

Korean Folk Culture:

Yesterday and Today

by Alan C. Heyman

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While it is impossible to determine exactly when Korean folk culture began, conservative estimates suggest it to have been around 3,000 years ago during the Tribal States period. At that time folk culture is presumed to have evolved from the religious ceremonials of primitive tribes. In the succeeding Three Han Kingdoms period of Mahan, Chinhae and Pyonhan, located in the southern part of the country, folk dance was closely linked to the agricultural cycle, as it still is to this day in the farmers festival music and dance. Farmers celebrate on the first full moon of the year to ask the gods for a bountiful harvest and good fortune throughout the year, and on the autumn moon to offer their gratitude to the gods when the crops have been harvested.

In the 13th century B.C., many barbaric tribes roamed the northern and central parts of Korea. One of these tribes, the Puyuh, who occupied the area that is now Manchuria, held a festival during the 10th month of the lunar calendar (December in the solar calendar) called *Young-go*, which they celebrated with songs and dances. The Ye people in the northeast held a festival called *Muchon* around October, which also included songs and dances. Group dances of invocation characterized these sacrificial ceremonies. Thus it is that the Korean people have been fond of singing, dancing and drinking from the earliest times. As a result, many categories of folksongs, such as work and entertainment songs, have evolved.

As a peninsula, Korea has fishing and boating songs along the coastline, while in its many inland plains and mountains, field-work songs and woodcutter's songs are performed. Because of the vast number of mountain ranges dividing the land, melodic styles and dialects differ, sometimes even from village to village. Generally, however, it can be said that worksongs are sung in a free rhythmic style beginning in a slow tempo and gradually accelerating. By contrast, songs of entertainment are almost always sung in triple meter, a characteristic that sets Korean folk music apart from that of its neighbors, Japan and China, who generally prefer duple meter.

The southern provinces are Korea's ricebowl, so the folksongs of this area are largely concerned with planting, weeding, pulling out the young shoots for transplanting, harvesting, hauling, threshing and pounding. With the introduction of farm mechanization several years ago, however – in addition to radio and television, which can now be found in the houses of even the poorest farmers – the work songs are becoming a thing of the past. They are sung mostly by the elderly, and then only when called upon to do so at folk art festivals or for tape and video recordings.

Songs of entertainment are usually performed at such festivities as a 60th birthday party, when the life cycle is said to have been completed, or in drinking bouts at local taverns – one person singing a solo verse and the others taking up the refrain. Like the worksongs, they usually begin in a slow tempo and gradually accelerate. In the tavern the conviviality of the occasion will inspire them one by one into an impromptu dance done with considerable verve and skill.

At the basis of all Korean folk music and dance, however, lies folk religion, sometimes somewhat mistakenly referred to as shamanism. In the Three Han Kingdoms, religious festivals were held twice annually, once, after rice transplantation to seek the blessing of the gods in assuring a good harvest, and later, during the autumn moon festival, as a prayer of thanksgiving. The *Munbun Tonggo*, an ancient literary work, describes the dances of the time:

“... performed by a dozen or so dancers, who, lined up in single file, followed the leader, raising their hands up and down and stamping on the ground to the accompaniment of music ... the ceremonies were presided over by a *mudang* (a practitioner of folk religion) who was, at the same time,

Rice transplantation.



lyricist, composer, musician, and dancer."

Though performed today more for pure entertainment, the festival music and dance of farmers and fishermen as well as the folk mask dance-dramas, still retain deep ties to folk religion, being often employed to exorcise evil or to supplicate the beneficence of the gods. In the case of the village festival masque, for example, which possesses many characteristics of a seasonal ritual drama, debauchery and eroticism play an integral part. The prevailing eroticism, however, is not merely obscene entertainment, as many often take it to be, but a form of imitative magic that can be considered part of a fertility rite. The imitation of sexual intercourse and the depiction of childbirth constitute a symbolic act of invocation for good harvests and other blessings in the year to come.

In a similar vein, ritual games, such as the "Stone Battle," in which two neighboring villages engage in a stone-throwing war, the tug-o-war, and wrestling matches held on January 15th and May 5th of the lunar calendar may be construed not only as mere sports or games, but as another symbolic act of fertility. In these cases they symbolize the dissolution, by magic, of the opposing forces of nature, bringing good harvests and fortune to the villagers.

With the entrance of Buddhism from China ca. 371 A.D., and, later, when Confucianism, replacing Buddhism, was established as the state religion at the outset of the Yi Dynasty in 1392, folk religion and folk culture were relegated to the lowest strata of the society. Because of their emotional forms of expression, they were looked down upon by dignified Confucian gentlemen and scholars with impunity and disdain. Folk religion and culture were regarded as fit only for the lowest castes, whereas Confucian ethics and Chinese calligraphy were regarded as the mark of the gentry. For example, an earthenware pot, called *onggi*, was regarded as nothing more than a meager storage vessel for hot pickled cabbage, known as *kimch'i*, whereas celadon and porcelain were highly prized as precious works of art. Any type of labor however skilled was considered demeaning, be it hat making, musical instrument making, or hemp cloth weaving. The leisurely life of the literati, on the other hand, was the ideal of the aristocracy. Folklife was nearly obliterated by Japan, who annexed Korea in 1910, equated folk culture with nationalism, and saw it as a threat to the Japanese domination of the people. Folk culture was dealt yet another blow by the influx of western culture and Christian missionaries, who regarded folk religion and culture as little else than superstition and backwardness; with the utterly devastating Korean War in 1950, it was nearly obliterated.

On the verge of extinction, folk culture, like the Korean people themselves, with determination rose like the phoenix from the ashes. Some ten years ago or so, with the help of a handful of persistent and devoted folklorists and ethnologists, it finally received the recognition it so long deserved from the government and Korean people generally when it was designated an "Intangible Cultural Treasure" to be protected and preserved for all posterity. So it is with pride that Korea can now, during this Korean-U.S. Centennial Year, display its truly unique folk culture to the American people at the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival.



Farmers threshing grain on Chindo Island.

Suggested reading:

Heyman, Alan C., "Korean Folk Music and Dance," *Folk Culture in Korea*, Korean Cultural Series No. 4 (Seoul: International Cultural Foundation, 1974).

Lee, Hye-ku. *Essays on Traditional Korean Music*, translated by Robert C. Provine (Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, 1981).

Survey of Korean Arts: Folk Arts (Seoul: National Academy of Arts, 1974).

Discography

Anthology of Korean Traditional Music, Vols 1-9. Performed by the National Classical Musical Institute of Korea. Recordings available from the Institute.

Folksongs of Northwest Korea. Performed by Kim Chung-yun. Record available from the Jigu Record Co., Seoul.