Image Is Everything: Re-imaging Traditional Music in the Era of the Korean Wave

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In contemporary South Korea, much attention has been focused on developing strategies for Korea’s global integration. The recent hallyu 한류 (Korean Wave) phenomenon attests to the sheer potential of using performing arts as a cultural emissary for the promotion of Korean culture abroad. Within this context, individuals priming Korean music for global acceptance have been molding the image and sound into something potentially more accessible and, thus, marketable, to both local and global audiences. This article examines the influence of the Korean Wave on the development and promotion of Korean music. Based on firsthand observations through field research from summer 2008 to spring 2009, this piece explores three sites of performance—the stage, brochures, and Web sites—on which the image of Korean music is being reconstructed for widespread consumption. Developments draw on the romantic imagery and storylines of hallyu dramas, using intangible forms of Korea’s heritage as raw source materials.

Setting the Stage

We live in a world in which the visual image often trumps musical and verbal communication. In many instances, the visual actually helps to shape both how we perceive ourselves and what we wish to communicate to the outside world. For example, in his documentary about wedding photography in South Korea, visual anthropologist Kijun Lee (2002) explores a cultural phenomenon in which ordinary couples are transformed into movie stars. Engaged couples are at the center of a fantasy, constructed through visual imagery, that depicts an idyllic relationship. Through soundtracks and soft lighting, videos offer a sexy and appealing view of the soon-to-be married couple. Photographers make use of locations such as Lotte World and the Kyŏngbokkung Palace in Seoul as romantic backdrops, and they further boost the romantic factor by painting over the background: adding rippling waves to water, peacocks, and fruit hanging from trees in the background. With directives such as, “Look happy,” and, “Kiss her a little more passionately,” the couple is transformed into stars of a personalized drama. In much the same way, contemporary performance of traditional music in
South Korea is currently being transformed as a romantic fantasy, packaged for consumption and gladly consumed by those hungry for the exotic.

The Korean Wave, or *hallyu* 한류, phenomenon offers the perfect opportunity through which the interconnectedness of aural and visual aspects of contemporary music-making in South Korea can be explored. *Hallyu* refers to the dominance of Korean popular culture in Asian cultural markets—as well as its sudden popularity in places such as Africa, Central Asia, and Europe—since the beginning of the twenty-first century. *Hallyu*, a term allegedly coined in 1999 by Beijing journalists expressing bewilderment at the sudden influx and popularity of Korean popular culture, has been credited with lifting South Korea into global consciousness. The sheer success of *hallyu* has meant a greater awareness of Korean culture abroad, which, of course, has also meant an expansion of Korea’s cultural-export market. As Millie Creighton (2009) points out in the case of Japan–South Korean relations, *hallyu* has spurred debates regarding the role of popular culture in strengthening diplomatic ties and repairing relationships damaged by occupations and territorial disputes. This article explores the impact of *hallyu* on music creation and promotion in South Korea.

The popularity of Korean television dramas and the proven success of popular-music artists and B-boys (devotees of hip-hop culture) have encouraged the emergence of campaigns aimed at paving the way for the acceptance and success of traditional Korean music among the general population, both domestically and abroad. I believe that, beyond stage design and costumes, *hallyu* imagery plays an extremely important role in the development of contemporary traditional music in South Korea. My aim in this article is to demonstrate how *hallyu* imagery is currently driving the ways by which traditional Korean music is designed, produced, and presented to contemporary audiences.

**Context: Music & Visual Studies**

An examination of imagery first needs to acknowledge visual studies. The study of visuality has combined psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and political dimensions of seeing in the quest to interpret those things that we see in our daily life. The perimeters of the study of visual culture remain a mystery. Akin to cultural studies, and branching off from historical art studies, the study of visual culture encompasses all that we see around us (Elkins 2003). According to the description of a recent art exhibit in Seoul, visual culture includes “everything you see in your day-to-day life. . . . [These] constantly change . . . [and] can emerge, disappear, or be replaced with something else” (Korea Design Foundation 2008).

