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EDITORIAL OFFICE

#415, 600th Anniversary Building
Academy of East Asian Studies
Sungkyunkwan University
53 Myeongnyun-Dong 3Ga
Jongno-Gu, Seoul (110-745)
Tel: +82 (0)2 760 0713
Fax: +82 (0)2 760 0780
e-mail: sjeas@skku.edu
<http://sjeas.skku.edu>

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Staging Korean Traditional Performing Arts Abroad: Important Intangible Intercultural Performance Issues¹

Roald H. Maliangkay
The Australian National University

ABSTRACT

Since the early 1960s the South Korean government has tried hard to promote its cultural heritage abroad. The degree of success with which performances of Korean traditional performing arts have been staged has increased, but in their efforts to reach audiences both performers and the organisers have had to make all kinds of adjustments. While some of these were practical, others reveal that organisers and audiences have expectations and preconceptions that may be considered both driving forces and obstacles. In this article I discuss the ways in which the staging of Korean traditional performing arts in the West has been approached and discuss the main issues faced.

Keywords: intercultural performance, intangible cultural property, cultural policy, self-Orientalism, exoticism

Introduction

In their efforts to promote Korea's cultural heritage in North America and Europe (hereafter "the West"), South Korean cultural institutions have had to deal with a lot of different issues. Apart from the fact that Korean culture remains relatively unknown among non-Koreans there—that is, at least, for things considered worthy of pride—organizers of cultural events have faced the challenge of competing with the powerful cultural icons of neighbouring China and Japan. Other hurdles were the practicalities of the art forms, and the notion that foreign audiences might not be able to fully appreciate Korean traditional art forms without some form of adaptation. In order to overcome these obstacles and create recognisable cultural icons that foreign audiences can easily associate with Korea, both organizers and performers have had to make some compromises and almost invariably that meant allowing some changes in the traditions. In the 1990s they created performances that had little to do with tradition² and promoted them as authentic, seemingly without any opposition. Those performances commonly included pieces belonging to different social classes, as well as, occasionally, a fast *kayagŭm* (twelve-stringed Korean long zither) piece clearly influenced by Western 2/4-beat rhythms, or a set with drummers performing while moving around the theatre with 1m-deep, oversized barrel drums uncommon to Korea, and with little more than a white cotton cloth covering their intimate parts, very much like modern "neo-traditional" *wadaiko* (Japanese drums) performers. These hotchpotch shows will have been considered useful in order to entertain foreign audiences, but it seems

A simplified image of the *Honil gangri yechodae guk do jido* appears in the front cover by the kindly permission of Ryukoku University, Japan, which is holding the ownership of this old map from early Joseon.

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unlikely that they ignited an interest in Korean culture beyond the art forms themselves. Although they may have been memorable to some, performances like that are inconsistent with other performances of traditional Korean art, and will appear too polished even to lay audiences. The current phenomenon of the 'Korean Wave' of popular culture throughout Asia is, on the other hand, more likely to create an interest in Korean traditions, because it entails many—albeit often beautified—impressions of Korean culture throughout history. It seems to me that one ought to try to present Korean traditional art forms in ways that as accurately as possible reflect on their past. This would entail allowing audiences to experience however alien an art in a form that at best approximates the commonly accepted original of the version chosen and emphasises the uniqueness of the culture associated. It is important to note, however, that some of these supposedly "original" forms need not be old at all, but there always seems to be some general consensus among both performers and academics on what version of an art is worth preserving. Although relatively unknown forms of Korean traditional performing art have always had some appeal with foreign, lay audiences, their success abroad depends on the degree to which their performers and organisers are willing to engage the audience. So far, performers and organisers have tended to either consider the arts to be instantly appealing as they are, with or without adjustments to their style of performance, or ensured that there were at least some points of reference for the audiences, for example, in that they evoked reminisced or compared with well-known features from other cultures. The fact that on many occasions foreign audiences included a significant number of overseas and first- or second-generation Korean immigrants was often ignored, as they did not constitute the primary target for these events.

The experiences I relate below reveal, however, that many of the adjustments made to the performances were probably caused as much by the non-Korean audiences in the West, where many sought to experience something of a unique introduction to an unrefined art form, as by artists and organisers. The audiences' reactions expressed a longing for exoticism, for instance, in that they did not want to be told about the limited significance of the art at its place of origin, or the commercialism traditionally involved. The organisers of cultural events often catered for this, be it intentionally or not. Many sought a balance between providing a unique experience and supplying sufficient information. Yet one must of course be careful not to dichotomise the organisers and the audiences, as that would constitute an oversimplification. After all, many of those involved in the staging of Korean traditional performing arts have either studied in the West or in Korea, and they are therefore well aware of the various cultural differences. In this article, I

shall therefore not so much focus on individuals per se, but try to make a number of general observations that identify several key issues that play a role in intercultural performances and name a few of the practical difficulties faced in the case of Korean traditional performing art. I shall look into how and why the arts or their performance may be adjusted by those involved, and describe some of the causes and effects. In doing so, I will narrow my focus to traditional music because it incorporates all the issues described and because of my personal experiences with organising performances thereof.

