

**The Voice of Globalization: Melding Past and Present Korean Identities in  
Contemporary P'ansori Performances**  
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**Abstract**

Korea has long been recognized as a crossroads of culture; a site wherein the ideas and mores of other nations have been woven into a rich, pre-existent nationalistic fabric. The country proudly boasts of resolute characteristics that have withstood the incursion of outside forces, while at the same time readily accepting a wealth of aesthetic norms from its neighbors. Thus it is that Koreans are in a continual state of identity formation – maintaining past traditions while at the same time adapting to contemporary circumstances.

Performance practices of “traditional” music offers us a lens through which we can clearly observe the interlacing of past and present articulations of identity. Therefore, this study will analyze various facets of performance as well as audience reception in regards to two *ch'angjak* (newly-created) *p'ansori* pieces. By comparing texts, sound aesthetics, space, costuming, and physical gestures used in contemporary *p'ansori* performances, we will be able to investigate the ways in which a traditional art form is being re-invented to appeal to young audiences. Additionally, we will observe how *p'ansori* itself is dealing with an era of globalization as the genre absorbs influences from the outside and conversely presents a rearticulated image of Korea to the world.

## General Introduction to P'ansori and the Rise of *Ch'angjak P'ansori* Performances<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand how *p'ansori* has changed over time and the significance of the genre in terms of Korean identity, we must first understand something of the genre itself and traditional performance practices. The typical performance setting of contemporary *p'ansori* is minimal; neither stage props nor special costumes are used. The singer sits or stands on a straw mat, wears traditional Korean clothing, and uses only a folding fan to represent objects (a sword, book, or saw, for instance), ideas (for example, power) or attributes (including bashfulness or sorrow). The fan may also be opened and closed to add to the aural landscape, or to emphasize certain aspects of the text sung. In addition, the drummer and audience add to the soundscape with their *ch'uimsae*, or words of encouragement: “*Ôlssigu!*” (“way to go, right on”), “*Chot'a!*” (“nice”), or “*Kûlôch'i!*” (“so it is”).

In order to relate musical and dramatic nuances effectively, a *p'ansori* singer must learn to produce a large number of characteristic tone qualities. *P'ansori* favors a rough husky voice that conveys dramatic power and folk-like qualities. A smooth vocal quality is said to lack dramatic expression (Yi Po-hyŏng 1973; Yu Ik-so 1987). The harsh vocal quality called for is not easily obtained. A professional performer undergoes years of intensive training to develop a powerful voice capable of many dramatic colors; critics often claim that a singer reaches his/her prime only in his/her fifties. Singers will practice continuously for hours until they become hoarse, eventually developing callouses on the vocal chords. They may sing in the mountains or under waterfalls, attempting to match the sounds of nature, while strengthening their voices and obtaining the desired timbral qualities.

Historically speaking, *p'ansori*, as an independent art form, emerged in the mid-eighteenth century. Originally it was performed by and for people of the lower classes, and did not involve the literate aristocrats who penned the social histories of Korea. Thus, little is known about the exact origins and early evolution of the *p'ansori*; however, two theories have been proposed by music scholars. The first speculates that the genre grew out of the performance practices of itinerant entertainers, and the second claims that *p'ansori* is closely related to the rituals and narrative songs of the southern-tradition shamans. Marshall Pihl has argued that *p'ansori* probably developed from a melding of the two traditions. He writes:

From shaman narrative songs [*p'ansori* performers] gained rhythmic patterns of drumming and singing, techniques of vocalization, interweaving of sung and spoken passages, and interpolation of songs from other traditions. From solo actors of farce and storytellers they inherited skills of characterization, improvisation, narrative development, and audience management. And the folk culture around them was an abundant source of such materials as myths, legends, stories, ballads, laments, and work songs” (1994:8).

