

MUSIC OF THE FATHERLAND: THE NORTH KOREAN SOUNDSCAPE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHONGRYUN IDENTITY IN JAPAN*

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Drawing on a field trip to the Tokyo area over a two-months' period in 2003, this paper aims to examine the role of music within Chongryun in the expression of identity building. The Korean zither *kayagŭm*, an instrument of unique historical symbolism for Koreans, has been chosen to illustrate the on-going musical exchange taking place between musicians affiliated to the Chongryun community and their counterparts in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Introduction

The *kayagŭm* zither tradition spread with Korean migration to Japan in recent times, particularly since the early 20th century.¹ Since the political division of the Korean peninsula in 1948 and the succeeding Korean War (1950–3), both performance style and repertory have developed independently in South and North Korea, reflecting the somewhat different political and cultural orientation of each state. However, musicians of the Chongryun community, which largely consists of people forcibly settled in Japan from the Korean peninsula during the Japanese colonial period, particularly in the late 1930s and mid-1940s,² developed their musical proficiency by paying annual visits to Pyongyang during the summer months, thus directly replicating *kayagŭm* performance style as well as the musical repertoire from North Korea.

* Preference is given to the form Chongryun, which is the romanised spelling the organisation has chosen to use. Still photographic images included in the text are reproduced from the video recordings cited at the end of this paper.

Meanwhile, a declaration announced during the visit by Kim Dae-jung, former president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), to Pyongyang in 2000 led to unprecedented cultural exchanges in the years that followed. The effect of such a political climate is far reaching, with an impact even on the cultural relationship between South Korea and the Chongryun community in Japan. Thus, we are currently witnessing a wide dissemination of kayagŭm repertoires across all three locations: the Korean peninsula and amongst Korean minorities in northeastern China and Japan. A further point is that the younger generation of Chongryun is being brought up in an environment directly exposed to Japanese culture as well as to the music that had become available for consumption as a result of a globalised music industry. The question arises, therefore, whether the soundscape of the Chongryun community will remain faithful to the musical imports from North Korea alone.

Chongryun and kayagŭm music

Chongryun is the common name of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (in Korean, Cheilbon chosŏnin ch'ong ryŏnhaphoe). Founded in 1955, it is a pro-DPRK organisation that takes as its mission the unity of Koreans in Japan around the government and leadership of North Korea (Ryang 1997:2). It consists of a complex of numerous associations affiliated to the main organisation. The central headquarters, situated in Tokyo, has authority over all the local chapters, covering the 48 prefectures of Japan (Ryang, *ibid*:3).

According to the *Korea Times* (30 September 2003), 700,000 Koreans currently live in Japan, forming the fourth largest overseas Korean community (an increase of about 50,000 compared to a report of 1993). In 1993, up to 90 per cent of Koreans in Japan were born in Japan (*Chosŏn sinbo*, 15 February 1993, quoted in Ryang 1997:3). Out of those who originally came from Korea, more than 97 per cent were from the southern provinces of the peninsula. Thus, North Korean identity in this sense, following Ryang (*ibid*), is not geoculturally pre-given; it is Chongryun's political projection.

As a number of ethnomusicological investigations suggest, the use of music in association with 'identity building' is not an unusual phenomenon. My observation of various presentations of performing arts put on by musicians and artists alike affiliated to Chongryun also echoes the underlining motivation of the organisers. To illustrate the point, I would draw readers' attention to the kayagŭm performance presented in a 2003 concert as part of an ensemble piece at the Korean Cultural Centre in Tokyo.