Within the academic field of cultural studies, the focus has been on the relationship between “high” and “low” art, something that James Elkins, in
his visual-studies reader, has identified as the concern in visual studies (2003, 45). Contrary to the historical focus of art history on “high” art, visual studies take us to a new realm by offering a study of the “cultural industry,” an industry in which once-clear lines dividing “high” and “low” art are blurred. Theodor Adorno famously criticized this cultural industry and argued for the merits of high art, defending the need for the separate and unequal status of the two (1938). According to Adorno, lessening high art to the level of low (or popular) art would dirty it and imbue in it an impurity that could not be undone.1 For Marx (1992), analysis of visual culture is useful because it can reveal the “false consciousness” implanted in a marketing practice, for example, that makes it appear natural. Hence, marketable—and fetishized—objects are not natural, pure expressions. For both Marx and Adorno, the need fulfilled by mass-produced art and mass consumption is not the need for aesthetic fulfillment; it is rather capitalistic greed driven by the desire for standard consumer goods. The “culture industry,” that is, creates need and desire through manipulation rather than through the actual value or worth of an item. Therefore, the message communicated here is that the popular—the focus of visual studies—is embedded in fraudulence. Hence, the study of such ordinariness, in some academic circles, remains embedded in controversy and insecurities.

To take on a study of imagery in music performance unearths many of these insecurities, not the least of which is the question of whether it is a worthy area of study. There are very few precedents for ethnomusicological works that deal with the relationship of the visual to music performance. Of those, works in sociology, music education, and psychology examine the relationship between the visual and the aural—for example, in the symbiotic relationship between music and color known as synesthesia (Baron-Cohen and others 1996; Sloboda 1985; van Campen and Froger 2003). Ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam famously tackles synesthesia in his classic work The Anthropology of Music (1964). His theory on the embeddedness of aesthetics in symbolic structures led to his questioning of a “pure” synesthesia, devoid of dependence on cultural assumptions (101). Other ethnomusicological works that concern the visual take a decidedly historical approach, using visual sources as clues that help musicologists piece together performance as it was practiced historically. Similar to the approaches taken in articles found in the International Journal for Music Iconography, these ethnomusicological works use images from tombs, cave paintings, vases, and other artifacts to piece together musical life historically and its relevance to present-day musical culture. Bonnie Wade (1998), for example, examines music performance as depicted in Mughal paintings. Through her examination of paintings, she asserts that music was both an aural and visual assertion of the monarch’s power. In the study of Korean music, as well, scholars have made use of visual representations of performances to
draw conclusions about musical life in Korea. This imagery has been most important in the study of folk music, for which a written record prior to the eighteenth century is virtually nonexistent (Provine 1983, 1985, 1988; Song Bang-Song 1980, 1991, 1997; Song Hye-jin 2000). Although visual imagery offers an important record from which the value of music to society can be inferred, I assert that popular culture in contemporary Korea is actually helping to shape the development of traditional music performance. Before so concluding, I must first explain and contextualize traditional music in contemporary South Korea.

Defining the Subject: Traditional Korean Music

Defining traditional music itself is a methodological concert: what exactly is it? First and foremost, the meta-genre of traditional music, or *kugak* 국악, can be defined as a category of music incorporating multiple court and folk genres. The genres within the *kugak* category include instrumental ensemble and solo genres (such as banquet music and *sanjo* 산조), vocal performance (such as *p‘ansori* 판소리 and *sijo* 시조), and ceremonial music (such as Confucian shrine music and *sinawi* 시나위). Many of those who study Korean music employ the general term *kugak* when referring to music that developed primarily during the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), and most distinguish “traditional music” from “new compositions.”

When the South Korean government established the Bureau of Cultural Properties (Munhwajae kwalliguk 문화재관리국) in 1962 to preserve cultural forms that were disappearing from popular use, the designation of certain cultural forms as tangible or intangible cultural properties—or of an individual as a human cultural treasure—increased the visibility of older forms of cultural creation by encouraging cultural education. At the same time, ideas regarding “proper” or “authentic” Korean musical structures and aesthetics were cemented, and alterations were discouraged within genres or in musical pieces designated as cultural properties. In such a manner, the foundation of official cultural heritage was formed. A limiting construction of *kugak*, stemming primarily from modern systems for preservation, has helped shape expectations regarding the appropriate genres for “authentic” presentations as well as a general sense of proper form.

