Special Feature

Female Masculinity and Cultural Symbolism: A History of *Yeoseong gukgeuk*, the All-Female Cast Theatrical Genre

Ju-Yong HA

The Review of Korean Studies Volume 24 Number 2 (December 2021): 107-144
doi: 10.25024/review.2021.24.2.107

Introduction

Within the pre-colonial history of Korea, several long-established theatrical genres existed. One of the most prominent was *pansori*, a storytelling operatic genre sung and presented by a solo male singer, known as *gwangdae*. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Japanese colonial presence provoked the dissolution of traditional society, as well as bringing modernization to Korea, such as modern theater and Western influences in the arts. Female performers, known as *gisaeng*, who had a long association among the aristocracy and at court as private entertainers, were now emerging as public entertainers, popular with the growing public audiences of that time. Individual *gisaeng* started to build their own careers, some becoming stars of the era. Most importantly, this was the beginning of *pansori* being sung by women, moving away from the long, traditional association with only male singers. Along with this, there was the development of operatic versions of *pansori* with multiple characters, both male and female, known as *changgeuk*, literally meaning, "sung drama." By post-colonial Korea in the late 1940s, another version of *changgeuk* was created by women, with only female singers. This all-female theatrical cast genre is known as *yeoseong gukgeuk*.[1]

By this time when group identity among *gisaeng* was minimal, individual *gisaeng* singers and performing artists re-interpreted *pansori* and *changgeuk* to create *yeoseong gukgeuk*, using *pansori* and a folksong singing style with newly composed songs, creating dramatic stories performed by new all-female troupes. This gained enormous popularity among mostly female audience members, who saw women as heroic "masculine" characters, strong and free from oppression—the opposite of reality for Korean women at that time. In this article I examine how the construct of gender roles in musical performance by female performers was in contrast to traditional masculinity presentations

* This article is based on a paper that was presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology 63rd Annual Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico, November 15-18, 2018.

1. Although there are musical traditions in which men take on female roles, such as Japanese *kabuki* and Chinese *jingju*, the phenomenon of women taking on male roles is much less common, with the exception of "pants roles" in Western opera and *takarazuka*, Japanese all-female musical theatre. In Korean cultural history the female shaman, *mudang*, often took on a male persona, and in the masked dance, *talchum*, males play female roles.

by male performers in Korea in the late 1940s through 1950s, a time of social and cultural transition as the nation rose out of the upheaval caused by Japanese post-colonialism and the Korean War. The female performers presented an idealistic reality, along with sexual fantasies that were appealing to a female audience. The conclusion is that *yeoseong gukgeuk* emerged at a specific time in Korean history for a limited period, addressed issues of masculinity before mass media, in particular films and TV, and gained control of feminine images and their promotion. Throughout this discussion, I continue to ask what masculinity is, what femininity is, and how these are both constructed in the performing arts. We must also keep in mind the relationship of the male body and the female body to each of these constructs, and consider that male masculinity or female masculinity is not formed exclusively from one body or the other but might easily arise from either. Likewise, the same is true for femininity.

These concepts have been discussed in Female Masculinity, by Judith Halberstam (1998). She suggests that there is a cultural anxiety regarding the prospect of manly women because as a concept, female masculinity implies "heroic masculinity," male presentation of masculinity which is dependent on the subordination of alternative masculinities, or masculinities mapped on other than male bodies. Heroic masculinity has been directly linked to maleness, power, domination, and privilege, and appears to be the "real thing," but as Halberstam has noted, it is produced by and across both male and female bodies. Thus, female masculinity, masculinity mapped onto female bodies, is one representation of alternative masculinity, and Halberstam suggests that alternative masculinities are framed from the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity.

With these concepts and their associations in mind, the anxiety of which Halberstam writes begins to come into focus. Any alternative masculinity—especially female masculinity—is perceived as a potential threat to the established heroic masculinity. On stage, *yeoseong gukgeuk* made the presentation of "manly women" possible, offering female audience members heroic characters played by women. This "disguised heroic masculinity" opened the way for new gender roles for women who were able to step out of the oppressive gender stereotypes that were subordinate to male gender roles. These heroes were a threat because they were beginning to empower women to take charge in real life with courage and conviction. Women in Korean society were traditionally always in service roles, raising children and working in domestic environments.

Their harsh lives were often reflected in the cultural themes in *pansori* stories in which women are often portrayed as fragile and victimized, emphasizing the extreme femininity assigned to them by their culture. Now, feminine masculinity and its "manly women" brought Korean women to the threshold of new cultural, social, and political possibilities.