The concert, entitled Oh! T'ongil Korea, was presented over two days on 6 and 7 June 2003 in celebration of the third anniversary of the South-North declaration of 15 June 2000. It was a joint concert presented by the South Korean Yun Tohyŏn

Band and a group called Hyang, whose membership was drawn from third- and fourth-generation Koreans from the community, primarily the musicians from the Chongryun-affiliated Kŭmgangsan kagŭkdan (Diamond Mountain Theatre Troupe).³ The concert was divided into three parts: the first part by the Hyang group, the second by the Yun Band and the third and last by both. Hyang's musical repertoire was a mixture of traditional and contemporary popular/jazz-style music, whereas the Yun Band's was very loud pop music. The finale, however, culminated in the well-known traditional folk song 'Arirang' and a song 'Oh! T'ongil Korea', widely sung in recent years in the context of reunification of the two Koreas.

With great anticipation from an audience of a couple of thousand gathered in the Centre, Hyang started off the concert with an arrangement of 'Arirang'. The initial silence was broken with a very slow, monotonic introduction to Kim Yongshil's kayagŭm solo, but the tune was soon layered by four additional musicians playing *chotdae* (transverse flute), Western drum kit, base guitar and piano. The music adhered closely to a mixture of traditional music and jazz in terms of musical styles and instrumental components. The musical structure unfolded in a folksong style, which was familiar to many Koreans, moved swiftly on to mosaic segments from *sanjo* ('scattered melodies'),⁴ a North Korean-style arrangement, then jazz improvisation and finally progressed to the end of the piece by returning to the North Korean style of playing.⁵

The performance style of the kayagŭm player, Kim Yongshil (b.1980), as presented in Hyang's 'Arirang', is somewhat different when compared with the style that might have originally been cultivated in North Korea. The difference is clearly marked in a performance by school children (Pyongyang haksŏng sonyŏn yesuldan) playing the kayagŭm trio presented in Tokyo in 1986.⁶



Fig. 1. Kayagŭm player Kim Yŏngshil playing 'Arirang'



Fig. 2. Kayagŭm player Kim Yŏngshil in ensemble with Hyang members playing 'Arirang'

Kim Yŏngshil's performance is much internalised and composed, whilst that of the school children from Pyongyang is externalised in terms of the artistic expressions manifested in their gestures, bodily movements and especially in their faces. South Korean audiences would strongly associate somewhat 'choreographed' outward expressions such as these with 'typical' North Korean style. To Kim Yŏngshil, her performance style still remains an area that demands her concerted effort for improvement. Whenever Kim Yŏngshil visited Pyongyang for training as a distance-learning student (*t'ongshin haksæng*), her teacher Kim Killwan (b.1936), one of the best recognised kayagŭm players and educators in North Korea, frequently pointed out the way she projected herself in performance. Kim Yŏngshil recalled: "My body and hands are big. So, the condition for playing is not bad. [However], I am lacking in the way I deliver emotion to the audience. Outward appearance [*hyŏngsang*], feelings and emotions [*kamjŏngjŏkin kŏt*]."7 Presumably, Kim Yŏngshil's facial expressions would have been considered rather 'clouded' (*ŏdupda*), implying they were not expressive enough and her bodily movement too restrained compared with what would be normally expected from a performer in North Korea.

Notwithstanding the difference in playing styles, both of the performances mentioned above employ reformed kayagŭms, with either 19 or 21 strings, that were constructed to generate a broader spectrum of registers and a larger volume, thus introducing the capacity to play the repertoire in the diatonic scale and the compatibility to perform together with Western ensemble and orchestras when necessary.

The question is: how and when did kayagŭm music take root in the Chongryun community, thus becoming an integral part of instrumental teaching in schools affiliated to Chongryun in the early years? In the 1960s and 1970s, or even earlier, there might have already been some traditional music performances on a small scale by musicians from South Korea who came to stay in Japan only temporarily. However, it seems that an active instrumental music scene (of traditional music) did not happen until, in the 1960s, the Chongryun community adopted a much more organised music education policy. By then, the community had been under constant pressure by the Japanese government, which scrutinised Chongryun's growing interest in establishing schools to promote not only the Korean language but also traditional culture with an underlining nationalistic sentiment.

