

**THAT WHICH WAS ONCE DYING IS NOW
RESTORED:**

Traditional music, musicians and agents

INOK PAEK-HOWARD

The "discontinuation of tradition"¹ or "the conflict of Korean culture" has been a heated subject of discussion among the South Korean intelligentsia since the early 1950s. By 1990, however, the focus seemed to shift to the succession and development of a national culture. What is perceived to be the cause of the discontinuation of tradition? What has been the rationale behind efforts to overcome this discontinuation? As in Polynesia (Merriam 1964: 307), the rapidity with which Koreans took over western music and the extent to which traditional music was abandoned went beyond initial expectations. Thus, in contemporary South Korea, to the majority of urban people *ũmak* (lit.: music) usually means just western music (more correctly *sōyang ũmak*) (for example, see Song Pangsong 1989: 6). *Kugak*, normally glossed as "traditional music",² although it should rightly denote Korean music as a whole (*kuk/kug-* = nation) only refers to half of the music culture.

In this paper I consider the transmission of music, especially *kugak*. I focus on how "tradition" incorporates itself into a new social context, and how culture bearers

practice their role in making sense of what is available to them.

The context

In the past, the music of Korea was transmitted in ritual, work and entertainment. Music always had an indispensable role in traditional society. The social context that enabled music to maintain a certain degree of stability had, however, to encounter change from the end of the 19th century. Consequently, it was inevitable that some alterations in the process of transmission should be experienced. As a result, *kugak* (traditional music) now has very little direct relationship with contemporary lifestyles.

The use of court music also declined as the Korean royal court came under Japanese influence. Not only were the number of performances related to rituals and banquets reduced, but also the numbers of court musicians employed rapidly decreased.

Soon after this influence began came the introduction of new styles of music (Yi Yusŏn 1985: 31-39 and 66-79). Contacts with western cultures led to initial exposure to western military band music and Christian hymns. Western music gradually cultivated roots in a new soil. It was actually only with the introduction of Western music categorization became necessary, and all the various kinds of traditional music performed in Korea were thrown together in one category, *kugak*. The relationship between music and the social classes, and between the producer and consumer, had changed track. So, the very same traditional Korean musical heritage was packaged differently.

Rapid modernization and industrialization came with waves of liberalization during the 1950s and 1960s. A wide spectrum of social changes occurred once more. And American music,³ which since liberation from Japan in 1945 had consisted of a popular as well as classical music culture, began to eat deeply into South Korean sentiments. The more society achieved social and economic progress, the less use it had for traditional music. And so it became increasingly perceived as urgent to re-establish the thread of the age-long tradition.

Steady economic progress and a reasonable degree of social stability in the 1970s provided the populace with a better standard of living. This eventually created the mental room in which Koreans could think about more than just earning a subsistence living. Further, the consciousness of consumers—who were by now well accustomed to western culture and whose interest in music had for decades been focussed on western music—began to look for their own music. Prosperity meant that traditional music could become more readily available to the populace. The social atmosphere provided an opportunity for rethinking the cultural currents at work in South Korea.

Efforts to try to accommodate both tradition and modernity are reflected in the inclusion of traditional music education in university and institutional programmes during the last thirty years. These programmes have produced an ever growing number of able *kugak* performers. Performance activities have become much more frequent, and new compositions written for traditional instrumental ensembles have begun to appear.

Some Korean composers who write in a western music idiom have become aware of the necessity of looking for a national musical idiom. This may reflect increasing

international musical exchanges. Those already involved in creating new music for traditional instruments deeply felt the need to identify the nature of Korean music. Many works have consequently combined tradition with modernity.

The music scene in contemporary South Korea, therefore, has several sound cultures. On the one hand, western music, most usually the classical music tradition, has been and continues to be closely identified with the educated intelligentsia.⁴ Western music has been assimilated into every level of Korean life: wherever education takes place, in concert halls, in churches, even in wedding halls. "Quasi-Korean music", referred to by Lee Kang-Sook [Yi Kangsuk] as the music written by Koreans with or without Korean texts but using strictly western melodic types,⁵ has been adopted as material for school textbooks and is enjoyed by most reasonably educated people. Popular songs and western-oriented pop music have also settled down as integral parts of the lives of young people (see, for example, Hoare and Pares 1988: 153).