The Scheme

The major promotion scheme that allowed for many performances of Korean traditional performing art abroad and forms the basis of the issues discussed here was first set in motion on 10 January 1962 with the promulgation of Law 961, Cultural Properties Protection Law(CPPL, *Munhwajae pohobŏp*). Article 1 states that it was to both "seek the cultural progress of the nation and at the same time contribute to the development of the culture of mankind by preserving and utilizing cultural properties".³ On the basis of the Law, a new system of safeguarding not only tangible, but also all kinds of intangible cultural properties was set in motion. Traditions were surveyed and documented, and if they were considered particularly valuable, assigned a specific Important Intangible Cultural Property (*Chungyo muhyŏng munhwajae*) number. As one came to believe that merely designating cultural properties would be insufficient to ensure their transmission and performance, on 10 August 1970 the Law was revised, and the designation tied not only to the appointment of so-called holders(*pyuju*), more commonly referred to as human cultural properties(*in'gan munhwajae*), but also to their financial support.⁴

The system was set up by the Park Chung Hee[Pak Chŏnghŭi] administration(1961-1979) as part of its efforts to boost feelings of national pride. According to Howard Becker, a state's intervention in the arts may help it to reach various objectives:

[...] the preservation of public order [...] the development of a national culture [...] as a good in itself and as something which promotes national unity ("our heritage") and the nation's reputation among other nations.⁵

Officially, the idea to stage Korea's cultural heritage abroad at least for many years also constituted part of a scheme to promote Korea as a tourist destination. According to Kim Kwangok, Korean cultural events came to be considered as having political and commercial potential. He said:

³ Office of Cultural Properties 1994:37.

⁴ Chŏng Chaejong 1985: 5; Office of Cultural Properties 1994:39, Art. 5.

⁵ Becker 1982:180.

¹ With due modesty, I wish to dedicate this short piece to one of the greatest performing artists I have ever met, shaman Chŏng Munsan, who so sadly and abruptly left this world in 2006. I would also like to sincerely thank Dr Charlie Fox and Dr Brian Myers for their invaluable comments.

² I believe all traditions change over time, but that sudden changes have to be endorsed by the majority or a selected number of authorities, categories that here do not incorporate a predominantly non-Korean, Western audience.

[...] the tourism industry in the 1960s was based on the political motivation of promoting Korea's image abroad and the national economic strategy for the acquisition of foreign capital; it is only recently [early 1990s] that the idea of tourism as a kind of culture industry which should be based on the production and spread of art, folklore and traditional customs has gained support.⁶

Kim seems to suggest that the idea of staging of Korean culture abroad in order to generate soft power existed already in the 1960s. That implies that tourism was at first seen as a more politically useful tool and only later as a money-making industry. It seems unlikely, however, that the promotion of Korean traditional art forms abroad has ever been a form of commercial marketing aimed at foreigners. It is more likely that tourism, now and then, has formed part of the administration's efforts to promote nationalism domestically as it can foster pride over recognition and praise of Korean culture abroad. After all, as a potential travel destination Japan and China have always been much better known in the West and although the commercial success of Korean traditional art forms abroad has indeed increased, as export products their potential remains negligible compared to the enormous selling power of, for example, those of China and Japan. It is likely, therefore, that it wasn't so much a change in the recognition of Korean traditional art forms abroad that led organizers and promoters to adjust their objective later on, but, rather, the growing appreciation for Korean cinema and pop music in the West and East Asia since the early 1990s. It is the pop culture of Korea and its adoption and inclusion of traditional elements that now has a significant impact on the recognition of Korean traditional culture abroad. Returning to Becker's words, South Korea's soft power might indeed help it to establish a stronger cultural presence vis-à-vis neighbouring countries and improve mutual understanding, but efforts to add to the nation's soft power have so far rarely preceded commercial success, and in the Netherlands, for example, they still fail to address long-standing issues detrimental to Korea's reputation there, including the harsh treatment of prisoners by Korean guards in Japanese war camps, South Korea's still thriving adoption scheme, and the maltreatment of animals for consumption, and estimates as to the degree of commitment to this end should be moderate.

South Korea's efforts to preserve its heritage were to reinforce feelings of nationalism and help eliminate the destabilising effects of foreign influence. John Martins points out that efforts to freeze a form of culture are particularly common among "newly arrived" immigrants,⁷ but I would argue that it is common wherever a community feels the need to protect its identity, in particular when, for example, it is or has been subjected to the pressure of foreign military or economic power(s), or, as in South Korea's case under Park, the government wants to emphasize such that pressure to stimulate nationalism. The nationalist cause also led to crude statements on racial purity. The Park administration championed Korea's relative

homogeneity and the uniqueness of the Korean race, leaving mixed-race nationals ostracised.⁸ Meanwhile, claims of foreign and cultural imperialism were so common that they reverberate at present. In his *Rebuilding a Nation* (1971), Park Chung Hee says:

In the past century, this brilliant culture had to face the challenges posed by Western civilization. Western thought and technology, which began to be introduced when Korea adopted an open-door policy in the 1870s, first came as a shock to most Koreans. Even more serious was the later attempt by the Japanese colonialists to destroy Korean culture, as a result of which our culture came to contain fragments of things Japanese, whether we liked it or not. By the time of our national liberation in 1945, a considerable part of the culture had become distorted. It was at this time that the tide of Western ideas and customs hit our land with full force.⁹