Because *p'ansori* is rooted in the folk culture of Korea, the tales often contained satirical passages lampooning the noble classes (*yangban*) and surreptitiously complain of the injustice suffered by the lower classes, including the singers (*kwangdae*) themselves who often lived in poverty as itinerant musicians. Despite the social chasms created by the class

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<sup>1</sup> The brief introduction to *p'ansori* of this paper is taken from my 2002 dissertation, entitled “The Sound of Han: *P'ansori*, Timbre and a South Korean Discourse of Sorrow and Lament,” and a chapter entitled “Destined for Greatness: One Song at a Time” in the edited volume *Musical Childhoods and the Cultures of Youth*, eds. Susan L. Boynton and Roe-Min Kok. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

system, by the mid-nineteenth century interactions between the *kwangdae* and *yangban* increased as the latter's interest in *p'ansori* grew. A symbiotic relationship developed between seemingly opposite elements: *kwangdae* who sang about the *yangban*'s elitism and subjugation of the lower classes, and the *yangban* who enjoyed, financially promoted, and documented *p'ansori*.

In the first half of the twentieth century, traditional Korean life and musical enterprises experienced far-reaching changes, the result of political and cultural suppression imposed during Japanese colonial rule and of turmoil caused by the Soviet-American conflict (1950-1953) that eventually divided the Korean nation. Chan Park, a contemporary *p'ansori* singer and scholar, has noted that during the early 1900s many Korean musicians adopted nationalistic values and tried to revive interest in traditional music by resuscitating folk genres and cleansing the music that had been "corrupted" by Japanese and other Western influences. "Weary of being knocked about by the current of modernity, they reoriented themselves, promoting fresh interpretations and a revival of *p'ansori*'s 'old style' (*koche*) aesthetics, described as genuine, traditional, unadorned, natural, straightforward, authentic, or dignified. ... They aimed for a distillation of the 'Korean' voice and the purging of centuries of social stigmatization" (2003:100-101).

In the past and until relative recently, *kwangdae* wove their improvised tales from the strands of the lives, emotions, and experiences of the Korea people – primarily the "folk" or common people. Various records indicate that there were twelve *madang* (stories or tales) sung by the *kwangdae*, although it is apparent that more than twelve tales existed, since the records themselves differ as to the names and contents of the core performances. It is quite possible, that a large number of highly varied tales were delivered by the *kwangdae* depending on their abilities and the needs of the audiences. The needs of contemporary audiences are far different from those in the past, a point to which I will return later in the paper.

First, it is helpful to further understand how *p'ansori* has remained the same and a few of the ways its performance practices have changed through the years. Beginning in the 18th century when the elite *yangban* class began taking a keen interest in *p'ansori*, the very nature of *p'ansori* began to be altered. Although the *yangban*'s efforts to preserve *p'ansori* are generally well-esteemed, their influence is also seen as contributing to the "gentrification" of the genre (Park-Miller 1995; Kim Woo-ok 1980), and marks the beginning of the demise of improvisation in the art form. It is also due to the Confucian ethics of the elite that today only five of the early tales are still enacted in traditional *p'ansori* performances.

The process of preserving cultural properties, enacted by the Korean government in 1964, has also contributed to the solidification of *p'ansori* performances. Each narrative, as performed by a famous "cultural holder" (performer), has received the, perhaps dubious, honor of being protected by the Cultural Properties Protection Law. As a result, the narrations are often replicated exactly, leaving little room for improvisation and experimentation by even master singers. This law of preservation has also contributed to the stultifying of revised or newly created *p'ansori* performances – until recently, at least.

However, as Charles Darwin most astutely noted, that which does not adapt, does not survive. Thus it is, that today although *p'ansori* is regularly performed in a traditional manner, there is also an upsurge in *ch'angjak p'ansori* – or newly created – performances. My intent at this point is not to delineate a history of newly created *p'ansori*, suffice it to say

that in many ways it is not really all that new, considering that performers have been experimenting with the presentation of the art since at least the 1940s, and perhaps even a decade or two earlier. What I would like to address, however, is some of ways in which *ch'angjak p'ansori* are executed today, and what we can learn about Korean identity today from the contemporary performances of the genre.

