

KOREA IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

ON FIRST HEARING THE COURT NIGHTINGALE (Reflections on a personal view of Korean music in the 1970s)*

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The 1970s would prove to be a fateful decade for *gugak*, traditional Korean music. Its greatest modern historian, Professor Lee Hye-ku, was at the height of his analytical powers; after decades of neglect through the colonial and post-war eras, its popularity was growing among South Korean music students and beginning to experience a long overdue revival in popular awareness; even in the Western world it was greeted with acclaim, almost certainly for the first time ever.

When I first set foot in Seoul in 1972 I knew very little about Korea and nothing whatever about its music. I was researching Chinese music, and a terse mention in William Henthorn's *A History of Korea* that Emperor Song Huizong had sent King Yejong two huge gifts of its latest ceremonial and ritual music encouraged me to try and discover more about this. Being unable to get a visa for the People's Republic of China I headed instead for South Korea.¹

Having asked to stay with a Korean family I was invited into the home of Yi Chaesuk in Changŭi-dong. It was the beginning of a friendship that would shape my life for decades to come. The very first evening after my arrival she took me to the old National Theater in Myŏngdong (Figure 1) for a performance on stage of traditional music and dance. It was a programme of mixed *tangak* and *hyangak*,² which seemed to bear no resemblance to the Chinese music that I was familiar with and interested in, and culture shock was immediately added to my jet lag!

Yi Chaesuk was a teacher of *kayagŭm* in the College of Music at Seoul National University (SNU), a well known recitalist, and the creator of a recently published system for transcribing the microtonal shading of traditional *kayagŭm sanjo* into Western stave notation. The following morning she introduced me to Professor Lee

* A talk given at the Korean Cultural Centre, London, on 28 April 2010.



Figure 1. The National Theater, Myŏngdong

Hye-ku, Dean of the College.³ When I explained what I wanted to research, however, he seemed to be unwilling to help, saying, first, that I should not simply approach Korea as a repository of *Chinese* culture, and, second, that until I knew something about *Korean* music from the inside, I wouldn't be able to understand what it was that I was reading about. He was perfectly right.

And so it was that one very hot summer's day in early June I arrived at the National Classical Music Institute (*Kungnip kugagwŏn*) on Namsan, to be welcomed by its director, Sŏng Kyŏngnin. In those days the NCMI shared premises with its High School, facing the site on which the new National Theater was being built. To my horror, Director Sŏng informed me that I had – through Lee Hye-ku's intercession – been allocated lessons with Choi Choong'ung (*kayagŭm*) and Chung Jaegak (*piri*). I was the first Englishman to have turned up there, and this was the beginning of my second stage of culture shock!

The Seoul through which I travelled daily to Namsan, by generally old and overcrowded buses, was still struggling to recover from the war, and people had plenty of grumbles. The capital still exerted its age-old pull on all countryside families aspiring to better themselves and streets were overcrowded with pedestrians. Their sudden emptying one lunchtime in July, as everyone crowded indoors to try and

watch film of the Red Cross delegation on its first epoch-making visit to P'yŏngyang, created an eerie stillness and quiet. Signs of economic austerity and constraints on freedom were obvious, even to a bewildered newcomer, though evidence of post-war recovery was clear. Ugly concrete flyovers straddled the equally ugly buildings of the Japanese colonial period. Public transport was badly overcrowded, taxis were few and far between, and there were almost no privately-owned cars. The first subway line was being dug and laid, which for the time being led to traffic jams and long delays. Troops guarded the few bridges across the Han River, the curfew curtailed everybody's evening activities, and taxis were almost impossible to find late at night. Monthly air-raid practices drove people off the streets (and me, with music teachers and fellow students, into the shelters below the High School where the Classical Music Institute worked). Koreans (like my Yi family) with a foreign contact could gain entry to the US forces' Commissariat, otherwise supplies of Western food and drink, like scotch whisky, Maxwell House coffee, and digestive biscuits were unobtainable). Little English or even romanised *han'gŭl* was in evidence, though as a sinologist I appreciated the widespread use of Chinese characters. From time to time itinerant vendors would climb aboard buses and sell the latest lists, along with such things as socks, dictionaries, ball-point pens, and mouse-traps. One of the most valuable things that I thus acquired was a list of government-approved Chinese characters with their *han'gŭl* equivalents.