To protect Korea's integrity, the administration's involvement with the arts therefore also entailed measures of control. Although, ironically, the CPPL was, in fact, strongly based on a Japanese precedent,¹⁰ these measures included banning all forms of expression that were reminiscent of Japanese culture or otherwise subversive, such as those mentioning, let alone favouring, communism or pacifism. And since shamanism was deemed a form of backward superstition that would stand in the way of modernisation, shamanic rituals were stripped of any religious significance when performed in public.¹¹

Already from the mid-1960s, human treasures and their star students were sent abroad, often as part of an ensemble of the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (Kungnip kugagwŏn; hereafter NCKTPA). The government organised concerts abroad either directly or indirectly, such as through Nanjang Cultures and Studio Metaa. The former organisation was officially established with a particular focus on folk percussion music in 2001. It is headed by Kim Duk Soo [Kim Tōksu], one of the leading founders of the style of *Samul nori* (traditional-style four-piece percussion play) that forms the financial basis of the organisation.¹² Metaa was founded by architect Yi Jongho [Chongho] in 1989. It is an agency that specialises in architectural planning and design, as well as the organisation of cultural events. Unlike Nanjang Cultures, however, it does not focus entirely on traditional music, and when I contacted the office in February 2007 organiser Bong-cheon Jeon [Chŏn Pongch'ŏn] told me that the last traditional music event they had been involved in dated from 2005. Because the number of traditional music events abroad was decreasing in general, he expected less

⁶ See Korean National Commission for UNESCO 1995:58.

⁷ Martins 2004:4.

⁸ Lee Na Young, 2006: 113-114, 167-168; Eckert 1991:407.

⁹ Park Chung Hee 1971: 25.

¹⁰ See Maliangkay 1999:chapter 3.

¹¹ See Maliangkay 1999:13; Maliangkay 2006; and Choi Chungmoo 1997:26.

¹² For more on the development of *Samul nori*, see Hesselink 2001.

involvement from private companies in staging Korean traditional music abroad in the future.¹³

The majority of the artists who have performed on public stages abroad have been sponsored by the Korean government, but since the late 1980s, when increasing numbers of Koreans travelled abroad, many have also gone abroad on private occasions either to add to their status or earn some extra money. Lists of state-sponsored traditional music events are available, but they are unlikely to be comprehensive. I surmise that they omit a number of events that were privately organised with government funding since the late 1980s and relied on funds supplied by organisations other than the Korean government. The data I found nonetheless show clear trends in the case of specific countries. According to them, the number of government-sponsored traditional music events staged abroad grew rapidly at least until 2001, from no more than 5 in the 1960s, to an average of 10 in the 1970s and 1980s, to 36 in 1991, 42 in 1996, and 147 in 2001. Figures for 2006 were incomplete at the time of writing, but they suggest a decrease in the total number of performances, which could be partly caused by the current government's focus on pop culture.¹⁴ Whereas in 1991 the countries with the largest number of different events were Japan(17), Russia(5), the US(5) and China(4), ten years later the countries with the largest number of different performances were Japan(18), the US(12), China(5), Russia(5) and France(5). Between 1991 and 2001 the total number of annual events in Europe grew from 5 to 13. As the Korean economy grew, the scale of the performing groups increased both in terms of the number of people participating and in the number of venues abroad. We shall see that the performance of artists abroad certainly does not rely only on the government, but it is safe to say that the government at first focused mostly on court music ensembles and instrumental solo pieces(*sanjo*), but that in the mid 1980s it also added the now increasingly popular *Samul nori*, either under the name of the NCKTPA or that of Kim Duk Soo. In the early nineties, when the number of performances by Kim increased considerably, the government began to also promote other forms of folk music, such as *p'ansori*(epic story singing) and, albeit less consistently, professional folksongs. These genres have since been regularly performed abroad. In selecting its repertoire of folksongs the government has maintained a preference towards *Kyŏnggi minyo*, the refined songs from Kyŏnggi province, over other professional folksong genres associated with the province. This may be because it prefers their relatively faster musical style, but also because other folksong Important Intangible Cultural Properties either originated from the now North-Korean Hwanghae and P'yŏngan provinces, or unlike *Kyŏnggi minyo*, which are commonly sung by individual female singers, entail groups of singers. Groups such as these are more costly and are commonly

dressed in relatively plain costumes, while the women who sing *Kyŏnggi minyo* often perform sitting down in colourful costumes in a way that is similar in presentation to that of the powerful icon of geisha.

Since the mid 1990s, the number of *Samul nori* performances abroad has not decreased. According to the Nanjang Cultures website, the organisation was responsible for approximately 150 performances abroad between 1998 and 2001.¹⁵ However, since then, the improvisational ritual accompaniment music of *Shinawi* and large performing groups that provide a less traditional show of Korean traditional music have also been sent abroad. Sometimes these borrow heavily from Japanese *wadaiko*-style drumming performances by introducing unusually large drums and bare-chested performers. It seems that in the 1990s it was still Japan's traditions that intimidated most. In an interview in 1993, 'holder' of long narrative singing(*p'ansori*) Ahn Sook-Sun[An Suksŏn] said:

"Look at Japan. Their *kabuki* is no match for the richness and maturity of our *p'ansori*. Yet they have made it known to the world through decades of concerted efforts. Today, they have exclusive *kabuki* theatres in downtown Tokyo. We should learn a lesson from the Japanese."¹⁶