The traditional, thus authentic, performance of music relies very heavily on the preconceived notions outlined above. Just as in the realm of traditional Korean painting in the mid-twentieth century, traditional Korean music has come to symbolize “a self-identity [that] was problematized by” Korea’s relationship with foreign former occupiers (Chun 1996, 185). Quite frequently, an attempt at resolving this problematic relationship has emerged through creating “binary oppositions about western value and that of the East, at the level of representation” (Chun 1996, 185). In both tradi-
tional Korean music and painting, the “West” has emerged as synonymous with the unnatural and egocentric, and Korea is viewed as evoking the spirit of nature and harmonious relationships. The result is a self-orientalizing discourse, exaggerating Koreanness in the search for unique cultural expression. These developments have set the tone for discourse regarding traditional Korean music and the transformation of this music by concurrently categorically identifying “official” performance styles and essentializing a Korean sound. Consequently, the need both to preserve cultural heritage and to define a cultural self in relationship to the rest of the world has meant a constant refining of South Korea’s musical identity, often verified through recognition via official channels (e.g., government institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, which provides much of the funding for cultural programs).

The Image-ing of Heritage: Performance & the Refining of a Korean Identity

Yen: July 14, 2008

On a hot, humid July evening, people crowded into Sangmyeong Art Hall in Seoul’s trendy Daehangno neighborhood. Inside the theater, black walls and a darkened stage were barely discernable thanks to the glow of black lights illuminating audience members, dressed predominantly in loose white tops and dresses. Smoke billowing from an off-stage smoke machine briefly preceded the heavy beat of electronic music controlled by a Mac-wielding deejay. As the beat progressed, shadows crossed the stage while the performers, young women dressed in black and white shoulder-baring tops and sneakers, took their places, instruments at hand. With a flash of bright white lights, the women were fully revealed and the music—kayagum 가야금 and komun’go 거문고 (bowed and plucked zithers), haegum 해금 (fiddle), taegum 대금 (bamboo flute), p’iri 펀리 and t’aep’yongso 태평소 (two types of oboe), changgo 장고 (hourglass-shaped drum), keyboard, percussion, electronic media—filled the theater in full force. The first piece, “Tribute to Seoul,” introduced the audience to the theme of the concert: a rumination on contemporary Korean urban life. The familiar whine of the haegum, the p’iri’s piercing tones, and the rhythmic pull of changdan 장단 (percussive rhythmic cycles) were juxtaposed with hip-hop and house rhythms as a veejay—a video jockey—projected an assortment of animated images and texts onto a large screen behind the performers. The words and images directly referenced Pak T’ae-won’s (1909–86) 1934 novel Sosólga kubossi-úi iril 소설가 구보씨의 일일 (A day in the life of the artist Kubo), which was written at a time when modernity and the survival of traditional values were at the forefront of Korean literary and political thought. Expressed in the first person through an animated character of Gubo, the words reflected
on his life, expressing a perceived tedium of daily life in the city and the hopelessness of existence. Sung lyrics inverted this hopelessness by imbuing optimism and hopefulness into the performance context. Words, music, and sound effects worked in tandem to convey the intensity of contemporary life flavored with the nostalgia intrinsic to the South Korean urban existence. Through the multiple, overlapping media, the performance by the group Yen 염 created a performance space in which both modern vitality and the comfort of heritage were within reach. The evening’s performance, complete with its clapping, shouting, and dancing crowd, felt more like a party in a dance hall than a Korean music recital at a university art venue.

Yen’s performance presents a fitting metaphor for the state of contemporary Korean music. First, it immediately presents to the spectator the question of whether this spectacle can be called “Korean music.” Second, Yen’s performance style exemplifies current trends in performances labeled as chŏlmin 철민 (young) kugak. Within the performance context itself, the potential incongruity of Korean heritage and modern lifestyles was implied. The performers required the audience—a mixture of young children and parents, kugak enthusiasts, students, music lovers—to participate in this reconstitution of “Korean music” as a fluid category. Yen refers to its brand of performance as “kinetic kugak,” implying an ever-moving and changing definition of Korean music; the subtext is that, as contemporary society begets a rapidly changing daily experience, music should not be approached as a static cultural property. The sexy, youthful performers combine their expertise in traditional performance with electronically produced sounds and dance rhythms, and the image presented to audiences is of a cool, confident, Korean youth culture. First and foremost, with Yen, the imagery assaults the audience, symbolically expressing that “this is contemporary performing arts”—with the implication, “this is Korean heritage.” Ironically, Yen’s performance, emphasizing the fluidity of tradition while questioning old assumptions, offers a timely reflection of South Korea’s new brand of official culture.