How then was *kugak* perceived by Koreans until recently? According to many scholars, the status of traditional musicians has been low (eg, Song Pangsong 1985: 27). The reason may lie in the fact that the kind of work which required physical labour was never highly regarded. Many of my informants referred to *kugak* as "the thing that *kisaeng* (female entertainers) do".⁶

In the first quarter of this century there was a drastic change in the members of the court's Royal Music Institute (the *Yiwangjik aakpu*). Membership, suddenly based on public recruitment rather than the traditional criteria of heredity, destroyed some public prejudice towards musicians. However, it was not until the 1960s that it

became possible for musicians to receive a higher education in universities (Seoul National University established the first graduate programme in 1959). The position of professional musicians could now be strengthened, because institutionalized training led to the award of qualifications the equal of those gained by other vocational groups. With the new attention focussed on tradition in the 1960s, the economic status of musicians improved one step further.

In spite of the changes, the overall perception and social understanding of traditional music does not seem to have reached that expected by those actually involved in the performance and teaching of *kugak*. One of my informants expressed this well:

Kugak is stuffy and boring. Do you know western music? When I listened to western music it was boring at first, but it came to touch my heart the more I listened. People have preconceived ideas about our traditional music. So they turn the radio off whenever *kugak* comes out of it.

What aspect of traditional music made her bored?

There is nothing like a fast tempo or any distinction between high and low pitches. That is why it is so boring and monotonous.

This student was studying Korean dance, and their perception tells us how some sort of internal change has been made by Koreans in regard to concepts about music within a culture (see Merriam 1964: 306); the framework in which the aesthetic of musical appreciation operated has been transformed. Such views are widely shared among a large spectrum of Koreans. The view is especially common among the older generation, because they received an education centred only on western music or "quasi-Korean music" (the education programme would have been called *Shinshik kyoyuk*).

Nationalism and traditional cultures

Nationalism remains influential as a history-forming power. It developed in Korea to overcome a socio-political situation whereby a breakdown in tradition had been experienced (Ch'a Kibyök 1986: 5). As Smith has pointed out, the conditions of nationalism today are no longer identical with those that fostered it in its initial emergence (Smith 1979: viii). Nationalism, promoted in the pursuit of independence, subjecthood, self-reliance and modernization, has now developed to counter historical colonial perspectives and to review culture in an effort to discover something "traditional" and "national". Nationalism seems still to be a powerful force.

In South Korea, national identity was surely felt to be endangered under what was perceived by the populace in general to be a superior culture, that is, western culture. When the spiritual dominance of the foreign culture is seriously examined, it is notable that a considerable number of the Korean elite are still unable to overcome the after-effects of Japanese colonialism, the so-called *shingmin sagwan*.⁷ It was because of this that the Korean *yöpchön ütshik* inferiority complex was originally born (Ch'a Kibyök 1986: 79; Kim Chae-ün 1987: 95-128).

As traditional culture was devalued in Korean people's consciousness, voices were raised to find a new way to promote the old. The consensual view of the way forward was a correct search for the national tradition in order to recover national pride and self-confidence, thereby overcoming cultural imperialism and colonialism (Pak Taesun 1986: 186).

The rediscovery and promotion of a national culture became important, as we can witness by looking back at various government policies. During the last few decades several measures have been devised, namely the *Muhyöng munhwajae* (Intangible Cultural Asset) system initiated in 1962, the *Munhwa chunghüng changgi kyehyök saöp* (Long-term Plan for Culture and Arts Revival) of 1974, and the establishment of the *Kungnip kugagwön* (now glossed as the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Centre) and the *Kungnip kugak kodüng hakkyo* (National Classical Music High School) in 1951 and 1972 respectively. Traditional culture came to be seen as a source of Korean identity; the music tradition, although once dying, and protected or fostered by only a small group of concerned and dedicated people, started to be revitalized in the life of modern South Korea.

The government emphasis on traditional culture gives the impression that the efforts were a means rather than an aim. Ch'a Kibyök shares this view. He states, "...the recreation of history through the discovery and re-interpretation of the tradition, without any doubt, is to stimulate modernization and political development" (Ch'a 1986: 131; see also Chöng Yunhyöng 1982: 281).