Emergence of Female Popular Music and Musicians

One of the most enduring issues within Korean culture from the late 19th to early 20th century is that of *gisaeng*, who were a combination of female performing artists and entertainers, as well as courtesans. Within pre-colonial Korea of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) up to the late 19th century, Korean *gisaeng* were divided into two distinctly separate groups based on repertory, social function, and the specific audience each addressed (Kwon 2001, 320). Both classes of *gisaeng*—*gwangi*, "skilled women at court," and *sampae*, "folk musicians"—were traditionally placed at the periphery of the social hierarchy and were known as *cheonmin*. Both groups, *gwangi* and *sampae*, continued to exist through the first decade of the 20th century.

But by 1908, the Japanese abolished the *gwangi* and *yeoak* (female performing arts) system. This action dissolved the distinction between these two groups, signaling the disappearance of the court performing arts traditions in Korea, breaking the historical and cultural continuity of five hundred years.[2] Japanese colonial rule had made a significant impact on the social and legal reconfiguration of the existence of *gisaeng*. As a result of this external political and cultural force, the identity of *gisaeng* as a collective social group was transformed. *Gisaeng* were suddenly forced into being both professional artist entertainers as well as legalized, public prostitutes. This forced Japanese system

2. The Japanese officially legalized prostitution among Koreans on September 25th, 1908, only 10 days after the *gwangi* were abolished. The Japanese issued two sets of laws; one set regulated the *gisaeng* and the other regulated prostitutes, *changgi* (Song 1998, 259-60). While these two groups appeared to be legally separated, at least on paper, the content of the police department's laws, Gyeongsicheong Ryeong, No. 5 & 6, was absolutely identical, without any distinction between *gisaeng* as artists and *changgi* as prostitutes. Interestingly enough, this action formalized the Japanese initiative to legalize prostitution which had a direct effect on both *gwangi* and *sampae*. Abolished from the *gwangi*, the court *gisaeng* had nowhere to go but to join the *gongchangje*, a Japanese system of legalized, public prostitution.

of legalized, public prostitution, known as *gongchangje*, was a radical cultural intrusion that resulted in an ambiguous status for many *gisaeng*. This new system offered *gisaeng* a reassignment of their traditional role within Korean society which was effectively abolished by the Japanese. Establishing *gisaeng* as legal prostitutes was a degradation and distortion of their original identity, and a cultural insult (No 1995a).

Within the new socio-cultural context, *gisaeng* sought ways to resist from merely being seen as commercialized sexual products and made efforts to reposition themselves as musicians and entertainers. Despite their new label as prostitutes, *gisaeng* insisted on their status as entertainers and artists by actively performing in self-organized venues as well as through their involvement in the newly emerging entertainment industry. As a result of these efforts made by *gisaeng* as well as the effects of the emerging music industry, *gisaeng* have become known as the most influential social and artistic group in the creation and development of Korean music genres to date. Not only did *gisaeng* significantly contribute to the shaping of the new music genres, *sinminyo* (new folk songs) and *yuhaengga* (popular songs), which form the basis of today's contemporary popular music, they further influenced the development of modern *pansori*, now organized in their newly established *johap*, *gisaeng* associations.

Two notable associations of *gisaeng*, the Hanseong johap and the Dadong johap, put on performances for the public, and *gisaeng* as performing artists found themselves with both a new burden and a new challenge. On the one hand, they had to move beyond the Japanese plan for promoting legal prostitution, the burden that history had given them. While on the other hand, as *gisaeng* developed an increased sense of self-consciousness and self-awareness with regard to their social role, they emphasized their artistic pursuits helping to fuel the establishment of other associations beginning in 1914. A number of newspaper articles published between 1909 and 1915 announced a series of promotional concerts, benefit concerts for schools, orphanages, and small regional cities, as well as for raising funds to support the *gisaeng* association itself.

By the late 1910s, *gisaeng* associations flourished adopting the Japanese system of *gwonbon* (*kyoban* in Japanese), which were profit-making performance companies headed by male entrepreneurs at the time. As more formally structured organizations, new *gwonbon*(s) emphasized the arts, and their main function was the training and education of *gisaeng* in the various performing genres and repertoires, literature, and social and conversational skills. *Gwonbon*

organizations also acted as a management service and producer for *gisaeng*, negotiating performances for both private and public audiences in theaters and restaurants.

New commercial theaters and performance venues, introduced at the beginning of the Japanese colonial government, reflected the modernization of social entertainment in Korean society. Theater owners and production managers became successful providers of entertainment for the emerging middle class—a new cultural commodity within modern Korea. Performers were supplied mainly from among *gisaeng* who now were organized in newly established *gisaeng* organizations and *gwonbon*. Both theater owners and the performers had an obligation to understand and respond to the taste of their new middle-class audience.[3] Each theater had regular newspaper advertisements intended to lure audience members by listing performers' names and their specialties. The prominent star attractions were *gisaeng* who were highlighted in daily ads. In 1914 *Maeil sinbo* (*Daily Newspaper*) created and announced a list of the 100 Best Performing Artists. In a series of articles from January 28 to June 11 of that year, each of the 100 Best Artists were introduced with information about their region of origin, their performance specialties, and their local theatrical affiliations. Out of a list of 100, 89 were female, all of whom were *gisaeng*, reflecting the popularity of *gisaeng* among all the other entertainers.