Although a broad range of *ch'angjak p'ansori* are performed, they can generally be divided into two large categories: namely, traditional *p'ansori* texts that are sung in a new style, and completely new *p'ansori* tales. In the case of traditional texts, the pieces are considered new because rather than performing only with the customary solo drum, the singer is accompanied by either Korean or Western solo instruments, a Korean instrumental ensemble, a Western orchestra, or a jazz band. In the case of new texts, the performer is typically accompanied by only the traditional drum, although instrumental arrangements can also be found. I will be addressing only the latter category in this paper.

### Two *Ch'angjak P'ansori* Pieces

Although there are many *ch'angjak p'ansori* pieces being performed today, I would like to concentrate on just two for the moment. These performances are not necessarily representative of all newly-created pieces, but by observing their texts, sound aesthetics, costuming, and performance space and physical gestures that are employed by the performers, we will be able to learn something about the way the genre is changing and what the changes might mean in terms of Korean identity.

#### 과자가 – The Song of the Confectionaries: by Pak Ji-young (박지영)

This is one of the more humorous *ch'angjak p'ansori* performances I have been able to personally observe. Let me begin by briefly explaining the story. The singer begins by introducing the characters who live all live in the *kwaja maul* (과자 마을), or Confectionary Village (to be honest, I think the term confectionary is a bit too high class for this lot, so if you will excuse the somewhat derogatory appellation, from henceforth I will refer to 과자 as junk food). If you live, and have eaten in Korea, you no doubt will be familiar with most of these characters, including *ppeppero* [sic] (빼빼로), *ojingo ddangk'ong* (오징어땅콩), *hoppang* (호빵), and *k'anch'o* (칸초), to name just a few!

One day a tragedy strikes the village – it appears as if someone has kidnapped the *kkameo* (까메오) – Korea's version of the Oreo – but not *all* the Oreo. No, the white cream remains behind, having lost its protective black cookies. The local villagers discuss the situation and determine that the Ice Cream Empire must be the culprits of this insidious act. The question then arises, who is brave enough to try to save cookies? Not surprisingly, a unit of *konppang* (권빵) – or “military candy” – volunteers, with the help of the *ch'ok'o songi* (초코송이) – or chocolate mushrooms. After what was no doubt a fierce battle our brave little soldiers return to the village, wretchedly defeated. In fact, the 초코송이 have been stripped of their chocolate heads, leaving only a thin, bald, pretzel body! This causes great consternation and discord among the villagers and another plan of rescue is sought after. For lack of time and space, I will forgo the further details of the rescue attempts. Suffice it to say that other schemes are made and are met with similar defeat, until the *saeukkang* (새우깡) – Korea's oldest and by extension, wisest junk food – devises a plan whereby the inhabitants of the 과자 마을, and in particular the 까메오 cream can be successfully reunited with their

beloved outer chocolate cookies. The moral of the story? Of course, the remedy is love: everyone should embrace and care for one another. Only tolerance based on love and faith can heal the village and the 까메오.

### 월드컵가 – Song of the World Cup (2002): by Yoo Su-gon (류수곤)

This tale is more serious than the first – and dear to the heart’s of most Koreans – but poignant in its own way. As one would gather from the title of this piece, the singer tells the tale of the events of one particular World Cup game in 2002: Korea vs. Italy. Throughout the song he describes in great detail the plays of the game. Anyone (and that includes the great majority of Korean citizens) who saw the game will be able to recall or clearly imagine the movements of the players because of his comprehensive description – aided, of course, by the nearly unending barrage of replays in the days following the game. He describes the (supposed?) blatant fouls of Italy’s notorious player, Vieri, as well as the glorious moves of Korean striker Hwang Sun Hong (황선홍). He explains that in the beginning of the game things were not looking good for Korea, but eventually the tide changed, the atmosphere lightened, and the situation reversed – all to the favor of the Korean team. Interspersed among the detailed analysis of the events of the game, including the winning score that occurred in the overtime play, is the now familiar sound of *taehan min’guk* (대한민국 \* . \*\* \*)<sup>2</sup>, chanted to a simple, but riveting rhythm. The singer not only describes the game itself, but the audience reaction and their increasing enthusiasm for their national team, including the wild exuberance, untied cheering, jumping for joy, and delighted partying of fans all across the nation.

In the following sections I will analyze various components of the performances in order to compare and contrast these two pieces with each other as well as traditional *p’ansori* performances.