Five years ago, the images offered forth by Yen and similar groups would have been outside the realm of official culture. Although drawing on traditional forms, they would not have been considered true reflections of Korean musical heritage. Official culture, on the other hand, took into consideration genres officially recognized as intangible properties by the South Korean government. Researchers with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism’s Traditional Music Division who are charged with organizing public performances must stay within the boundaries of the genres officially labeled by the term “cultural property.” The primary audiences and contexts for unofficial and official heritage have been, in the past, distinct. Audiences exposed to work by performance groups like Yen or other neo-traditional chŏlmin kugak groups have been, for the most part, domestic au-
diences with a connection to traditional music culture. It is within this culture that the need for revisions of traditional forms was most urgently expressed, and experimental performances such as that of Yen exemplify the types of performances lumped together under the label ch’angjak 창작, or created, kugak (Finchum-Sung 2008). The primary venues tended to be small performance halls and Web sites. The main audiences for official heritage (in the case of music, that which is labeled “traditional music”) tend to be foreigners or schoolchildren. The primary performance venues for official heritage include the stages at cultural heritage sites (such as Changdökkung Palace in Seoul) and Web sites. The majority of the latter are sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The focus of the performance practice of unofficial heritage is inward (aimed at musical development), while that of official heritage is outward (aimed at cultural promotion). Both forms of heritage are connected, due to the fact that their existence is reinforced through promotion and rhetoric describing their worth. For more experimental forms of music, concert programs and Web sites provide information on the importance of such activities. For the officially recognized forms of performance, concert programs, Web sites, and promotional campaigns reinforce the definition of Korean tradition and the place of music within it.

Cashing in on Heritage

The question of heritage stands at the forefront of discussions regarding contemporary Korean music in South Korea. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998) defined “heritage” as an opportunity to explore internationalization or globalization of a cultural form without questioning its authenticity. It is a heritage that is “not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse in the past” (150). Considering the current reconstruction of heritage in the present, this definition is most suiting. As in the “storehouse of treasures” into which composers dipped in Margaret Dilling’s (2007) recounting of music created for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, “officially” recognized cultural forms have become source materials on which contemporary, “dynamic” performances are built (303). Official heritage and unofficial heritage (experiments that safely ease in and out of the perimeters of traditional performance), as Adorno (1938) feared, have bonded in this new movement toward global promotion. In a sense, it has all become “official heritage.”

I focus here on those performances of “intangible cultural properties” currently featured in public venues meant to promote Korean culture. For this reason, South Korea’s tourist industry and the construction of Korea’s international image remain central to this focus. The international stage, in this instance, maintains strong connections with a domestic evaluation of the value of Korean culture and the display of contributions of Korean cul-
ture to the global community. In this sense, it becomes a medium through which traditional performance genres are refashioned for international audiences (Iyer 2001). While the official heritage promoted by the government draws on musical genres recognized as intangible properties, the new image of Korean heritage promoted internationally requires a reconstitution of “official heritage” that incorporates elements of Korean culture—many of which are Korean products identified as Korean merely due to their origins in a Korean context or with a Korean artist—that have a proven track record abroad. The building of a national image has taken the forefront of the commodification of traditional music, and, as a result, theatrical effects, popular trends, and audience expectations play active roles in the cultural production of traditional music on the global stage. Present-day expressions of Korean identity are conscientiously applied to performances in the making of an image labeled and objectified as “Korean” (Appadurai 1996).

Tourism has become an important venue through which culture is produced because it has become an increasingly important part of the South Korean economy. A century of societal shifts, from agrarian to industrial society, and recent developments in inter-cultural contact reveal a society for which culture has become one of South Korea’s biggest exports and carries much potential for boosting economic and political growth. Since 1988, tourism has consistently contributed 4 percent of South Korea’s GDP. Between 2001 and 2002, the government increased its assistance to the tourism industry by 942 percent (an increase of about US$160 million) (OECD 2002). Government assistance and programs such as the Tourism Promotion Act attest to the significance of tourism to the South Korean economy. With an increased focus on tourism as a way to bolster Korea’s international status, tangible and intangible cultural products have become actively enlisted in the refashioning of a Korean identity that can be marketable worldwide. The heavy influence of tourism, with the hope of bolstering both international standing and domestic pride, plays a direct role in cultural reinvention. In Indonesia, for example, traditional performing arts and music have played a significant role in tourism—and vice versa. There, tourism has been “one of the means by which a world audience has been able to access, admittedly in a ‘diluted’ form, the performing arts of Indonesia and thus become aware of their significance” (Iyer 2001, 1). It seems suitable, as well, that Koreans should employ traditional performing arts in the fashioning of an international image.