By 1925 a new phase began in the evolution of the *gisaeng* and their identity as professional performers, characterized by changes in the many facets of popular music and its participants. Overall, there is the growth of the media, especially the recording industry, which began in Korea in 1907 when the U.S. recording companies, Columbia and RCA Victor, introduced the earliest recordings. They were quickly overtaken by Japanese record companies which all produced cylinders. With the introduction of 78 rpm records and electricity to the recording industry in 1928, production and circulation of recordings accelerated. More record shops appeared, and recordings were promoted in newspapers throughout Korea, although mainly in Seoul. The Japanese

3. Performances at the five main theaters of the time included traditional genres, *guyeonggeuk*, such as *pansori*, *danga* (a short song used as a vocal warm-up, usually presented at the beginning of a *pansori* performance), *japgga* (professional folksongs of the various regions of Korea), traditional dances, such as *seungmu* (the Buddhist monk dance), classical vocal genres such as *gakok*, *gasa*, *sijo*, instrumental pieces for *yanggeum* (hammered dulcimer) and *gayageum* (the 12-string zither), *gayageum byeongchang* (self-accompanied songs with *gayageum*), and even acrobatic entertainment such as tightrope walkers.

recording companies promoted their new labels: Columbia-Regal, Victor, Polydor, Okeh, Chieron, and Taihei-Kirin.

The record companies and the newspaper promotion focused on finding performers whose careers could be developed and who could be marketed as new stars that would appeal to the growing popular audience. In this way, the recording companies capitalized on their new cultural role as suppliers, and they also helped to create the demand. They found their success in the *gisaeng* who performed *pansori* as well as *japgga* (professional folk songs), many of whom had already had some notoriety before the public and were seasoned performers.

Through the mass production of recordings and their dissemination, the *gisaeng* stars widened their popular appeal, reaching larger audiences than they had when their notoriety was generated solely from the *gwonbon* concerts and the gala concerts. These new *gisaeng* recording stars became known as "professional" performers or "great singers" (*myeongchang*), who had greater notoriety, more artistic acclaim, and greater economic success. For the first time, many of them found their own individual identity apart from the stage name persona that linked them with the group identity of the *gwonbon*. They had immediate recognition and intense fame, all generated by the record companies that promoted them.[4]

This also signals the decline of the importance of the *gwonbon*. By the early 1930s the *gwonbon* sponsored their last public concerts, and the *gwonbon* culture broke apart as evidenced in the decreasing number of *gisaeng* associated with them. In 1919, there were almost 1,000 *gisaeng* in the *gwonbon* in Seoul, but by the early 1930s, there were less than 250 (Kwon 2003, 148). The *gisaeng* culture, which had been so important in the large public theatrical productions, broke apart into smaller groups. First, the *gisaeng* recording stars moved away from the *gwonbon* and established independent careers. Second, the less stellar performers found employment in restaurants as entertainers and servers for private clients. The *gisaeng* stars, with their new stellar status and recording contracts, had a significant effect on *pansori*, as well as newly developing popular music genres, *sinminyo* and *yuhaengga*.

These new *gisaeng* recording stars were now identified as *yeoryu myeongchang* (Great Female Singers), and the use of "*yeoryu*" recognized their

4. For example, Yi Hawjungseon's recording of the *gyemyeonjo* aria, Chuweolmanjeong, from the *pansori*, The Song of Simcheong, sold more than 100,000 copies in the late 1920s (G. Kim 2009, 81).

prestigious and honorable status for the first time. Many of them found their own individual identity apart from their previous stage name and began to use their full name, both family and given names. Among them, Yi Hwajungseon (1899-1944) and Pak Nok-ju (1905-1979), the two most popular *yeoryu myeongchang*, flourished at this time—the divas of their day. Both were from Namdo[5] where Yi was associated with Mokpo gwonbon and later, Namwon gwonbon, and Pak was affiliated with the Dalseong gwonbon and later, Daegu gwonbon (Kim 2000, 27). They both studied *pansori* with Song Man-gap, the most famous *gwangdae* at that time, and had built their careers, establishing themselves as excellent *pansori* signers. When they arrived in Seoul as *gisaeng* in the early 1920s, their popularity with the new audiences quickly carried them to stardom and their names regularly appeared in the concert programs. In the *Maeil sinbo*, January 1, 1935, Yi was compared to Song Man-gap. She had achieved the mastery level of the most famous reigning *gwangdae*, and if he was the "king," she was the new "queen." A woman was compared to her male counterpart, the first time in Korean cultural history that such a daring statement was written in public.