### Texts and Emotional Expression<sup>3</sup>

As represented by the first example, it has been observed that the majority of *ch’angjak p’ansori* pieces are humorous or satirical. Although humor has always been at the core of traditional *p’ansori* performances, that core has in the past been balanced with a variety of other emotions. However, *ch’angjak p’ansori* seems to have lost some of the emotional depth that made the genre a masterpiece, concentrating on only the lighter more jovial aspects of life, rather than delving into the *han*, or pain, suffering and regret of earlier generations. According to Yoo Young-dae (유영대), a well-respected professor of *p’ansori*, these new pieces are a reflection of the “unbearable lightness of life.” They deal with trifles or non-serious matters, in part because that is what the young generation wants to hear. They want to laugh and be entertained by topics to which they can easily relate. What is interesting about this phenomenon, however, is that in the earliest stages of *p’ansori*, the tales sought to reflect the everyday life experiences of the common people. And so, perhaps rather than

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<sup>2</sup> \* . \*\* \* represents the rhythm that is clapped after chanting 대한민국, in a simple dotted quarter, eighth-eighth, quarter note rhythm.

<sup>3</sup> As in all *p’ansori* performances, I use the term “text” to mean the lyrics that are sung and spoken: there is no term in English to adequately describe the combined use of *ch’ang* (singing) and *aniri* (recitative) of *p’ansori*. Additionally, in traditional performances of the more distant past, no written records existed, and thus no “text” per se.

turning away from its roots, *ch'angjak p'ansori* is once again achieving one of its original goals – the expression of the ordinary.

*Ch'angjak p'ansori* tend to not only be humorous, but also quite brief – compared to the four to eight hours required for a full-length traditional performance. This can be said to be a manifestation of a contemporary audience's understanding, or lack thereof, of *p'ansori*, its history and traditions. Again, according to Professor Yoo, to fully appreciate a traditional performance, the audience must be educated – armed with the knowledge of the *p'ansori* tales and the intricacy of their performances. They should understand when to yell out the *ch'uimsae* (추임새) – or words of encouragement – and have a comprehension of the complex Chinese poetry inserted into the tales. But today's audience are not, and perhaps do not care to be so educated. For many, they simply want to be entertained for a few minutes and then leave – without having to contemplate a deeper significance of life or emotion.

It is difficult to say what the long-term effects of this performance practice will be: is it a reflection of youth's inability or lack of desire to deal with deep emotional complexities? Will *p'ansori* forever lose its depth of expression and ability to portray the entirety of human expression? Or, will a balance ultimately be found, as in traditional performance, wherein humor and satire can be used as a cathartic release from the otherwise overwhelmingly difficult aspects of everyday life? Perhaps only time will be able to answer these and other questions about the role *ch'angjak p'ansori* will play in telling the tale of the Korean experience.

## Sound Aesthetics

Although not explored deeply in these two examples, in past presentations I have demonstrated that not only have the texts of *ch'angjak p'ansori* become “lighter,” but the vocal timbres as well. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, it was common for the early *kwangdae* to go to great lengths and endure profound physical, psychological, and emotional hardships in order to develop a *p'ansori* voice, particularly the raspy vocal qualities previously deemed requisite for performance of the genre. The majority of *ch'angjak p'ansori* performers that I have heard of late, however, lacks the broad range of use of vocal timbres used in the past and in particular is devoid of the harshness of their predecessor.

In two examples we have heard today we can observe that, although somewhat accomplished singers in their own right, the performers Pak Ji-young (박지영) and Yoo Su-gon (유수곤) do not employ the traditional vocal timbres of a *p'ansori* performance. For instance, in the Song of the Confectionaries, Pak does not maintain the full chest-voice sound of *p'ansori*, nor does she fully utilize the raspy tone colors central to a traditional performance. There could be several reasons for this. First, it is possible that she consciously chooses to use a somewhat airy voice (at least compared to traditional *p'ansori*) and avoid harsh vocalizations, since the subject matter is light and humorous. However, there is also a complaint among some Master Singers that many young performers today want to only sing the *ch'angjak p'ansori* pieces, without having first perfected the vocal and performative qualities necessary for traditional performance. I, personally, have not heard Pak Ji-young sing anything other than this piece, and so I do not mean to be judgmental. However, having heard many other *ch'angjak p'ansori* pieces, sung by a diverse group of singers – many of whom are quite young – I can agree with the Masters, that if performers

want to maintain the standards of p'ansori, even while singing the newly created pieces, they must first dedicate themselves to the tradition.