The reason for the concerted efforts made then could well lie in an explanation offered by Ko Ch'angil, since 1998 chairman of the North Korean Literature and Arts League in Japan (Cheilbon chosŏn munhak yesulga tongmaeng, commonly known as Munyedong):

During 1961 to 1964, when I was in charge of a class at the 9th School, a social movement had developed that placed strong emphasis on three dimensions for youth



Fig. 3. School child from Pyongyang playing in the kayagum trio, Tokyo 1986



Fig. 4. One of a large collection of musical instruments presented by North Korea to Chongryun schools in 1966

education: these consisted of knowledge, virtue and sports [*chi, tŏk and ch'e*]. This idea was addressed by Kim Il Sung, the North Korean leader at that time, in a speech on 3 May 1962 (known as *Osam kyoshi*), and came to dominate about half of the youth projects. One of the important issues in the speech was his emphasis that everybody should be able to play more than one musical instrument. Since then, the instrumental training movement became the core enterprise of education as a whole.⁸

Since then, the Chongryun community was to follow the policies of *Osam kyoshi* enunciated in Pyongyang in 1962, which included the requirement that musical education for everybody should be taken up strenuously.⁹ The policy was adopted in the Chongryun community without question. However, being physically separated from the mainland, the community had to face many practical difficulties in carrying out the tasks at a local level in terms of a shortage of human resources—such as trained music teachers or musicians—and of musical instruments, without which neither musical transmission nor promotion was possible.

A teacher visiting Pyongyang in the early 1960s soon reported the situation in Chongryun to North Korea. Before long, a large collection of gifts, including funds to establish schools, and textbooks as well as musical instruments (a total of 97 items of 22 kinds), was presented on 4 May 1966.¹⁰ Without doubt, these grand gifts facilitated one of the educational agendas that were to set about cultivating national consciousness through cultural learning and experience.

Prior to the arrival of the gifts, North Korea had supported Chongryun by providing instrumental training in an effort to ease the community's situation, where an adequate number of locally based qualified instrumental teachers or practising musicians, who could train the younger generation, was absent. It was not until the mid-1960s that some basic training took place secretly in a port, about several hours

away from Tokyo. At that time, a North Korean ship (known as the *kwiguksŏn*) made a regular monthly visit to the Japanese port to transport people and goods. Some musicians affiliated to the Kūmgangsan kagŭkdan troupe, originally trained in Western music or in what was known as *kyŏngŭmak* (light instrumental music), were dispatched to undergo extensive training on the ship. The mission for learning was also necessary as North Korea considered their cultural presence at the forthcoming Olympic Games, to be held in 1964 in Japan, important in promoting the country in a positive way to the worldwide participants. Since then, Chongryun was to follow a musical performing style that closely resembles that of North Korea. The kayagŭm tradition and other traditional instrumental playing gradually made their way to Japan.

Kayagŭm learning

One of the most interesting features noted during my fieldwork in 2003 was the way the tradition is being transmitted. The process differed greatly from that of Chongryun's counterparts, such as South Korea and the Yanbian Korean community in China. Whereas transmission in these two locations takes place within a formally organised system and an educational framework, such as teacher-pupil school lessons, within Chongryun it happens as one of the extra-curricular activities (*sojo hwaldong*) in their affiliated schools. Furthermore, learning and teaching take place primarily among peer group members in school, with students usually learning from senior students or a peer group who have already achieved an advanced level of proficiency.