As in the case of Indonesia, many performances for the sake of tourism are “diluted” to such an extent that scholars have pondered the depth of such “airport art” (Howard 1989). One of the frustrations encountered in many traditional music concerts designed for tourist consumption can be found in the explanation of the program, or lack thereof. As Chan Park (2001, 131) and Roald Maliangkay (2008, 56) rightly point out, many per-
formances begin with a mention of the performing art as a cultural asset; yet simply stating that something is significant means very little to an audience unfamiliar with the historical context or meaning behind the performance. The audience is treated to a visually stunning yet vacant performance: vacant because the audience has little to go on in terms of content and, thus, engagement with the performance. In efforts to remedy this situation, organizers of performances and government agencies seek, through various measures, to strengthen appreciation for traditional performing arts. Their approach includes redefining “traditional” and showcasing performing arts that are “transmuted, refashioned, or invented to serve present cultural and political agendas” (Hackforth-Jones and Roberts 2005, 5). It is through an engagement with Korea’s past and with other cultures that a new sense of self-identification is emerging. The popular media has become increasingly responsible for directing this engagement, and, as I outline below, a combination of mastered imported culture and export trends are directing contemporary performances of traditional music.

The Korean Wave & Traditional Korean Music: The Hallyu Effect

The hallyu phenomenon ignited throughout Asia a flurry of interest in Korean culture. Sparked by interest in the beautiful people and romantic storylines of such popular dramas as Winter Sonata and Jewel in the Palace, the soundtracks to these dramas and the artists producing songs on these soundtracks soon attracted a huge following in places like Taiwan and mainland China (Sung 2006). Tourists soon flooded Korea to see the locations where many of these popular dramas were filmed and to snatch up memorabilia sold in tourist shops at these locations (Creighton 2009). The fascination with the idyllic locations and dramas in which, most always, the protagonist succeeds while love and good old-fashioned Korean values save the day, has inspired interest in traditional Korean arts. This interest is something that has not been overlooked by organizers of traditional music performances and government agencies who have latched onto the romantic imagery and idyllic love stories to create an attractive, romantic Korea, using traditional music and hybrid forms as the national soundtrack (Tuohy 2001). The result has been a refashioning of the very definition of traditional Korean music.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has taken the proverbial bull by the horns with its new promotion campaign, “Han Style,” which focuses on six major aspects of Korean traditional culture: han’gul 한글 (Korean alphabet), hansik 한식 (Cold Food Festival in April), hanbok 한복 (traditional Korean dress), hanok 한옥 (traditional Korean houses), hanji 한지 (traditional Korean paper), and han’guk ūmak 한국음악 (traditional Korean music). The momentum from hallyu has, for the moment, made traditional
Korean culture more appealing than at other times in recent memory, and the Han Style initiative aggressively underscores this appeal. The stated overall goal of the plan is to increase the “Korean Premium” internationally (HanStyle 2007). On the Web site dedicated exclusively to Han Style, the goals related to Korean music include creating a national brand of performance and building star artists who promote traditional Korean music abroad (including fusion art and t’aekwondo 태권도 teams and B-boys). The plan includes, as well, designs to develop cultural events aimed at introducing Korean culture to foreigners, restoring “original Korean music,” and supporting related activities (HanStyle 2007). Currently, researchers with the traditional performing arts unit of the Art Division of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism are developing strategies aimed at increasing interest in traditional music.