The supports provided by government, in spite of national policies, have rarely been felt by music circles to be satisfying or appropriate. Often they are considered insignificant. The reason may lie in the role of paragons. That is, the attitude that administrators should have for dealing with artistic activities ought to be delicate and sophisticated—administrators should be interested in the art form but not concerned directly with it (UNESCO 1974: 6). This attitude has been lacking in South Korean arts administration. Thus, the government fails to play the role

of administrator through allowing people who lack interest in the arts to be directly involved in administration.

Nonetheless, the notion that *kugak* is a manifestation of a "tradition," whose roots can be found, started to gain popular support. If we suppose that a culture exists only in performance, as Blacking (1986: 3) suggests, the culture, regardless of its form, has to be continuously filtered. For this reason, Alan Merriam once stated that concepts and behaviour have to be learned (Merriam 1964: 145). Every musician, whether professional or amateur, has to go through a learning process, by which they are trained to present musical sounds to match an aesthetic suitable for their audience.

Traditional music is now channelled mostly through performing organizations, educational institutions, music associations and private classes. Transmission, then, is achieved not by a group of people restricted by social class, but by a cultural group in which participation is by individual choice.

Formal teaching methods mean that orally transmitted culture has become restricted in terms of the elements of improvisation and variation. However, we cannot perpetuated the idea that traditional music can be preserved in identical forms. For "culture" is not merely to be received, but to be performed, recreated, and interpreted by every member of society in every generation.

What is perceived to be the tradition?

Some view tradition as something changeable, dependent on the re-interpretation of beliefs and practices passed down from times long gone.⁸ Others view it as static and unchangeable. Korean scholars tend to combine the two views. They agree that, although tradition is rooted in the past, it does not exist simply because of the past, but can rather be important now or in the future. Thus, while keeping some relationship with the past, tradition functions both as a vital energy to enrich the present and as a measure from which a new culture for the future can be created.

The Korean word for tradition, *chǒnt'ong*, therefore contains a sense of value—faint though it may be—which argues for the preservation and development of good things transmitted from the past. Tradition is held to change depending on regional, periodic or other conditional factors. Tradition is neither uniform nor singular. And, tradition retains characteristics which make the culture of a specific group consistent and distinct. So, when Koreans this century experienced a conflicting sense of value as the "old" faded and the "new" took shape, they realized their responsibility to re-create the tradition of the past and pass it on to the future (Han'guk chǒngshin munhwa yǒn'guwǒn 1978: 198, 199, 223, and 224).

The concept of nation, in South Korea expressed by prefixing either *minjok-* or *han'guk-*, was used in relation to the process of tradition-building. The use of either term surely gave Koreans a sense of their historic identity, the aim being to revive or recreate a lost or threatened characteristic of nationhood through the study of the customs, language, religion, folklore and other features of

the past. What Smith (1979: 49) regards as one of the most potent ingredients of late 18th and 19th century nationalism, for example—the emphasis on social unity, the patriotic belief in linguistic and cultural identity—was practised in Korea within the concept "education with nationality" (*kukchŏk irrŭn kyoyuk*). Nationalism is, in its essence, a mass movement, yet the elite played an important role in shaping the national ideal in Korea as in many other countries.

As for an artistic activity which illustrates this, *madanggŭk*,⁹ essentially a traditional outdoor theatrical performance style, is worthy of note. *Madanggŭk* denotes a movement actively developed by university students during the 1970s. The motive behind *madanggŭk* was to step over the cultural boundary of the older generation in order to discover a source of new cultural creation from within the Korean artistic tradition (Pak T'aesun 1986: 188).

Among other performing arts, *t'alch'um* masked dances also featured prominently as a medium in which common people could take part with great enthusiasm (Sŏ Chungŏk 1982: 335). Perhaps their popularity stemmed from the fact that they allowed students to express their desires for national homogeneity. Without doubt, the essence of tradition was found in folk genres in which a strong sense of mass culture could be identified. This explains why the 1970s cultural movement has been largely based on folk performance arts. While participation in such genres has become more popular among some groups, it is also clear that the university movement runs counter to the activities to foster heritage promoted by academic organizations and the government-sponsored *Muhyŏng munhwajae* system.