It seems logical that a tradition's image is directly related to that of the culture to which it belongs and that efforts to emulate, for example, the success of Japan's traditions are unlikely to be successful if pursued on the basis of a single form of art only, but it seems that this has not prevented some Koreans from trying to do so. The populist *Minjung* movement, which advocated a return to the traditional values of rural society, had a major influence on the appreciation of Korean traditional culture in the 1980s and early to mid 1990s. Although for some time it appeared to endorse the government's selection of cultural properties, eventually many opposed the policy, arguing that it might freeze traditions and hinder their natural development.¹⁷ Claims of cultural imperialism formed very much part of the socio-political ideology that argued that Koreans shared a feeling of loss and resentment that was caused by foreign aggression and that of Japan in particular.¹⁸ It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Japan's icons may still be considered primary targets for emulation.

The fact that the hotchpotch groups invent new styles and mix others that once belonged to different social classes does not appear to be an issue. And it seems to me that it is justifiable as long as it provides a diverse compilation of styles that is distinctly Korean and able to appeal to younger generations. After all, as elsewhere, in Korea the younger generation continues to be a difficult audience to target with traditional art. At the National Folk Art Contests that I observed in

¹³ Jeon Bongcheon, pers. communication, 5 February 2007.

¹⁴ Pak Sŏnghŭi 1995:374-376;
http://www.artsonline.or.kr/yearbook/1992/kukak/1992cc26.jpg, accessed on 13 April 2004;
http://www.kcaf.or.kr/yearbook/2002/kukak/3kukak12.html; and
http://www.arko.or.kr/yearbook/kukak/12_01.html, both accessed on 3 February 2007.

¹⁵ See <http://www.nanjangcultures.com/Nanjang/MgmtNote/MgmtNote03.asp>, accessed on 11 August 2007.

¹⁶ See Chi Junnam 1993:47.

¹⁷ Minjokkut-hoe 1987:191; Choi 1991:54-55.

¹⁸ De Ceuster and Maliangkay 2003:201-212.

the mid 1990s, the high school students in the audience were obligated to attend and they looked bored to the extreme. And at several of the regular Saturday afternoon performances of Korean music and dance that I observed at the NCKTPA in 1995, young students were standing at the exit collecting the used tickets for their friends as "evidence" of their mandatory concert visit.¹⁹ The idea was born, therefore, to allow some adaptation in order to make folk performing arts more palatable to new audiences, comprising young Koreans and foreigners. When, in 1991, 300 visitors to the NCKTPA were asked what they considered the best way to preserve and

transmit traditional Korean music, 19 percent answered that popularisation was the key.²⁰ Surprisingly, the *Minjung* movement was still in full swing around the time of this survey, and its effect would not wear off until after the influence of *Söp'yönje* (1993, dir. Im Kwon Taek [Im Kwōnt'aek]) had subsided. This movie about an itinerant family of folk performers gained such popularity that it had a significant impact on the appreciation of *p'ansori* both domestically and abroad. This appreciation, however, was different for each generation of Koreans, and for those in the teens and twenties, it was often no more than a fleeting attraction.²¹ The younger generations have almost entirely turned their backs on traditional performing art and now once again listen to popular music almost exclusively. Ever since Pak Sōnmi's 'Rap Ch'ang' (1994; *ch'ang*=folk singing), many of Korea's biggest pop stars have used samples of traditional music and lyrics on their albums, but this has not resulted in increased sales of traditional music or Kugak (Korean traditional music) FM listener ratings. Famous examples include Seo Taiji and Boys' 1994 song 'Hayōga', 1TYM's song 'K'waejina ch'ingch'ing' (2000) and MC Sniper's 2003 album 'Ch'ohaeng/First Journey'. Because the bands were unknown in the West when they released their respective albums, it did not lead to a greater appreciation for Korean traditional music among foreigners.

Audiences and Their Expectations

Roland Barthes has shown how images may be "read" differently depending on their readers' cultural backgrounds.²² His findings do not entail any measure of appreciation depending on the image's familiarity, but nationalists often imply as much on the basis of foreigners' ability to "read" their images. Similarly, during South Korea's military administrations (1948-1988), it was common to suggest that Western audiences, or at least those comprised of a majority of non-Koreans, might not be able to fully appreciate Korean traditional art forms. Park Chung Hee's rhetoric often included references to the uniqueness of Korean culture, and the natural differences between Westerners and Koreans:

Orientals possess a mysterious, unified, and harmonized spiritual culture that

can scarcely be understood by Westerners, who have different ways of thinking and different systems of logic. Although it is risky to generalize, it is clear that Oriental cultures have a certain gentle, mild rhythm and harmony.²³

Besides being blatantly racist, this particular statement is also unquestionably self-Orientalist. It contrasts Koreans and, ironically, Japanese with Westerners on the basis of the former having more mystery and spirituality and the latter being more rational, mundane, and verbal. Although no features are considered superior here, it nonetheless suggests that Asians can be generalised as practising indirect communication and being less rational. Edward Said has shown that it was these two traits in particular that for long were used by Westerners to explain their culture's superiority over any Asian culture. Self-Orientalism is a phenomenon that commonly occurs where the promise of financial gain, now the most common denominator of power in Asia, is in play.²⁴ It certainly does not imply a form of acquiescence to Western superiority, but may be a way of using contrasting traits to one's advantage instead. As I indicated before, one must be careful not to dichotomize the people involved in staging Korean traditional performing art as swayed by only one of two worlds of thought,²⁵ but the experiences show that both organisers and audiences have expectations that to some extent mirror these preconceived notions of Korean or Western culture.