Having said that, there is another unique learning practice to mention here. That is, to visit Pyongyang as distance-learning students. The students are selected in Japan and spend one summer month, usually August, each year to go through vigorous instruction from a designated teacher in Pyongyang. The learning period is not really sufficient to allow them to level themselves with the music students in Pyongyang. Nonetheless, it provides a fundamental learning period for these visiting students, not only to meet the teacher and gain access to a deeper level of musical knowledge, but also to witness and observe the performances of many excellent performers based in Pyongyang. From the point of these visiting students, according to Kim Yŏngshil for instance, the period of a month allows them only to "review the things they've learnt in the previous year and to grasp all the technical details of the repertoire under study; not necessarily mastering them but to squeeze as much as they possibly could into their brains."¹¹

In spite of such an under-equipped learning situation, the Chongryun community has in recent years produced some excellent musicians who have been awarded one of the highest honours at the annually held music competition in Pyongyang. One

of the finest examples of this is Ch'oe Yŏngdŏk, a *changsaenap* (oboe) player.¹² While musicians in the Chongryun community are able to achieve an unexpectedly high level of artistic ability especially through distance-learning in Pyongyang, the musicians, like many other Chongryun youth, are not entirely free from the cultural environment that surrounds them and which further removes their musical aesthetics from the direct and indirect influences of learning the musical products from North Korea.

Constructing an identity through music

Indeed, if the social context is taken into account, in terms of both the general music education scene in Chongryun schools and the cultural environment to which Chongryun youth is accustomed, the community at large is exposed to diverse musical influences that are not confined to the traditional musical repertoire originating in the Korean peninsula. Thus, the community is continuously revising the curriculum to reflect the on-going social and cultural changes in the Japanese context as much as what is happening in the DPRK. For example, although the emphasis tends to be on rearranged traditional songs and Korean rhythms (cf. the song about the kayagŭm included in the primary school third-year music textbook), music textbooks used at primary school level broadly cover music from other cultures (thus, the primary school sixth-year music textbook introduces world music through CDs). Exposure to South Korean pop music or Western-style music concerts cannot be underestimated. When talking about Chongryun youth or the community at large, we need to consider not only these musical encounters but also the cultural exchanges that frequently happen between Koreans in Japan, South Koreans and Japanese, such as the unprecedented musical exchange marked by a Chongryun school performing troupe that visited



Fig. 5. Performance of Changsaenap on G by Ch'oe Yŏngdŏk with Hyang



Fig. 6. Yun Tohyŏn singing 'Arirang' with Chongryun musicians

South Korea on 4–6 September 2002. The younger Chongryun generation shares a distinctively different political outlook, let alone cultural experience, to the first-generation Koreans in Japan. Hence, the presentation of a musical repertoire rooted in tradition but fashioned to a contemporary outlook, such as Oh! T'ongil Korea, is considered even more instrumental in bringing out the apparent differences among the generations and thus promoting collective identity.

Ryang (1997:197–8) suggests a radical distinction should be made between the migrational experience and the diaspora one: the former is a dynamic displacement and thus deconstructs one's identity; the latter is a stable building of the homeland connection, which serves to construct one's identity. The destiny of the first generation in Japan became tied to their homeland, North Korea, to which they would eventually return. As the sojourn in Japan has prolonged itself, North Korea as a homeland has become increasingly remote from reality. Ryang (*ibid*) further elaborates the identity of the successive generations living in Japan by stating that the second-generation's identity as Chongryun Koreans rests on the premise that Chongryun is a North Korean organisation. The third generation's experience is more individual-oriented because of its members' awareness that they may continue to live in Japan and that they can sever their North Koreaness from state-level politics and become Japanese residents whose fatherland may be North Korea but who may not support it as a state.

Although it would be possible to say that the third and fourth generations of Koreans in Japan hold views that are sympathetic to Ryang's observation, the unification of the two Koreas is an issue deeply shared among all generations. Two video excerpts from the Oh! T'ongil Korea concert vividly demonstrate the community's fervent hope for an identity rooted in history but situated in Japan. Here, a mixture of one of the best known traditional songs, 'Arirang', and a song 'Oh! T'ongil Korea', representing the theme of the event, binds not only the performers from South Korea and Chongryun singing on the same stage, but also the audience closely together as one. In the centre of the stage, a flag known as *hanbando ki* (flag of the Korean peninsula) is symbolically placed as a backdrop.¹³

Closing remarks

As seen above, the kayagŭm performance practices of this region can only be reasonably assessed when they are placed in their political relationship to their surroundings as much as in their ongoing political relationship with the DPRK. The situation in the Chongryun community in Japan differs to that of other regions in terms of its cultural, political and economic contexts. The unique context contributed to the framework in which the kayagŭm tradition flourishes and is performed and listened to.