However, I must clarify that as with the changes in text, the modifications of vocal timbre may in fact be a conscious decision on the part of all *ch'angjak p'ansori* performers, and not a general lack of “talent” or training. In other words, it has been noted elsewhere that the sound aesthetics of many traditional Korean musics are losing their once predominantly raspy characteristics. For instance, in the past the traditional Korean zither, *ajaeng* (아쟁) was played with a wooden bow. However, today it is common to use a cello, or similar type bow made of horse hair or other synthetic material, the result of which is a somewhat significant change in timbre, making contemporary sounds of the *ajaeng* far less harsh compared with the past. We can assume that this is a purposefully aesthetic choice; that Koreans of today prefer more smooth, sonorous timbres compared to their ancestors. The reasons for this choice cannot be explored in depth at this point, but we can surmise that as life in the twenty-first century is rapidly changing, so too do the aesthetic choices of younger generations. In part because they are exposed to a far greater range of musics from throughout the world, the majority of which do not necessarily employ raspy timbres, and perhaps as well because their very lives are far less harsh compared to the suffering of their ancestors, and thus they are in need of a different sound aesthetic to reflect their own life experiences.

### **Costuming and Performance Paraphernalia**

Although not always the case, in many *ch'angjak p'ansori* the performers tend to wear costumes other than the *hanbok* of traditional performances. As we have seen in the examples today, in *The Story of the Confectionaries* the performer has fashioned a most creative costume from the wrappers of various junk foods. The cleverness of the singer must be acknowledged in her clothing choice. She is able to capture the essence of the performance piece through a visual manifestation: we can easily imagine all of the characters of the Junk Food Village, because we are exposed to their own “outwear” in the form of the cloak worn by the singer. We should also note that in this concert the singer does not use a fan, as is common in traditional performances. There may be several reasons for this. As noted above, the entire aural landscape of this performance is altered by the lack a raspy tone colors. Likewise, it is possible that the traditional sounds created by the opening and closing of the fan would distract from the humorous characteristic of this piece. And, as will be discussed below, the overall movements of the performer are quite different compared with a traditional performance, and thus the fan could have been a burden to her physical expressions.

Yoo Su-gon also makes particular costuming choices for his performance of the Song of the World Cup. In this case the singer is dressed in casual and simple attire. Most notably he has donned a soccer T-shirt – although interestingly, not a flashy red *taehan minguk* (대한민국) shirt, as would have been worn by the thousands of fans gathered not only in the World Cup stadiums, but also throughout the streets of Seoul and the rest of the nation. In other concert settings he has also traded the traditional *kat* (갓), or top hat made of horse hair, for a “Be the Reds” bandana. Like Pak, Yoo also forgoes the use of a fan. However, he has replaced the traditional prop with a sogo (small, hand-held, two-headed drum) painted as a soccer ball – blue on one side and red on the other.

The costuming choices of the performers are obvious in these examples. Rather than donning a traditional *hanbok*, which would likely seem out of place and awkward considering the context of these pieces, the performers have created clever costumes which adequately reflect the message and atmosphere they are trying to portray through their songs.

### **Performance Space and Physical Gestures**

In both examples the performers open, or broaden the performance space, compared with traditional *p'ansori* performances. Although traditional singers do technically have the freedom to move about the entire length and width of the bamboo mat on which *p'ansori* is generally performed, their movements are often confined to a relatively small space, and their gestures are somewhat reserved – often relatively slow, controlled, and meticulous. In the case of the Song of the Confectionaries, the performer takes full advantage of the large space she is afforded. She is constantly moving – sometimes almost pacing from one side of the mat to the other (in search of the missing *까페오* cookies?). Although she never actually steps outside of the designated performance space, it is as if she feels no physical restraints created by the boundaries of the mat. Additionally, her physical movements are broad, energetic, and even comical at times. There is none of the simplistic grace associated with traditional performances, but as noted above, the story being conveyed is far from conventional, and the gestures are apropos for the content of the performance.