An 'intercultural performance' differs from a performance abroad in that it entails some efforts to communicate both the differences and the similarities between people of different cultures, usually by focusing on recognisable human emotions and experiences. Although Korean culture is not well known in the West, the efforts many performers and organisers make to avoid self-Orientalism and find aspects that can be appreciated, be it perhaps for different reasons, by audiences from different cultures, justifies labelling the results 'intercultural'. The problem lies, however, in that audiences may not always be aware of the adjustments made, and that they may not find an intercultural performance engaging at all. The term therefore remains rather subjective in its application. It seems to me that to successfully stage Korean traditional music abroad entails making sure that the audiences have some understanding of some of the compromises made to stage the art, such as time compression, gender representation—such as when an all-male or all-female group is preferred, while according to tradition the group should be mixed or of the opposite gender to that of the group selected—and scale. The way in which the staging of performances in new contexts, and in particular for foreign audiences, leads to new inventions has been widely studied.²⁶ Since such compromises are very common, our attention should focus on the practicalities that cause them and on informing the audiences

¹⁹ See also Maliangkay 1999: chapter 4.7; chapter 8.2.

²⁰ Kwak Yonghyo 1991:52.

²¹ James and Kim 2002:144.

²² Barthes 1977:26.

²³ Park Chung Hee 1971:25.

²⁴ Said 1979:40, 325-324.

²⁵ See also Everett 2005:177.

²⁶ Maliangkay 2003:223-245; Bharucha 1990:44; Elschek 1991:40.

thereof. Due to the power of the popular media and technology-related cultural industries the younger generations will remain difficult to reach, at least as long as their interest in Korean culture is not stimulated through Korea's rich popular art. Following the example of anime, popular media can be effectively utilised to stimulate an interest in, for example, old customs and ancient legends. But if guides and handouts are all organisers have to work with, the information included should give audiences some idea of the history of the art, its intricacies, as well as its place in Korean culture today. Some may consider it unnecessary or somewhat dishonourable to explain the uniqueness of a Korean art form vis-à-vis a similar one in China or Japan, but some mention thereof might also help audiences to understand the art's significance, especially when the special characteristic of the Korean art is positively compared. Background information seems to be of crucial importance. It is the difference between a one-sided, silent film-like representation of the art and a form of intercultural communication.

Chan E. Park rightly points out that the organizers of intercultural events in their effort to "educate" foreign audiences about *p'ansori* commonly begin their program notes with the mention of the art's status as a cultural asset.²⁷ When the art forms fail to convince, however, creating high expectations in this way may be counterproductive. Rather than focusing primarily on the art forms' status in Korea, therefore, it is important to explain in detail which aspects of the performance are valued by Koreans, and why, for example, the art has been appointed an Important Intangible Cultural Property in the first place. To make the audience fully aware of the many intricacies of a performance is impossible, though it is wrong to suggest foreign audiences may never fully appreciate a form of art. They may simply appreciate aspects other than those valued by Koreans. According to Chidananda Dasgupta, it is impossible for people of one culture to apprehend another totally upon the terms of the first. He says:

Perforce, an Indian audience will understand a Japanese film and an American audience a Kathakali performance in its own way. That understanding, misunderstanding, if you like, is bound to be absorbed and reflected within the culture of the receiver—even the most well informed.²⁸

In the case of narrative art forms, to communicate with the foreign audiences and truly convey the art forms' drama and humour is a challenge. The aspect of drama is usually partly music-based and partly lyrical or sub-textual, so ideally one ought to at least provide simultaneous translation or subtitling that does not only explain what is said, but does so in a style similar to that of the original. Provided they can read the text and follow the movements on stage, in this way audiences should be able to not only better appreciate the physical movements on stage, but also the colourful metaphors and vocal synchronicity. And even though humour is to some

extent culture-specific, Chan Park, an academic and performer who on occasion provides very carefully rendered literary translations of her words and lyrics during a performance, has found that as long as the words are more or less clear, foreign audiences may actually find humour in areas where Koreans do not. Yet the problem is that providing translations may not only lead to some "contamination" of the original, for instance because of the sounds of the words of the target language, but it also rules out improvisation, an essential part of many folk traditions.²⁹

What remains, however, is the fact that the staging of an unusual or rare art form creates expectations. Western audiences, whether out of a form of—romantic or positivist—Orientalism or the feeling that their own Western folk culture has been irreparably popularized or perhaps has lost its spirituality,³⁰ are inclined to consider the art performed to be an important tradition and expect it to prove its worth through subtlety and allusions to religion.³¹ John Corbett argues that the promise of exotic music is no different to Western composers:

What various "traditional" musics bring to the Western classical scene is a sort of shock of the ancient—they are seen as having values that were lost over the course of European art music history, or perhaps were never there in the first place. It is important, then, that these traditions be configured as old—perhaps primitive—so that they can whisper their secrets in the ear of the Western composer. Of course, this means that those traditional musics must not change, and never have.³²

Critics of intercultural exchanges and their inherent compromises sometimes express a somewhat similar positivist traditionalist—and arguably Occidentalist—viewpoint when they express their concern over the spiritually nullifying effect of specific arts' foreign stage forms, which, I hasten to add, may well be worthy of concern.³³ As Kim Jinhee points out, the destructive effect of Western culture to traditional cultures in general has been commonly asserted in both colonial and post-colonial writings. In their critiques, academics often juxtapose the secular Western theatre tradition with the spiritual, ritual theatre of other, non-literate cultures.³⁴ Rustom Bharucha is a fitting example. He says that he does not believe in Western attitudes towards Indian theatre, but warns that due to cultural

²⁹ Chan E. Park 2001:132. I borrow the word "contamination" from Park's *Voices from the Straw Mat: Towards an Ethnography of Korean Story Singing* (2003: 250).