The next two months put me on a physical, intellectual and emotional roller-



Figure 2. Yi Chaesuk



Figure 3. The Court Nightingale Dance

coaster. Trying to play and to understand the two instruments and an unfamiliar notational system using non-standard Chinese characters, when taught individually in exceptional heat by two outstanding but uncompromising virtuosi, caused me intense pain, both physical and mental. I was suitably ashamed one day when Chung Jaegak, no doubt bored beyond endurance by my feeble efforts, lay down on the floor and went to sleep. On the other hand I felt genuinely satisfied if and when he praised my playing, saying that I must have been out on the beer the night before! It was good teaching psychology! To make up for my blistered fingers and the pressure of practising at home within Yi Chaesuk's ever-attentive earshot, I would marvel at the sound of her own playing and the *sanjo* lessons I heard her giving her own students in the house (Figure 2). And even if I had to force myself to catch the bus up Namsan in the mornings I was at least consoled by the thought that my labours were as nothing compared with the sufferings of the workmen with wet flannels on their heads chipping away in the mid-day sun at huge blocks of granite to build the slowly rising National Theater opposite the High School.

I found occasional opportunities to witness performances of traditional court dance by the beautiful girls who belonged to the NCM dance troupe. Some of these were performed by soloists but most by teams. I particularly remember the thrill I felt on seeing the Sword Dance, the Drum Dance, and the Court Nightingale Dance for the first time. I was immensely excited by the possibility that in the Sword Dance I might be witnessing something that represented a direct cultural link with Tang China and the Drum Dance with Koryŏ Korea.⁴ But for sheer aesthetic and breathtaking quality nothing could rival the Court Nightingale Dance (*Ch'unaengjŏn*), one of the last surviving solo pieces in the formerly extensive court repertoire (Figure 3).

Performed by a female or male dancer entirely within the confined space of a small woven mat, it represents even today the acme of control and sophistication. The performer's torso and shoulders rise and fall very slowly as she advances, retires and inclines in time with the music. Her entire body, limbs and hands are concealed by a gorgeous costume with long sleeves, and the viewer's attention becomes concentrated on the movement of her arms and flicks of her wrists. Though the dance may only date from the early nineteenth century and was probably Korean rather than Chinese in origin,⁵ it nevertheless represented the ultimate refinement visible in dance style at either court. Sometimes a special performance of *gugak* was put on to welcome a visiting dignitary. On such occasions it was customary at the NCMI to position the guest and Director Sǒng Kyǒngnin on chairs at one end of the hall, facing the orchestra seated on the floor at the other. The dancers performed in the intervening space. One of the principles of court dance, as expounded in the 1970s, was that the dancers should show no sign of emotion or awareness of their surroundings. Having encountered them in the High School corridors I knew just how lively and excitable they really were, but so disciplined were they that not a hint of this showed when they were performing, and I found them hardly recognisable. On one such occasion I was privileged to watch from the balcony at the end of the main hall. In the course of one dance two lines of girls glided slowly down the hall, eyes straight ahead and unfocussed, evidently oblivious of the two spectators sitting straight ahead of them. As they got closer to them I was amused to see the guest growing increasingly anxious



Figure 4. Kim Ch'ǒnhǔng's
Court Nightingale Dance



Figure 5. Lee Hye-ku in 2008, aged 100

and uncomfortable. When, at the very last moment, they wheeled away to right and left with only inches to spare he was quite unable to conceal his sense of relief.

The musicians and dancers who performed on such occasions were, so to speak, descended from the last court orchestra of the Chosŏn dynasty. In 1972 just one of them, the great dance expert Kim Ch'ŏnhŭng (Figure 4), had actually been a member of that orchestra as a boy, and from him I heard something of the exacting discipline maintained at the court.⁶ Before a performance the musicians were marched to their playing positions and sat down cross-legged on the floor. There they must remain for hours, before, during and after the entertainment, without showing any sign of discomfort. Anyone who made any unnecessary movement would be hit with a stick by the *chef d'orchestre*, and perhaps incur further punishment when the whole ordeal was over.

A visit to the annual performance of *Munmyoak* at the Confucian Shrine provided me with an introduction to *aak* (Confucian music), and my third culture shock of the summer. This, I sensed with renewed excitement, put me within fingertip distance of the rites and culture of ancient Confucianism as it was preserved nowhere else in the modern world: it was the survival of just that very Chinese music that I had come to Korea to research, and this must be a taste of what formal court life in ancient China might have felt like. I was actually jumping to rather emotional and naïve conclusions, but as I watched the eight lines of eight male dancers making the slow, stately movements of the civil and military dances, exactly as described in the

Analects of Confucius,⁷ my excitement was pardonable. Here, for example, I got my first sight of some of the most esoteric of ancient Chinese instruments, the ocarina (Ch. *xun*, Kor. *hun*), the tiger (Ch. *hu*, Kor. *ö*), the tub (Ch. *zhu*, Kor. *ch'uk*), and the huge *zhian'gu* (Kor. *kön'go*) drum. What's more, on that lovely September morning, I was almost the only foreigner in evidence. Never, I believe, have I felt as privileged as I was that summer at the welcome and attention that I was given in Korea.