The recent revisions in defining and promoting traditional music are part of something I term the “hallyu effect.” The hallyu effect is that in which the trends based on the aesthetic sensibilities and romantic notions of popular media, such as drama, precede refashioning of traditions and directly stimulate the ways by which these performing arts are produced in the present. One of the most telling examples of these new developments is an advertisement, produced by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, aimed at both attracting tourists and inducing nationalist pride among domestics. The ad begins with a scene showing snow falling softly through trees; the scene is reminiscent of one of the most popular scenes of Winter Sonata that shows a grove of trees on a snowy day. The scene fades into another showing a misty river through which a man wearing traditional Korean garb (hanbok) and sporting a topknot is rowing a boat. The soundtrack features the sound of a kayagüm (twelve-string zither), its strings plucking softly the tune of a sanjo 산조 (improvisatory folk piece). As the music speeds up, the sounds of percussion ensembles greet the ears, and the viewer sees scenes such as a woman standing on a swing (in a hanbok) and swinging back and forth in front of tall buildings—and an old man with a long white beard in traditional garb playing with his cell phone on the subway. The distinct sound of a human beatbox introduces hip-hop rhythms that are juxtaposed atop the kayagüm and percussion as the viewer is shown scenes of B-boys, club-goers, and soccer fans in rapid succession. The advertisement’s images draw on popular imagery associated with the Korean dramas that sparked the Korean Wave while juxtaposing disparate musical forms into a soundtrack identified as “Korean.” The hallyu effect relies heavily on both imagery and hybrid musical forms to construct a new tradition, at once self-exoticizing and global.

Media images with proven success in the global market now dominate the promotion of Korean culture. In Ray Chow’s (1995) critique of Benedict Anderson’s idea of print capitalism symbolizing a symbolic national unity,
he emphasizes the overarching effects of the onslaught of media images. Visuality, in this sense, is at the center of emergent nationalism and, thus, at the center of commodification of a national image. The choices regarding the images and genres in the process of commodification may be provoked by the “gaze” of the tourist, heavily influenced by the hallyu effect which, in turn, influences the decisions regarding which elements might be of greater interest to international audiences. Yet, contrary to a Foucauldian perspective on the gaze (1995), the power regarding the dominance of some images or genres over others still rests in the hands of those creating the forms for consumption. On the Web site of the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO), communication guidelines regarding discussion of Korea’s visual identity—“Korea, Sparkling!”—include the use of images and other promotional materials. For example, the “communications guidelines” on the Web site suggest “what kind of tone must be adopted in writing an article related to Korea’s tourism brand, how to use the KTO’s tourism brand identity and other organizations’ identity at the same time, how to select and use photos, how to produce promotional materials, what kind of concept must be used in setting up a promotional booth and how to make promotional videos” (Korea Tourism Organization 2009). The visuality of “performing Korean identity” appears to connect to very specific ideas about a proper Korean image.

The Hallyu Effect on the Stage

The hallyu effect has found a place in the ways by which programs at popular tourist venues are developed. For example, at Seoul’s Chongdong Theater, a venue at which cultural programs of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism take form, a recent “Korean Traditional Stage” performance titled MISO 美笑 featured a variety of genres from different social contexts in what Maliangkay (2008) refers to as a “hotchpotch,” a medley of performances strung together. Because it attempts to connect multiple genres and performance styles with, interestingly, a love story, MISO stands out among the variety shows. The love story, progressing from a fleeting encounter to the physical and spiritual union of the lovers, creates a tenuous connection, stringing the different scenes and reconstructions of musical form into a single performance.

The performance is divided into subsections made distinct through themes, musical ensemble combinations, and choreography. “Purity and Tremor” opens the performance, with a congregation of four percussionists, called a samul nori 사물놀이, taking center stage. At the front of both stage right and stage left, an instrumental ensemble consisting of kômun’go, ka-yagûm, ajaeng 아쟁 (zither), haegûm, taegûm, p’iri, and tanso 단소 (bamboo flute) perform music based on the p’ungnyu 風流 (secular chamber mu-
sic) repertoire. The physical design includes carefully choreographed lighting, beautifully painted backdrops, and colorful hanbok. The samul nori performers initially dominate the segment, but with the crescendo of the ensemble and added harmonies and interplay with the percussion foursome, the piece climaxes and presents the audience with a rather spectacular instrumental opening to the performance. With the integration of elements such as harmony and the joining of ensembles not typically combined (and from very different contextual histories), the performance echoes the definition of tradition firmly stated, in English, on the brochure: “Traditional art is not a definite form that has been descended from the past, but it incorporates everything we sense and feel.” The statement, as well, serves as a disclaimer for the vague descriptions (e.g., “Korean classical orchestral music and traditional percussion quartet” or “Exorcism Dance”) used to explain the musical ensembles on stage during each section of the performance. Although the performance is aimed at foreigners who, most likely, know very little about the instruments, musical structure, historical forms, and contexts of the music, beyond the brief ensemble titles or genre indicators, not much else is given. Other sections of the performance include “Feeling of Love,” “Curiosity,” “A New Beginning,” “Lovers,” “Joy and Delight,” and “Blessed by Everyone.”