³⁰ Amankulor 1991:228.

³¹ Bharucha 1990:18.

³² Corbett 2000:167.

³³ See Dasgupta 1991:78. With the term "positivist" I refer to the notion that an oriental culture has the potential to become like a Western culture, but that it is typically behind in development. This is different from romantic Orientalism, which holds that cultures are incomparable, but in principle equally valuable.

³⁴ Kim Jinhee 2000:93; see also Peters 1995:206.

²⁷ Park Chan E. 2001:131.

²⁸ Dasgupta 1991:249.

exchanges and the influence of Western culture, Indian traditions may no longer be performed for the blessing of gods, but for other—primarily financial—reasons.³⁵ The questions this raises are, of course, how un-commercial performers in India actually are, whether commercialism is a product of cultural imperialism, and how the spirituality of a performance can be assessed. In Korea, these claims of cultural imperialism are still commonplace. In 2002, Haksoon Yim writes:

...it is important to consider [Korea's] traditional culture and the strength of influence of Confucianism, the ruling ideology of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910). Due to the influence of Confucianism, the Chosun [Choson/Chosun=Chosŏn] dynasty emphasized humanity, ethical morality and spiritual self-cultivation, and furthermore, valued spiritual over material life. [...] In line with this, spiritual culture and academic knowledge were broadly preferred to commerce and technology. [...] While western culture permeated the everyday life of the people, the traditional characteristics of the Korean culture gradually lost their influence on the way of life of the people. The problem is that the characteristics of the western culture differ considerably from that of Korean traditional culture. From the Korean point of view, it has been argued that western popular culture tends to be synonymous with commercialism, materialism, violence and sensuality as compared with the Korean traditional culture mentioned above.³⁶

This is not to say, of course, that in staging Korean traditional music, we should not strive hard to maintain some of the spiritual or ritual aspects, but it sometimes seems the commercial aspect is considered best left unmentioned, even when it is aspects such as these that may render the intangible tangible. Moreover, information on the practical aspects of, for example, shaman ritual music, the practical rites if you will, may well prove effective in allowing foreign audiences to relate to the art.

The media have a significant role to play here. Bailey has shown that plays and performances involve, among other things, (re)cognition, commonplaces (truths), and 'framing'. Plays are patterned, he says, and audiences have learned to recognise stereotypes and commonplaces.³⁷ Korean village traditions such as those held on Tano (on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month) in many ways follow the pattern of a play or performance in the sense that their local audience, or the majority thereof at least, will be able to relate to them because it is preconditioned to do so. The "framing" that Bailey speaks of entails knowing when to react to what's happening on stage and when not to. When an audience is informed sufficiently, it will know when and how to react to what it sees, thus allowing

interaction and participation, whether because of an emotional, dramatic scene, or simply the fact that it recognises some of the practical ins and outs of the organisation. In a way this "framing" applies to the staging (display) of tangible artefacts too. The local media in particular have the power to precondition audiences; it is they who can ensure that some of the intricacies of art forms are known. It is, however, imperative that they correspond to feelings of nostalgia or exoticism while also recognising that audiences like to (perhaps virtually) wander back-stage and see what drives the people involved. The Tano rituals of Kangnŭng city comprise a major event that because of its myriad aspects and actors has a particularly wide back-stage area, and it seems to me that a well-planned marketing scheme would render great results with both domestic and foreign audiences. On the other hand, audiences must be left with some things to explore on their own. This is the same with all communicative arts. In his *The Act of Reading* (1978), Wolfgang Iser says:

If a literary text does organize its elements in too overt a manner the chances are that we as readers will either reject the book out of boredom, or will resent the attempt to render us completely passive.³⁸

It was probably because of concerns such as these that Hervé Pejaudier found that in 2002 during the preparations for a performance of shaman Kim Kūmhwa in Paris, the Korean organisers were told that the simultaneous translation they planned would be unnecessary. The French organisers told them that the Parisian audience would prefer to receive the detailed information in printed form as it wanted to have something to work out on its own.³⁹ Although that claim is unlikely to have applied to all members of the Parisian audience, the problem with such information is the format. Even though many people may prefer printed information to a long introduction or simultaneous translation, since they might break the mood, many, still, are unwilling or unable to read information prior to or during a performance, either because they are too busy, or because they cannot read it in the dark, or simply because they want to sit back and relax. The layout and structure of the text have to be very clear, therefore, but even when that is achieved, it is best not to rely on printed information.