The aims of the university movement, generally known as the *minjung munhwa undong*, the mass culture movement, were genuinely positive. But the movement itself has been seen by many as somewhat antagonistic and agitative. Critics have tended to see little in common with established activities. The *minjung munhwa undong* further gives the impression that only the structure of traditional culture has been borrowed to use as a means of political statement, whereas institutional activities have frozen traditional culture (Pak T'aesun 1986: 195). Because of this distinction, some who research the traditional performance arts oppose any staged production. However, the need to recreate traditional folk arts as staged arts seems to be generally realized.

The general impression of traditional Korean music as old-fashioned or vulgar, because it represents the culture of the *kisaeng*, and/or is in some way inferior, still exists, but is declining. Korean nationalism will persist while Koreans feel there is value in taking from the tradition. Since music is a social product, it is not possible to imagine a society where music would not exist. And so, the traditional music of Korea, having passed through a serious crisis caused by external and internal change, has survived only because it has taken on new roles in modern Korea. It now exists as concert products, for tourism, and as cultural artefacts which help to establish national identity. Changes in the social fabric of a community can thus be seen to influence not only music but also the ways in which the music repertory is transmitted (for parallel cases elsewhere, see Bohlman 1988: 15).

In the 1980s, a new emphasis of the government as an activator for cultural promotion appeared. This began to narrow the gap between musicians and the general public. Governmental efforts were called for by UNESCO in the

early 1980s (To Chŏngil 1987: 188), but the South Korean government has remained one step behind the international arts community.

In conclusion, the existing music culture of South Korea is, in effect, a result of history. *Yangak* (western music), *yuhaengga* or *taejung kayo* (popular songs) and *shin kugak*, new compositions written for traditional instrumental ensembles, are all products of Korea in the 20th century. Could not this be living proof of how people make sense of culture?

NOTES

1. Discontinuation seems to be attributed to three main factors: the advent of western culture, the Japanese occupation, and the flood of American popular culture since liberation in 1945. Korean scholars most frequently refer to the Japanese occupation, although reasons are seldom documented or well explained. This is the dominant view amongst the general public, although some might point out that it was the Koreans themselves who abandoned or turned against their traditions in the pursuit of something new (Yi Ūlho 1978; Kim Ch'öljun 1986: 164 and 339-346)
2. The first official use of *kugak* was in 1907, when the music department of the royal court (*Aakpu*) incorporated the term into titles for the head and elder musicians (*kugak sajang* and *kugaksa*). In Japanese, the term had appeared in 1878 to denote "national music." No Tongŭn asserts that a Japanese official resident in Korea referred to *kugak* a year earlier, in 1906 (1989: 13).
3. For details on the influence of American culture, see Yi Kangsu (1987: 130-172) and Koryŏ taehakkyo asia munje yŏn'gusŏ (eds) (1984).
4. There are two possible reasons: i) they had better educational opportunities which, due to social acceptance, meant they could experience western music more readily

than traditional Korean music; ii) they belonged to a social strata which actively experienced the cultures of advanced nations.

5. The division between "quasi" and "genuine" is not applicable in any single music culture. Barnett points out that individuals must "work out of a cultural background which provides them with certain potentials for innovation and certain conditions within which they must operate (cited in Merriam 1964: 323). Music culture, then, is the product of members of a given society.
6. This view is still common. The strong association with *kisaeng* may have evolved in the early 1900s, as female court entertainers were absorbed into the *kisaeng chohap*, associations more commonly known as *kwŏnbŏn*. This changed both traditional functions and hierarchies, as Chang Sahun has discussed (1974: 38-40).
7. The Japanese Government-General promoted this as a way to rationalize their rule over the Korean peninsula. *Shingmin sagwan* exaggerated the influence of Chinese culture and underestimated the uniqueness of Korean culture. Such a view still retains considerable influence.
8. "Tradition" is defined here as in the Collins English Dictionary: "the body of thought, practices and so forth... belonging to a particular country, people, family, or institution over a relatively long period. Note two conditions: a sense of belonging to a specific group, and the need for continuous transmission.
9. *Madanggŭk* has been adopted as a new theatrical style by both amateur and professional groups. Texts are often satirical.

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