The kayagŭm music tradition in Chongryun, although situated in Japanese society,

does not bear any trace that would suggest the incorporation of Japanese musical traits into its style of playing. Rather, it still adheres closely to what is happening in North Korea, as the fatherland. However, in both performance style and repertoire it has distanced itself from North Korea by developing a unique strategy for survival to counter the ever decreasing number in the Korean population who are sympathetic to their school education or to the faithful replication of a political structure.

Nevertheless, a traditional musical element, as mounted in a contemporary concert such as Oh! T'ongil Korea, remains integral for fostering 'identity' across the generations of Koreans living in Japan. Here we may note the processes by which the necessary connection is made between the old traditions, which Nairn (1977:144) refers to as the cultural raw material for nationalism, and contemporary culture, and how 'tradition' is articulated and formulated in the formation of identity-building. The performance traditions in Chongryun in Japan have inevitably changed in response to encompassing social and cultural movements. The way traditions are realised and mounted in performance all differ: whilst traditions are presented at one level as conscious reinvention for the creation of a new identity or political ideology, they are also found in the form of "living expressions of collective experience in aesthetic form" (Coplan 1991:41) in the circle of performing musicians, whose search for 'Korean' musical idioms is manifested in the blending of the contemporary world and the traditional.

Musical practice, as illustrated above, can play a powerful role in the reproduction and transformation of social order (Waterman 1990a and 1990b), as the musical style employed not only evokes a Korean identity and sentiments firmly rooted in traditional culture, but also serves to articulate and define communal values in rapidly changing societies such as Chongryun in Japan.

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Notes

1. The instrument had also featured in the earliest musical exchanges between Korea and Japan during the Three Kingdoms period (c. AD 300–AD 668). Early examples, described as *Shiragi koto* (zithers from Shilla, one of the Three Kingdoms) are preserved at the 8th-century Shōsōin repository in Nara, Japan.
2. According to Kim Sanghyōn (1988:16), about 720,000 people were forcibly taken to Japan between 1939 and 1945.
3. The video excerpts of the performance cited in the text are available to view on the University of Sheffield website: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/music/ethnomusicology/leverhulme.html>
4. Sanjo is a solo instrumental form comprising three or more sections in progressively faster tempos. The soloist is accompanied by the *changgo* (double-headed hourglass drum). It is most frequently played on the kayagŭm.
5. See video track 1 of the University of Sheffield website.
6. See video track 2 of the University of Sheffield website.
7. Interview with Kim Yōngshil, 24 July 2003, Tokyo.
8. Interview with Ko Ch'angil on 2 July 2003, Tokyo.
9. See also *Kim Il Sung chōjakchip* (vol. 6:521, n.d.), which calls for a wide dissemination of traditional music and national musical instruments (quoted in Ham Tōgil 1987:14).
10. See video track 3 of the University of Sheffield website.
11. Interview with Kim Yōngshil, 24 July 2003, Tokyo.
12. See video track 4 of the University of Sheffield website. In the Oh! T'ongil Korea concert, Ch'oe captured the audience's undivided attention and loud acclamation with his truly astonishing musicianship. He performed a piece called *Changsaenap on G* in ensemble with Hyang members playing percussion band music known as *samulnori*. Through a successive change of beat, the samulnori team created an interesting dynamic soundscape juxtaposed with Ch'oe Yōngdōk's wind sound. When arriving at the cadenza, with a subtle change of lighting on the stage, Ch'oe was in full control, playing a much-prolonged solo section managed only on a single breath. At this point, the audience responded to him with hearty cheers and a roar of applause.
13. See video track 5 of the University of Sheffield website.

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