Other Practicalities

There are numerous practical issues that one has to overcome each time a performing art is staged abroad, but here I will try to highlight those that are particular to Korean traditional performing art. The most successful, intercultural performances of Korean traditional music I have witnessed were those where a large audience that had intentionally come to see a particular performance, was able to sit and feel close to the performers in level-floor rooms or halls and, at some

³⁵ Bharucha 1990:15, 45.

³⁶ Yim Haksoon 2002:38-39. It must be noted that Yim does not question these Korean views in the ensuing text.

³⁷ See Bailey 1996:3.

³⁸ Both citations taken from Holub 1984:87, 98-99.

³⁹ H. Pejaudier, pers. communication, 9 December 2005.

point, ask them or the organisers questions about any aspect of the art, usually after the performance. Because of the many costs and efforts involved, however, it seems that in northern Europe most performances of Korean traditional music are staged at theatres, which do not allow a similarly level engagement with the performers. When, on the other hand, the performance was included in a festival of some kind, or organised at short notice, the events were sometimes staged at a venue other than that intended for such use, such as a museum hall, a lecture theatre or even a city square. In those cases, when there was little distance between the performers and the audience, there may have been many people who had little idea of what it was they were witnessing. Those occasions also required some adjustments: aspects of a performance needed to be staged differently in order to benefit from the stage lights (even though they are already modern additions), and extra care was needed to correctly amplify the sound of singers and instrumentalists. Whether or not singers were always clearly audible in the past, for the purpose of an intercultural performance, it seems to me that it is best to amplify singers' voices, so as to allow lyrics to be heard. To assist the performers in making these adjustments and make sure they were happy with the way their performance was staged, organisers usually sent a coordinator along, typically some one who spoke good English and was knowledgeable about Korean performing art. One such coordinator was Kim Suyoun.

Kim worked as a business consultant for Studio Metaa for several years until 2005. Her job entailed having to frequently assist with the production and organisation of government-sponsored Korean traditional arts performances abroad, which meant that she was involved in the staging process well before the performer(s) travelled abroad. She told me that the Korean government's interest in staging arts in a specific country was guided by international relationships. She said that every time Korea's relationship with a specific country was given particular attention in the media, before long the government would make arrangements for cultural exchanges. Of perhaps equal influence on the frequency of Korean traditional music events in a specific country are the local, practical conditions. The large number of events sponsored in China and Japan should not be surprising, for example, considering the large number of local Korean residents, the proximity of the countries and the relative ease with which artists can be accommodated comfortably and travel safely along with their instruments and stage props. Russia is also nearby and has many Korean residents, but Kim told me that performers had been increasingly unwilling to visit the country since the early nineties when they became unsure about their safety and comfort. Because Korean embassies differ greatly in terms of the number of staff and the size of their budget, they may not always be able to offer additional assistance. Much may therefore rely on the degree to which local organizations are able to guarantee a successful staging of events and a satisfactory accommodation of artists. A growing number of performances in a specific country or by a specific performer does not therefore necessarily suggest a political or personal preference from the side of the Korean government, but may well be induced by a preference from the side of performers or the successful cooperation with local organizations. Over the past ten years, for

example, performers have often explained their preference for a specific country to me on the basis of the availability of good Korean food and the hospitality of the hosting organizations—usually in that order. Kim told me:

Performers working for big companies like the NCKTPA just do what they are told to do and they care mostly about the showy effect: the more and the bigger, the better. [...] Their interest in specific countries is somewhat limited to food and nice shopping opportunities.⁴⁰

Katherine In-Young Lee, who in 2003 worked as the Overseas Affairs Coordinator for Nanjang Cultures, also recognised a preference for specific destinations:

[...] there is a predilection towards certain cities (such as New York, London and Paris) for their "prestige factor". With that said, I do think that cities with active Korean embassies or cities with Korean restaurants are definitely more appealing to Korean performers. [...] It may seem somewhat trivial, but I do think that food plays an important role in shaping the overall experience in a foreign country. I didn't hear specific comments from the artists we represented regarding countries they did not like performing in, but I did hear that many artists enjoy their gigs in Japan. Among the reasons they gave were Japan's proximity to Korea, the similar time zone, good food [...], the well-organized presenters, and the relative ease with which one can travel around.⁴¹

Some of the artists who belong to the set stock of government-designated holders and star students who are sent abroad for a basic fee while enjoying a relatively high status in Korea have shown a lack of interest in events organized in a country they have no interest in. Kim told me that at a performance of *Kkochtugakshi* (puppet play) at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague on 15 October 2003, the main puppet player, Nam Kisu, not only left out parts of the repertoire, but behaved in such an arrogant manner off stage that her company blacklisted him.⁴²

There are a few more practical issues that may complicate matters, the most obvious one being that of language and communication. The cultural differences that often lie at the root of such communication problems sometimes concern the attitudes of theatre staff. Kim notes:

Korean people, especially performing arts people, and even administrators and executive crews, love to improvise. The non-in-house staff of the Palais des Beaux Arts [in Brussels] left at some point, simply because they could not stand it. [...] In Korea it is quite customary that we improvise matters. Stage crews, we think, should devote themselves; it is an unwritten rule. In Europe, you

⁴⁰ Kim Suyoun, pers. communication, 13 April 2004.

⁴¹ Katherine In Young Lee, pers. communication, 18 September 2005.