In the case of the Song of the World Cup, the performer steps outside the natural bounds of the traditional *p'ansori* performing space. As can be seen in the video example, in fact, I was poised to film the performance from a perfect location in an open space in the middle of the audience, with a clear view of the stage. However, upon commencement of the performance, the singer left the stage and came to perform in the very spot I had positioned myself (thus the rather odd angles in the recording). It is important to note that in ancient traditional performances of *p'ansori*, although the singers were separated from others by the restrictions of the bamboo mat, they were still quite near the audience members – interacting with them face to face, voice to voice. As in times past, in this performance the singer enters the audience space and breaks down the now, all-too-frequent barriers between audience and performer. As a result, the audience sees him more as a cheerleader for the Korea vs. Italy soccer game (readily joining him in chanting *대한민국 \* . \* \* \** and cheering as Korea – once again – makes the critical final goal) than as an overly stoic or distant performer. He has entered their world and he has brought them into his – the living space of the 2002 World Cup games.

Both performers are successful, then, in bridging the gap between audience and performer that has arisen with the use of Western-style stages that have unfortunately created a chasm between the participants in a genre that was known for its interactive performances in the early days. In this way, we see that the performers are trying to reconnect with their audience in a very personal, intimate manner.

### **Concluding Observations**

There is much we can learn from contemporary performances of *p'ansori*, although I shall only mention a few here. First, as was noted at the beginning of the paper, in its early manifestations, *p'ansori* was primarily an entertainment for the masses – in this case, the lower-class peasants and merchants. Over time that changed, and the genre eventually became gentrified with the influence of the upper-class *yangban*. Although the same strict



social classes no longer exist in Korea, contemporary *ch'angjak p'ansori* performances attempt to return the music to the masses, and in particular are working to attract young people to a genre they might otherwise deem as antiquated, boring, and out-of-touch with the realities of their own lives. And that is what *p'ansori* was originally all about – displaying the intricacies of the life and emotions of the common folk through song, satire, humor, and tears. Thus, irrespective of the quality of the performances, contemporary audiences find the *ch'angjak p'ansori* pieces to be entertaining. And, perhaps as they become more aware of the genre, they will also become more discriminating in their taste, and the vocal and performance skill mastery required by performers in previous generations will again become requisite.

Although perhaps not feeling the *han* of their ancestors, contemporary audiences are also able to become emotionally involved in *ch'angjak p'ansori* productions. As noted above, the performers work diligently to draw the audience into a world that is entertaining, but also relevant to their own daily existence. Particularly in the case of the Song of the World Cup, the audience is able to relive the glorious moments of Korea's dominance in an important sporting event seen by millions worldwide. They can forget their disappointment in the 2006 games and simply relish the unity and exuberance felt by their compatriots in the 2002 games. Thus, a profound sense of nationalism is engendered.

In the end we can observe that as with all cultural products, *p'ansori* is adaptable to change. The fusion of past and present traditions is manifest in what some may call an entirely new genre, but what is argued by others to be a re-articulation of the emotions, experience, and nationalism of Korea's forbearers. That is, *ch'angjak p'ansori* is rooted in the past, but expressed in the cultural milieu of the present: an “invented tradition” as Hobsbawm might claim – but wasn't *p'ansori* of the 18th century also an invented tradition? Thus we see – or more importantly *hear* the voice of globalization in *ch'angjak p'ansori* performances. They are a manifestation of a changing world in which Koreans relish their long and glorious 5000 year history, while at the same time acknowledge that they exist in a world that is now deeply infused with interaction among all nations, peoples, and cultures. *P'ansori* has been able to withstand the test of time – it has persisted even when some bemoaned that the genre was on the brink of extinction. And so it is today, *p'ansori* is finding a way to tenaciously grasp the richness of its past, while at the same time find meaning and relevance in a rapidly changing global environment.

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