

# Defining Korean Folk Traditions

by Fredric Lieberman

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In discussing the question of the folkness of Korean folk traditions, several trends or possible approaches exist. Various scholars, artists, and performers, in fact, agree – that in Korea there is considerable overlap – for whatever reason – between styles that would be considered folk, art, or popular in the West. The Korean folksong scholar Song Kyong-rin, for example, has stated:

*... the Korean term for folk music, minsok umak, differs from most Western definitions ... since it includes the music of certain professional musicians. Any definition of folk music would include the simple work songs and lullabies of the Korean countryside, but the Korean term includes also the highly developed art forms like p'ansori which were created by professional, itinerant troupes of performers. The word for folk song, minyo is normally used today for the polished, developed, professional songs of these troupes; indeed, if a farmer were asked to sing a minyo, he would doubtlessly respond with an imitation of a professional song, not with one of his work songs.*

In similar fashion, Mr. Zo Za-yong, a leading specialist in Korean folk painting has this opinion:

*In order to establish the concept of folk painting, we must, first of all, clarify the concept of the term "folk." There are two ways of conceiving the term. One is the general concept of "common folk" in terms of social structure; and the other is the image of what may be called the naked man, man as a humble being on earth. It is not just country farmers who feel childlike happiness on New Year's Day or at Christmas. There are times when everyone wants to escape from his social position, high or low, and go back to being just a plain naked creature. If these two concepts of "folk" can be formulated, then two concepts of "folk painting" ought to be considered. For the time being, until Korean folk painting has been theoretically defined, we can define it as the product of the "naked" man as well as the art of the peasantry.*

To reach a usable and understandable definition of Korean folklife today we must understand this blurring of borders and also the context of folk traditions as affected by the onslaught of modernization and technology, by modern educational systems, and by international trade, communication, and tourism.

Robert Garfias, an authority on Japanese and Korean music, has pointed out that the great influx of technology in the 60s and 70s tended to leave all traditional arts in its wake – both elite and folk traditions. As a result, folk survivals today tend to be grouped together with the high arts because they are old, traditional, venerable. Together with the tendency towards professionalization, this leads to the current state of such folk traditions as the Farmer's Dance (*nongak*), which is now being taught by professional musicians in conservatories. Farmers may still know how to do it, but most people would say that you have to go to the cities to hear it done well, done precisely. If someone in a village turns out to have performing talent, he studies with the best masters; then if he is really good, he will go to the big city and try to make a career in the performance and recording-studio world.

Garfias has observed a clear trend during the last generation towards standardization. "There is a tendency for the arts to become frozen," he says, "the variants are disappearing. Musicians tend more and more to play in Western intonation, and almost everybody plays one or two standard versions of a piece, so that the art of improvisation is being lost very rapidly." Communication world-wide is also to blame, according to him. "Sixty years ago it was virtually impossible for one culture to know much about another. Now it is very easy – almost too easy. You go from one corner of the world to another and it is almost like the same airport has followed you. This standardization is encour-

aged by Ministries of Culture and Information, but even the artists are being brainwashed. No one is telling the Korean National Classical Music Institute orchestra to play in Western intonation, but they have been hearing Western music (in the media, in school) for so long that their performance practice has changed dramatically from that heard on recordings of thirty or forty years ago, despite a conscious desire to preserve and carry on the heritage."

Tourism especially has taken the everyday, the utilitarian pot or village social dance, and put it on-stage – communicating the "best" in quality while standardizing the product. Such a packaged tradition is also easy to export in the form of national music and dance troupes.

In this complex and fluid situation, I doubt if it is either possible or particularly desirable to be very fussy about defining folkness or authenticity. A more useful concept might be that of the vernacular – the common, everyday language (in speech or in art) of the ordinary people.

In choosing and presenting Korean and Korean-American participants at this year's Festival, we have tried to explore the range of vernacular styles in music, dance, crafts, foodways, games, and so forth, as expressed through the skills of the best available practitioners. We hope to provide thereby a glimpse of this lively, varied, fascinating country, its cultures and its peoples.

#### *References cited*

1974 Song Kyong-rin. "Folk Music: Introduction," in *Survey of Korean Arts. Folk Arts* (Seoul: National Academy of Arts) pp. 273-77.

1974 Zo Za-yong. "Folk Painting," *Ibid.*, pp. 357-71.