⁴² Kim Suyoun, pers. communication, 13 April 2004.

want those things in a contract.⁴³

Katherine Lee explained to me that good communication was particularly important when artists made unexpected changes:

When the coordinator or managing director on the Korean side is able to correspond proficiently in English (which has normally been the case for Nanjang Cultures), there are fewer problems in the actual organizing process. Problems often arise, however, when the artists themselves “improvise”. In my experience, this ranged from changes in the technical rider to sudden changes in the repertoire. Most of these alterations ultimately served to improve the performance, but since there are contractual issues involved, requesting any type of alteration must be handled with care. This often puts the staff/tour manager in a tricky position to negotiate between the presenter and the artist.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most typical of performing folk arts in general is that they rarely have a set time limit or tempo, and sometimes require much physical space. However significant though these aspects may seem, they require the relatively common compromises of the modern stage. The professional folk artists that are sent overseas are well accustomed to these limitations and any further adjustment therefore has little to do with issues of intercultural performance. One issue that has sometimes been overlooked by the organisers and might arguably lead to some confusion, on the other hand, is that of the seasonal character of the art forms and their budgeting. While sometimes the artistic or dramatic effect may be limited because the repertoire or tradition does not correspond to the local season, the seasonal aspect of budgets may cause even greater problems. Kim told me:

Last year, when I was working very hard to stage the *Ult'ari kut* [*kut*=ritual] in Brussels, the fact that Europe and Korea have different seasons turned out to be very problematic. In Korea, everything starts in January and ends in December, which means that the government subsidies also follow that schedule.⁴⁵

The relative availability of performing arts from all over the world in northern Europe means that Korean organisers ought also to be aware of specific local seasons. They might wish to avoid Chinese, Japanese or other Asian cultural events, or compete with them. Since the majority of Korean performances are government-sponsored, the organisers in the West cannot freely negotiate the week in which a group performs. The sponsorship system itself, therefore, may need fine-tuning. Of course, if marketed properly, traditional music should not have to rely on sponsoring, but there may not be enough incentive on the part of the

performers to put much effort in what is likely to be rewarding in terms of on-stage praise only, especially when many of them enjoy sufficient status in Korea.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Many schemes to promote one or more Korean traditions have to date focused on the assumed self-explanatory power of their “authenticity”. Traditional music was sent abroad and marketed as special, simply because it was Korean, even in those cases where the art performed was arguably not traditional at all. The events staged cannot be called intercultural. On the contrary, they emphasized the enormous gap that lay between Korean culture and that of the foreign audience; the non-Korean Western experience was often ignored, and the art considered impressive enough to speak for itself. The artists and organisers, meanwhile, were rarely asked to explain about the practical aspects of their work, perhaps out of fear that doing so might reveal that their tradition was not popular at all or even in danger of being lost. In my experience, however, audiences that are looking for something unusual, something exotic, at the same time try to find commonplaces; however contradictory, they enjoy participating in events that are unusual but allow them to engage and associate. In other words, it appears that some involvement of the foreign audience may help to ensure the success of a Korean traditional performing arts events abroad. Yet another paradox lies in that the more a performance is tuned to a foreign audience the less authentic it is likely to be, so an equilibrium must be found.

Audiences should, ideally, be given some information on how the art forms and traditions have changed over time. Information on the practice of artists and practitioners could underscore the complexity of the traditions and their unique status, and in doing so support their reputation. Meanwhile, the use of specific narratives in popular culture, and even comparisons with Chinese, Japanese, or even Western music and folk narratives may increase the art forms' presence in the discourse on Asian traditions both in Korea and abroad. With the help of the media, detailed information on art forms or traditions' background and categorization can be effective measures to guarantee a growing presence of Korean traditions and an increased recognition of Korea's rich history. Audiences are unlikely to appreciate performances that are repeatedly interrupted by forms of information or translation, and that do not highlight any special characteristics and qualities. In the information provided, some reference to the preservation of the art today would be useful. I am not arguing that we should all know that a certain shaman loves singing Cho Yong-pil songs at a *noraebang* (private karaoke rooms), but it certainly would be interesting to know what he or she does most of the time, and how the rapidly modernised Korean society has affected the art. That second layer will make the events more interesting, and underscore the fact that traditions are not pre-set plays, but in many ways living, i.e. evolving treasures, because of the human factor involved. In order to find out which specific changes in marketing and presentation will render the best results, organisers and policymakers should treat events more as scenarios in which the cultural conditions, the traditions' oddities, legends and practicalities are all given some

⁴³ Kim Suyoun, pers. communication, 13 April 2004.

⁴⁴ Katherine In-Yyoung Lee, pers. communication, 18 September 2005.

⁴⁵ Kim Suyoun, pers. communication, 13 April 2004.

attention, so the acts and actors have more than just a passive role to play.

GLOSSARY

Chosŏn	朝鮮	Munhwajae pohobŏp	文化財保護法
Chungyo muhyŏng	重要無形文化	Noraebang	노래방
munhwajae	財	P'ansori	판소리
In'gan munhwajae	人間文化財	Poyuja	保有者
Kkoktugakshi	꼭두각시	Samul nori	四物놀이
Kungnip kugagwŏn	國立國樂院	Sanjo	散調
Kyŏnggi minyo	京畿民謠	Shinawi	시나위
Munjung	民衆	Ult'ari kut	울타리극

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