In MISO, the sparse descriptions of dance and musical genres are often filtered through the love story—complete with essentialization of femininity and a link to the deep suffering, or han, often characterized as an innate Korean emotion—that dominate the performance (Willoughby 2000). As the folk, court, Buddhist, and shamanic musical genres intermingle on stage, a screen to the side of the stage displays text (in Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese) that explains how the musical performances develop the love story. For example, the text accompanying “Curiosity” is as follows:

The woman suffers from her feeling of love that comes and goes against her will. Finally, she decided to open her heart, but she's still not familiar with her own feeling toward the man. Her mixed emotion is expressed in Gayageum [kayagŭm] chorus. Gayageum chorus refers to a type of play that the singer plays Gayageum themselves while singing a phrase of Pansori [p'ansori] or folk song.

With the focus on the love story and the supposed expression of the story through kayagŭm pyŏngch’ang 가야금병창 (kayagŭm self-accompanied songs), the explanation of the on-stage action focuses on reinforcing an aura of romance. The music plays a decidedly secondary role.

After watching the performance on July 16, 2008, I had the opportunity to discuss the performance with the artistic director. A bit perplexed by the love story, the mixture of performance genres, and the distinct lack of content, I asked him about his decision to use a love story to link the perform-
ances. The most difficult aspect of presenting these performances, he asserted, rested in the fact that non-Korean audiences had trouble understanding the action on stage during a typical performance. He believe that the placement of the love story within the variety show would help engage foreign audiences and help them understand the performances a little better. When I pressed and asked if he really believed the love story helped people understand the music more deeply, he responded by saying that the emphasis was not on teaching people about traditional Korean music but on entertaining them. The artistic director developed the storyline in order both to imbue some continuity into the performance (to provide the illusion that the performance was not simply a montage of genres) and to make the performance more interesting for the audience. While acknowledging the fact that the storyline did not necessarily facilitate actual comprehension of the genres, he contended that the storyline made the audience feel as if they had understood the action on stage—echoing the language on the brochure that asserted the simple format and story existed so the “audience can easily understand and enjoy the traditional art which is often considered difficult.” Interestingly, members of the traditional performing arts unit of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism were present in the audience that evening. The focus of the ministry representatives was to discern whether audience members were entertained and thus, perhaps, further intrigued by the “traditional” Korean performance.

The choices made by the ministry representatives regarding the MISO performance reflect assumptions that are made about the transferable nature of traditional Korean performing arts. Placed in a context in which foreign audiences are the primary consumer, it seems, such performances lose their historical significance and, therefore, take on a new, global significance exemplified through imagery popularized by the dramas and music videos of the Korean Wave. Additionally, the assumption is that domestic Korean audiences understand the cultural significance of the musical genres when, in reality, most Koreans have very little understanding of traditional Korean music. The imagery promoted by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism—self-orientalizing and essentializing as it is—has become internalized and absorbed into the very rhetoric defining traditional music. In 2003, five years before my summer trip to Seoul, the ways people described and defined traditional music were remarkably different. At that time, people drew a sharp line between “traditional” and “contemporary” music. Yet, as exemplified in the definition printed on the program for MISO, tradition has become a more fluid category, part of the present as much as the past. In my discussions of traditional music with music scholars and performers in Korea in 2008, this new perception of tradition had come to permeate both their own ideas of and contributions to traditional music.
The Shifting Definition of “Tradition” in Korean Music

In South Korea today, we are witnessing a transformation in the ways by which traditional and contemporary performing arts are defined. In the process, the very meaning of “Korean” music has come to incorporate elements of contemporary lifestyles that, until recently, had no place within Korean society. Collaborations between B-boys and zither ensembles both pull B-boy culture into the overarching scheme of “Korea” while also making a new place, and function, for music once considered to be static. To make room for these changes, the very definition of tradition has changed.

