

Korean Folksong, Dance, and Legend

By Michael Saso

For Americans of Korean ancestry, folksong, dance, and legend are a cherished part of their Asian heritage. At this year's Festival, dances, songs, and legends taken from Korean harvest and fertility celebrations of spring and summer are enacted on the Mall each day.

The origins of the rites of fertility and harvest in Korea are certainly very ancient. Burial sites from the Three Kingdoms period (37 B.C. – 668 A.D.) in south Korea have yielded evidence that the costumes, hair ornaments, and musical instruments used today were an essential part of court ritual in that early period. But the advent of Confucianism during the Koryo Dynasty (918 – 1392 A.D.) turned the upper classes away from many native forms of religion.

The rites of spring fertility and summer-autumn harvest are still preserved today as part of village celebration. The Koreans take special pride in these festivals because of a sense of continuity with their cultural past. Great heroes of former dynasties, generals, literary figures, and nature spirits "attend" the festival in the form of fancifully attired dancers. The legends of the heroes of the past are told in simple lyric song, and their telling is thought to create the culture hero's actual presence. So joyful are the songs and so heady the dances that bystanders often join in. Blessing of crops, babies, wealth, healing, and many other blessings are thought to accrue to those who attend the performance.

Women take special pride in preserving the legends, bringing their children to be instructed by the ancient tales. Humor is an important part of the performer's art, as he mixes stories of the past with wit and jokes from the present. The dance steps of the folk are the basis for stately court rituals and for classical Korean dance seen on formal occasions. The dancing is to the accompaniment of drum, flute, and stringed instruments.

The myths or epics told in the song-dance are called *bongburi*. Usually spicy tales of a spirit, an ancestor, or a hero of the past, the characters who appear are called out by the performer as he or she assumes each identity. Elaborate

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Practicing *mudangs* enter in processional, past seated *sinaui* ensemble.
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costumes are put on to identify each spirit: *Chit-sul nim*, the spirit of the seven stars of Ursa Major, is dressed in a beautiful white robe over a red skirt and dons a pointed white cap; *Taegam-nim*, the spirit who protects the house, wears a blue tunic with a black rimmed hat; *Jang-gun nim* is a general with a weapon, while *Pali Gunju* is a beautiful princess with her hair done up in a bun. The audience laughs in delight as each spirit appears and its story is told.

No matter what the purpose of the festival, the general outline of the dances and legendary songs remains the same. The dancers portray successively the literary spirits of the past, the martial spirits, the ancestors, and spirits of the underworld. Each of the segments of the dance-with-story is different, but the audience never tires of the legend retold, or the wit and humor of the dancers interjected between tales. The beauty of the costumes, the intricacy of the dance steps, and the joy of seasonal festival give a special value to this form of folk art from the ancient past.

Among the more poignant legends is the myth of the fertility goddess, told in spring during the planting of crops. A woman, fleeing the injustices of a cruel husband, is accosted in a field by a spirit of the soil (in some versions, by an unknown vagrant). Becoming pregnant by the chance meeting in the grain field, she gives birth to a child, and later nurses the baby in the field. The field yields a fertile crop, and the child grows up to be a fine farmer, collecting abundant harvests each year.

Another legend, in which the Princess *Pali Gunju* rescues her brother from hell, is known throughout Inner Asia. Once a king had seven children, six daughters and one son. While the boy was the pride and joy of his father, who had long prayed for a son to succeed him, the youngest daughter, the Princess *Pali*, was unwanted and was therefore married to a distant kingdom in the Mongolian Desert. In extreme loneliness and isolation, Princess *Pali* one night in a dream saw that her brother had died and that her father was heart-broken with grief. In the dream, she descended into hell and cajoled the King of Hell to release her brother in return for her hand in marriage. Then, by trickery, she escaped with her brother's soul and returned to the world of the living. During the Festival this story and many others will be told in dramatic dance and pantomime; no spoken word is needed to express their beauty.



Mudang dancer before traditional *sinawi* ensemble.