens. Among those moved by its legacy is Bok-sook Song, a 72-year-old Korean American residing in Chicago, who reminisces about her childhood in Goheung, South Jeolla Province in the 1970s (Chung, 2025a). The movement's songs evoked in her a profound hope that one day her family would be able to enjoy not just two bowls of barley, but three full meals of rice. Similar feelings are shared by Mi-soon Her, who was a student in Daegu, Gyeongsang Province at the time. She, along with her fellow classmates, used to sing SU songs together at the crack of dawn when commencing their schoolwork. In her words, it was a joyful empowering experience. For all these women, and many others like them, the SU songs represented far more than mere state propaganda; they were powerful personal reminders of renewal and belonging intricately bound to their hopes and hardships.

Beyond the emotional and symbolic features, one of the most notable contributions of the SU was the improvement of women's social status in Korea. During the movement, women often took part even more than men did. In a nationally representative survey of 1,497 inhabitants of the countryside, 71% positively evaluated the role of *Saemaul Women's Associations* as helpful to the movement (Kim & Kim, 2012). In a different study, 92% of 831 women surveyed believed that they had meaningfully contributed to rural development. Traditionally, women's public participation in Korean society has been issued greatest suppression—there is a saying, "When the hen crows, the household will fall" (Kim, 2007). Yet, through unyielding effort and actual results, such perceptions were changed, women's engagement in the SU phenomenon was transformative. Women participated in the reforestation of the barren mountains that were left in ruins after the Korean War. Women from Imsil County in North Jeolla Province went out to an abandoned hill and planted approximately two thousand chestnut trees. The trees not only restored the forest, but eventually also provided enough income to fund local students' scholarships. This aspect becomes particularly important when thinking about life in rural Korea during the 1970s. Although the state's developmental vision was not always coherent or universally accepted, the SU provided a means for the average person to channel their struggles into collective advancement. Public rituals, along with music, became ways for people to modernize and feel part of a larger national effort for change.

Gramsci would suggest that these activities are examples of cultural practice, illustrating how popular ideological projects are legitimated not through brute force but woven into the morality of everyday life. From a Habermasian perspective, the use of songs as ritualized performances—though state-directed—can still be seen as efforts to foster communicative consensus and shape collective identity. Building on a similar perspective, John Lie critiques dependency theory by portraying SU as a successful case of endogenous development rather than externally imposed modernization. Alice Amsden commends the movement for its distinctive ideological scope blended with practical economic execution, noting its rural inclusivity and sustainability. These perspectives highlight the fact that SU was not simply a top-down command. Rather, it was an elaborate interplay of state control and some grassroots responsiveness.

Survey data of public sentiments further underscore this complexity. National polling results have consistently shown that substantial portions of the Korean populace regard the *Saemaul Undong* (SU) as one of the most significant milestones of the Republic. In a survey conducted in 1988 during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Republic, 45.6% of respondents—according to polls by *Chosun Daily News* and Korea Gallup—identified SU as the Republic's greatest achievement. *Dong-A Daily News* reported an even higher figure of 50.5%. By 2008, two decades later, 40.2% of respondents still cited it as the Republic's most important accomplishment. These statistics demonstrate SU's enduring presence in the collective consciousness of the people—not as a tool of oppression, but as a constructive and aspirational initiative rooted in self-sufficiency, hard work, and communal spirit. Globally, SU has also gained recognition. The UN World Food Programme and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific have cited SU as a successful model for poverty alleviation. Its principles of voluntary cooperation, local initiative, and moral motivation have been adapted in various regions, especially across Africa.

To summarize, while critical views on the totalitarian elements of SU provide important perspectives, they ignore the reality, enduring identity, and popular imagination of the movement. From the perspective of Gramsci's cultural hegemony and Habermas's communicative action, the SU can be appropriately understood not as a mere state-led modernization effort, but as a strategic and formative initiative in which economic narratives, emotional resonance, and civic ideals were deliberately integrated to define the trajectory of the nation.

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8. CONCLUSION

The SU program stands out as one of the national cases of self-modernization emerging out of both visionary leadership and popular mobilization simultaneously in Korea. The SU was more than an economic project; it served as an educational campaign that fostered self-reliance, cooperation, and perseverance through songs, slogans, and structured training programs. The two national songs of the SU transcended symbolic function; they were vehicles of ideology and education serving to shape attitudes, behavior, and purposive ascription. They facilitated the sustenance of citizens' socio-rural self-beliefs in laboring as a means of advancing the society and turning socio-passive citizens to socio-active citizens. The SU showed us that even development does not happen only by providing concrete resources but through transforming cultures and education systems. The movement, later termed the "Miracle on the Han River," was Korea's rapid progress. Through repetitive educational methods, SU integrated ideology into daily life. The model demonstrates how citizens can be mobilized through participatory education toward common strategic long-term objectives, and framed as enduring citizenship challenges countries face today in sustainability and civic engagement.

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