THE FIVE SURVIVING P’ANSORI REPERTOIRES: THEMES, ISSUES AND THE CONNECTION TO INDIA

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Introduction

P’ansori expresses dramatic feelings such as happiness, pain, joy and virtue through music, mimicry, movement and words – it is truly one of a kind. Painting a scene before our eyes, it takes us on a journey through different worlds and lets us experience the stories together. It cannot be compared to any western art form. (Yoo Young-Dae)¹

P’ansori is traditional Korean folk music. Performed by a solo singer accompanied by a drummer on the puk barrel drum it can be described as an epic song. P’ansori is today a refined art of storytelling that uses folk tales and fables that have been handed down orally from teacher to student over generations. The perceived value of p’ansori is reflected in the high national and international honours it has achieved, such as having been proclaimed Important Intangible Cultural Asset number five in Korea in 1964, and a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2003.

The exact origin of p’ansori is still an ongoing debate among scholars, but it can be said with certainty that it arose from non-elites, the sŏmin, and became popular when it captured the interest of the elite groups, the yangban. Patronage from elites led to the popularity of p’ansori throughout Korea. P’ansori is significant as a form within the Korean performing arts in that it went from being played and watched only by non-elites to a highly refined performance art loved by elites and non-elites alike.

The aim of this paper is to provide an insight into the wide range of p’ansori studies while showing the value of and need for further research. My paper will describe the core socio-cultural messages of the surviving five madang (repertoires), namely Ch’ūnhyangga (The Song of Ch’ūnhyang), Shimch’ŏngga (The Song of Shimch’ŏn), Hŭngbuga (The Song of Hŭngbu), Sugungga (The Underwater Palace) and Chŏkpyŏkka (The Red Cliff), and

¹ Yoo Young-Dae [artistic director of the changgeuk department of the National Theatre of Korea], personal communication, June 2011.
I will also discuss the possible influence of Indian Buddhist Jataka tales on p’ansori.

The Five Surviving P’ansori: Character and Significance

The five surviving repertoires each present different themes and, like a kaleidoscope, respectively display different characters that commonly appear in Korean literary and musical forms; for example, rapacious usurers, chaste lovers, dedicated subjects or patriotic warriors. These five p’ansori are the only remaining songs of a larger repertoire that existed in an earlier period, and each one of them is meant to represent Confucian virtues.

Ch’unhyangga is the story of a lower class woman, Ch’unhyang, who marries a local official. The story showcases her love, virtue, faith and chastity, displaying an ideal vision of how women were perceived in Confucian thought as paragons of virtue, in this case standing against the despotism of authority. Many novels, movies and TV series have been inspired by the story of Ch’unhyang, which emphasizes the love between a low status woman and an aristocrat. The journey of Ch’unhyang, who is transformed from being the daughter of a kisaeng (kind of courtesan) to a respectable woman, is of great interest. Her torture and hardships provide a way for her to repent her sins as a free-spirited woman and justify her social advancement as she rises in status and becomes the concubine of a nobleman. Modern interpretations see Ch’unhyang as the wife of an aristocrat, but because of the difference in their social status this would not have been possible when the story was created. The woman, capable of being influenced and receptive to status and money, endures unspeakable pain while she steadfastly holds to a promise made in love and faith. The love is shown from the woman’s viewpoint, and the story illustrates her firm resolve and the trust she places in her lover, Yi Mongryong. Also important is the display of corrupt power and the restoration of the rightful order through adherence to the law.

Hûngbuga is the tale of an impoverished but honest man, Hûngbu, with many children, who discovers a swallow that he nurses back to health. The swallow rewards his kindness by providing him with a seed that produces gourds of treasure. The Hûngbuga is humorous yet deeply touching and shows how excess and greed will be punished harshly; it is the only story of all the p’ansori in which money and inheritance are direct reasons for conflict. Unwavering loyalty towards family, especially siblings, and the