I returned to Seoul in 1974. By this time SNU had moved from its old downtown buildings to a new, spacious, and airy campus in Kwanak-gu. But the sense of freedom afforded by the wide open spaces, multiple sports grounds, attractive vegetation and rugged granite hillsides was contradicted by the military guards at the main gates, and it was here that I had my first encounter with student demonstrations, and the whiff of tear-gas. Now at last Lee Hye-ku (Figure 5) was ready and waiting to let me in on the secrets of *gugak* history – almost literally ‘secrets’ because apart from Professor Chang Sahun, who didn't speak English, he was almost the only person working in the field at that time. I remember lying awake at night, wondering if I would ever get used to the hard floor and almost equally hard bean-filled pillow, and struggling to understand the implications of what I was reading about in the *Song Shi*, *Koryösa*, etc.



Figure 6. Farmers' music at the Suwön Folk Village

This trip also gave me the chance to visit the Suwŏn Folk Village prior to its opening later that year (October), and to see the musicians practising there (Figure 6). I hadn't encountered the concept of the open-air working museum before, and I wondered if this was the first such project in the world: certainly it filled me, as a historian with a rapidly growing interest in the culture of traditional Korea, with fascination and enthusiasm.⁸ It was here that I first saw farmers' music, *nongak*, being played – if not spontaneously – then at least in more or less appropriate surroundings rather than the confined space of a theatre or concert hall.

In 1978 a third trip to Korea coincided with another significant opening, that of the Sejong Cultural Center, celebrated with a grand Arts Festival between 14 April and 8 July. Not only did these three visits give me unprecedented opportunities to study and enjoy Korean traditional music, they also brought me flattering invitations to give lectures to Koreans on their own traditional music,⁹ and to write an article on Korean musical instruments for the in-flight magazine of Korean Air Lines.¹⁰ During these three visits I was honoured to be assisted by such great scholars as Lee Hye-ku, Chang Sahun, Hwang Byunggi (Figure 7), Kim Kisoo, Hahn Manyoung, Yi Byongwon, and Song Bang Song. Yet to my never-ending astonishment, the music to be heard in the coffee shops and even the concert halls was almost invariably Western; more than ninety per cent of the students in the music colleges practised Western classical music; the greater part of the programmes played through the opening season at the Sejong Cultural Center was Western, and even when traditional Korean music was played, it was mostly in the Small Hall, and attracted small audiences and earned sparse applause.

Unlike today, performances of Korean traditional music were infrequent in the 1970s and attracted scant attention compared with Western music, either pop or classical. But there were encouraging signs: student enrolments on courses in *gugak*



Figure 7. Hwang Byunggi

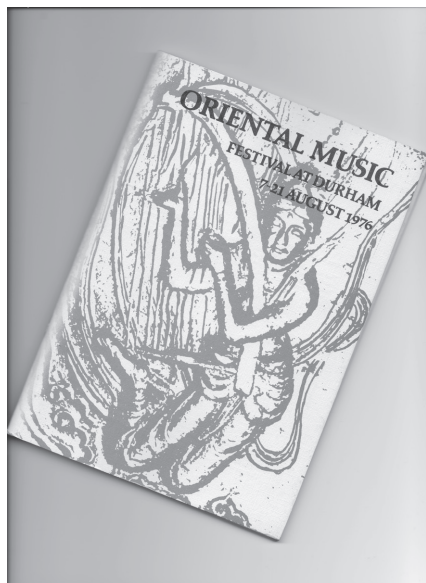


Figure 8. 1976 Durham Festival programme



Figure 9. Kim Sohee

increased through the 1970s and were accompanied by the success of the *Tonga Ilbo*'s newly introduced *kayagŭm* competition;¹¹ the Little Angels paid their first visit to Europe, including the United Kingdom, in 1973; 1978 saw the formation of the now well-known percussion group Samulnori.

