Music of the Fatherland: the North Korean soundscape in the construction of Chongryun Identity in Japan*

PAEK INOK

Drawing on a field trip to the Tokyo area over a period of two months in 2003, this paper aims to examine the role of music within Chongryun in the expression of identity building. The Korean zither *kayagüm*, an instrument of unique historical symbolism for Koreans, has been chosen to illustrate the on-going musical exchange taking place between musicians affiliated to the Chongryun community and their counterparts in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

INTRODUCTION

The *kayagüm* zither tradition spread with Korean migration to Japan in recent times, particularly since the early 20th century. Since the political division of the Korean peninsula in 1948 and the succeeding Korean War (1950–3), both performance style and repertory have developed independently in South and North Korea, reflecting the somewhat different political and cultural orientation of each state. However, musicians of the Chongryun community, which largely consists of people forcibly settled in Japan from the Korean peninsula during the Japanese colonial period, particularly in the late 1930s and mid-1940s, developed their musical proficiency by paying annual visits to Pyongyang during the summer months, thus directly replicating *kayagüm* performance style as well as the musical repertoire from North Korea.

Meanwhile, a declaration announced during the visit by Kim Dae Jung, the then president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), to Pyongyang in 2000 led to unprecedented cultural exchanges in the years that followed. The effect of such a political climate is far reaching, with an impact even on the cultural relationship between South Korea and the Chongryun community in Japan.

* Preference is given to the form Chongryun, which is the romanized spelling the organization has chosen to use.
Thus, we are currently witnessing a wide dissemination of kayagŭm repertoires across all three locations: the Korean peninsula and amongst Korean minorities in northeastern China and Japan. A further point is that the younger generation of Chongryun is being brought up in an environment directly exposed to Japanese culture as well as to the music that had become available for consumption as a result of a globalized music industry. The question arises, therefore, whether the soundscape of the Chongryun community will remain faithful to the musical imports from North Korea alone.

CHONGRYUN AND KAYAGŬM MUSIC

Chongryun is the common name of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (in Korean, Cheilbon chosŏnin ch’ong ryŏnhaphoe). Founded in 1955, it is a pro-DPRK organization that takes as its mission the unity of Koreans in Japan around the government and leadership of North Korea (Ryang 1997: 2). It consists of a complex of numerous associations affiliated to the main organization. The central headquarters, situated in Tokyo, has authority over all the local chapters, covering the 48 prefectures of Japan (Ryang, ibid: 3).

According to the Korea Times (30 September 2003), 700,000 Koreans currently live in Japan, forming the fourth largest overseas Korean community (an increase of about 50,000 compared to a report of 1993). In 1993, up to 90 per cent of Koreans in Japan were born in Japan (Chosŏn Sinbo, 15 February 1993, quoted in Ryang 1997: 3). Out of those who originally came from Korea, more than 97 per cent were from the southern provinces of the peninsula. Thus, North Korean identity in this sense, following Ryang (ibid), is not geoculturally pre-given; it is Chongryun’s political projection.

As a number of ethnomusicological investigations suggest, the use of music in association with ‘identity building’ is not an unusual phenomenon. My observation of various presentations of performing arts put on by musicians and artists alike affiliated to Chongryun also echoes the underlining motivation of the organizers. To illustrate the point, I would draw readers’ attention to the kayagŭm performance presented in a 2003 concert as part of an ensemble piece at the Korean Cultural Centre in Tokyo.

The concert, entitled Oh! T’ongil Korea, was presented over two days on 6 and 7 June 2003 in celebration of the third anniversary of the South-North declaration of 15 June 2000. It was a joint concert presented by the South Korean Yun Tŏhyŏn Band and a group called Hyang, whose membership was drawn from third- and fourth-generation Koreans from the community, primarily the musicians from the Chongryun-affiliated Kŭmgangsan kagŭkdan (Diamond Mountain Theatre Troupe). The concert was divided into three parts: the first part by the Hyang group, the second by the Yun Band and the third and last by both. Hyang’s musical repertoire was a mixture of traditional and contemporary popular/jazz-style music, whereas the Yun Band’s was very loud pop music. The finale, however, culminated in the well-known traditional folk song ‘Arirang’ and a song ‘Oh! T’ongil Korea’, widely sung in recent years in the context of reunification of the two Koreas.

With great anticipation from an audience of a couple of thousand gathered