New definitions of tradition may reflect changing cultural attitudes regarding tradition, yet performing on the global stage heavily emphasizes image-making that draws on officially recognized representations of tangible and intangible Korean culture. Despite the fluid definitions of tradition and the juxtapositioning of music of diverse genres and origins, the genres that dominate the performances, such as those by Yen and MISO, are still the same genres that the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism promotes in similar performances throughout Seoul; its use of popular themes from p’ansori, samul nori, and sinawi is standard. The aspect that makes MISO stand out is the brash application of a standard dramatic storyline from popular Korean dramas onto the performance. And MISO, like other contemporary forms of music promoted by the ministry, draws heavily on the youthful energy embodied by hallyu. The result is smoke-and-mirrors conundrum, one for which the effect is potentially damaging to the way that traditional music will be developed and performed in the future. Once-disparate forms of new traditional music and conservative genres are sharing a space in the youth-driven market. With the education and reintegration of the music, it is hoped Koreans will internalize the music of their heritage as a mode of cultural production relevant to and shifting with cultural transformations. When the focus turns outward, as in the image-making function of music performance within the tourist industry, the aim of the performance shifts to highlighting the physical and emotional manifestations of Korean identity that have proven to be popular and appealing across cultural borders for both domestic and international audiences.

Organizers of cultural programs and events package the forms that they anticipate might be more appealing to international audiences; yet the question remains as to whether the packaged commodity has much to do with most Koreans’ sense of cultural or national identity. In Nelson Graburn’s (2001) discussion of heritage in the U.S.S.R., for example, the physical and much-lauded symbols of culture (peasant costumes, dances, architecture) “were never as valued as the inner, spiritual (ethnic and national) heritage . . . which was inside the person, could not be taken away, and was worth fighting for” (80). Therefore, one could argue that, while tangible
and intangible cultural objects are endorsed by the government and promoted in visual imagery as official representations of Korean values and aesthetics, the invisible values such as jŏng 정 (human connection) that exist are more significant than commodified symbols. These invisible symbols could be characterized as something internalized and “worth fighting for,” while the popularized image of “tradition” becomes the empty commodity Adorno (1938) feared.

In a Marxian phantasmagoric twist, the images and fantasies of traditional Korean culture, constructed with the help of popular trends and touristic expectations, become fetish objects valued for their exchange value. The categorizations are based on the classifications designed by the Korean government, yet the images build on what has proven marketable. As witnessed in the performance of MISO, theatrical and extra-musical elements remain at the forefront of the performance to ensure an entertaining experience for the audience. The principal purpose of the performance, therefore, is to excite, not to educate. While “hotchpotch” performances that collapse genre boundaries and make little effort to educate audiences on the meanings behind traditional music may frustrate some, the remanufacturing of images for profit by the tourist industry could be interpreted as projected culture rather than internalized culture. In other words, these types of performances may say more about the tourists or non-specialists themselves, or at least about assumptions regarding their tastes, than about Korean cultural heritage and identity.

Notes

1Adorno’s discussions of high and low art are not limited to the visual. His writings on music also reveal his critical approach to popular works versus their classical cousins.

2Contemporary manifestations of traditional Korean music have been known by many labels, some clearly distinguishable, some not. The terms sin kugak 신국악 (new national music), ch’angjak kugak 창작국악 (created national music), and hyŏndaegukugak 현대국악 (modern national music) are used when referring to music primarily employing traditional Korean instruments and musical idioms in a “revision” of the tradition. The appropriation of these particular terms appears to depend on the preference of the user and not on clearly distinguishable sonic factors. Yet, in conversations with musicians and composers, some have noted distinctions between the application of the term and sound of the music.

3The cultural properties system has been widely criticized as a system through which the “museumification” of Korean culture takes place. Some scholars have determined that the system changed the structure of music performance and education pedagogy. Instead of the student learning a foundation and embellishing the tradition with his or her own style (a sign of good musicianship), the student became an apprentice who studied a master’s style and then replicated the master’s style as part of the master’s legacy. Other identified problems include favoritism (certain artists singled out over others not according to their skills but to personal connections) and censorship, such as
with the subjective singling out of certain characteristics of an art form and discarding of others (Howard 1989; Maliangkay 2004; Yang 1994).

"The full name of the group is Kinetic Gugak [Kugak] Group “Yen,” with “Yen” standing for ye-in 예인 (artist). Thus, the group is literally named “artists on the move.”"

In my research on ch’angjak (created) kugak, many composers and musicians I interviewed detailed extra-musical, abstract concepts as essential to an authentic Korean music. Intangible cultural concepts such as jŏng (interpersonal connection) and han (deep sorrow or grief) were consistently included in discussions of “real” Korean music aesthetics.

References