My growing obsession with Korea and its music resulted in the creation of the Durham Oriental Music Festival (1976–82) (Figure 8). To this, thanks to the generous support of government and musicians themselves in Korea, I was able to bring to the UK such outstanding instrumentalists, singers and dancers as Hwang Byunggi, Yi Chaesuk, Kim Chŏngja, Kim Sohee (Figure 9), Mun Ilji and many more. In the course of three unprecedented festivals such great Korean traditional music as *sanjo*, *kagok*, and *sinawi* was played, folk song and *p'ansori* were sung, and individual pieces such as *Sujech'ŏn*, *Yŏmillak*, and *Yŏngsan hoesang* were heard in authentic and full version in this country for the very first time. Professor Lee Hye-ku came to Durham to receive an Honorary Doctorate; programmes were broadcast on Radio Three; both the BBC Proms and Edinburgh Festival 'borrowed' performers when they had finished playing in Durham; rising ethnomusicologists such as Keith Howard¹² first encountered Korean music; and even the closed world of musicologists in post-Mao China found itself confronted by the excitement of *gugak*. In response to Beijing musicians' uncomprehending reaction to their first encounter with it during the 1982 Durham Oriental Music Festival a seminar was arranged to discuss what was meant by 'traditional' music. The leader of the Chinese ensemble from

the Beijing Conservatory, Fan Kun, later wrote an article describing the seminar in *Renmin yinyue*,¹³ and soon, as the Maoist era drew to a close, Chinese musicologists were at last freed to explore and enjoy the depths of their own ‘ancient music’.

Notes

- 1 The unprecedented and hugely significant gifts were sent in 1114 and 1116. The results of my research were eventually published in ‘Music as a Factor in Sung-Koryŏ Diplomatic Relations, 1069–1126’, *T’oung Pao*, vol. LXII (1976), 4–5, pp. 199–218, and ‘Sung Hui Tsung’s Musical Diplomacy and the Korean Response’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XLIV (1981), Part 3, pp. 509–21.
- 2 *Tangak* refers to music of traditional Chinese origin, *hyangak* to that of native Korean and other foreign origin.
- 3 Only as the years passed would I come to appreciate the greatness of Lee Hye-ku’s scholarship, the significance of his lifetime’s contribution to the unraveling of *gugak*, Korean traditional music, and his genuine humility and kindness as a human being. See my ‘Memories of Professor Lee Hye-ku’, in *Essays on Music Offered to Dr Lee Hey-ku in Honor of his Hundredth Birthday* (Seoul, 2008), pp. 75–80.
- 4 I was wrong about the likely source of the Sword Dance (*Kŭmmu*): it may indeed be possible to trace its origins to the Tang era (AD 618–907), but is now thought to commemorate a Korean youth of the Silla kingdom, perhaps a member of the *hwarang* order. Its costumes retain a military flavour. The Drum Dance (*Mugo*) is said to date from the late thirteenth century, and underwent substantial changes in the early and late Chosŏn dynasty.
- 5 Although it is frequently referred to in English as the Court Nightingale Dance, the name in both Korean and Chinese means Spring Nightingale (or Oriole) Dance. The *Muja Chinjak ūigwe* of 1828 indicates that it was composed by Prince Ikchong in the early nineteenth century, although the *Chinch’an ūigwe* of 1848 says firmly that it was composed in 1469. Mun Ilji suggests that Ikchong rearranged and completed the dance. See her ‘Ch’unaengjŏn (Nightingale Dance), a Korean Court Dance’, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 15, 1983. Other dances that are still performed provide evidence of the repertoire inherited from China as far back as the twelfth century, such as the Ball-throwing Dance (*P’ogurak*). See also the excellent PhD thesis by Soe Jung Rock, *Ancient Korean and Japanese Court Dance: Historical Relationship and Transmission*, SOAS, London, 2010.
- 6 1909–2007. “His contributions to Korean culture, which include dancing before Korea’s last king in Ch’angdŏk Palace and playing music for an elaborate ceremony to relocate the tomb of Korea’s last queen, were formally recognized many times, and twice by the Korean government when he was designated a National Living Treasure for his expertise in important performing art forms of Korea.” University of Hawai’i, 4 May 2009. <http://hawaii.edu/news/article.php?aId=2850>
- 7 *Analects*, Book 3, no. 1.
- 8 Beamish Open Air Museum, Co. Durham, England, opened in May 1972. A smaller but somewhat equivalent Asian example, the Hong Kong Sung Dynasty Village, opened in 1979.

- 9 For example the Korea-UK Society, the Korean Musicological Society, and the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch.
- 10 *Morning Calm*, vol. 2 no. 3, August 1978, pp. 27–31.
- 11 Seoul National University was the first to establish a department of traditional music, in 1959. It was followed in 1974 by Hanyang University, and by Ewha and Chugye.
- 12 Now Professor of Music at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
- 13 *Renmin Yinyue* ('People's Music'), no 178, Beijing: January 1980, pp. 38–40; trans. K. Pratt, 'A Discussion on Chinese National Musical Traditions', *Asian Music*, XII-2, 1981, pp. 1–16.