In the complex historical period regarding *gisaeng*, it is perhaps not so difficult to imagine how an individual *gisaeng* might have felt. From a life at court enhanced with certain privileges beyond her own social status, to being categorized as a prostitute, re-inventing herself through the *gwonbon*, and finally arriving at the status of a professional public entertainer and recording artist must have been a journey of continual adaptation, reinvention, and resistance.

This is reflected in the first issue of the *gisaeng* monthly magazine, *Janghan* (*Long Pain and Suffering*) which appeared in January 1927. For the first time *gisaeng* used their own voice to speak out against their negative image from the past and to identify themselves more for their humanity than for their artistry. This was reinforced by the cover of that first issue shown in Figure 1, an illustration of a *gisaeng* in a bird cage, with the caption, "Think, friends, my body and soul are locked in this birdcage!" In the preface, "Yeongchunsa," the voice of the *gisaeng* asserts that she is alive with blood running through her veins,

5. Namdo designates a broad geographical area of the southern provinces including Jeolla-do and Gyeongsang-do. The area is known as the birthplace for many professional folk music genres, including *pansori* and *sanjo*, and prestigious *gwonbon* flourished in the urban centers of Mokpo, Gwangju, Namwon, and Dalseong (former name for Daegu).

and that her heart is beating, but she is treated like an animal. There is a call to all *gisaeng* to stop sighing and crying, and to search for their true existence and identity. From this first publication it is clear that the *gisaeng*'s public persona hid their inner personal struggle and their search for a fulfilling personal identity. *Gisaeng*'s socio-musical contributions to Korean cultural and social history in the twentieth century are irreplaceable. They were entertainers, social radicals, and even "superwomen" who adapted their lives according to the pressures of the day. As expressed by Pak Nok-ju in that first issue, "we are human, we have tears, blood, and sensitivities…we must continue the fight in search of our identity!"

Figure 1. Cover Page of *Janghan*

Transition: *Pansori, Changgeuk, Yeoseong gukgeuk*

Within music cultures throughout the world there are gender-specific groups related to social status and religious observance, among many other constraints. One observes that women and men appear to occupy separate expressive musical spheres, creating two separate self-contained groups. In Korean theatrical genres, while this has been the case in traditional practice, during the 20th century male domination decreased and the stamp of masculinity blurred more and more, with characteristics that suggest cross-gender or gender-shift expression. Some aspects of this are the development of new genres, and the rise of female musicians. *Pansori* was a male dominated genre through the turn of the twentieth century until female musicians gradually started to sing *pansori*. *Changgeuk* emerged because there were now female singers for the female roles. This genre, the multi-character version of *pansori*, could not have happened before then because the male *pansori* singers were not willing to sing the female roles.

Changgeuk, literally meaning "sung drama," a mixed-gender theatrical genre which has survived in Korean society up to the present day, was an offspring of *pansori* in which the entire story is carried by one vocal soloist (*gwangdae*) and a drummer (*gosu*). As a new music drama genre, *changgeuk* was performed on stage with multiple *pansori* singers of mixed gender who play different dramatic roles according to a given story. Like *pansori*, the musical elements, such as vocal arias (*sori* or *chang*), recitative and narrative sections (*doseop*), physical gestures (*ballim*), and spoken text (*aniri*), are also presented in *changgeuk*, but these are transformed into a theatrical music drama with acting, dancing, costumes, and stage scenery, as well as an orchestral accompaniment, much like the way Western opera, to use the Wagnerian term, is thought of as a "*gesamtkuntswerk*," or a "total art work."

Changgeuk emerged around 1907 with the establishment of the new commercial indoor theaters. As already noted above, these new performance venues were introduced at the beginning of the Japanese colonial government, and the modernization of social entertainment in Korean society catered to the emerging modern public audience who could pick and choose what they wanted to see and hear. Because the performers were supplied mainly from among *gisaeng*, they came under the influence of *omyeongchang*, the Five Great Masters, who were themselves both teachers and performers of *pansori*. They were Kim Chang-ryong (1872-1943), Song Man-gap (1865-1939), Kim Chang-hwan (1855-1937), Yi Dong-baek (1866-1949) and Jeong Jeong-yeol (1876-1938).

Five early theaters that dominated public entertainment from 1907-1908 until 1914-1915 were: Yeonhungsa and Danseongsa, founded in 1907; and Jangansa, Wongaksa, and Gwangmudae, founded in 1908. Important to note is that these theaters also functioned as production companies. In their competition to outdo each other, they marketed specific genres, highlighting performers and spectacular *changgeuk* productions, to attract larger and larger audiences. Western plays, *sinyeongeuk* (new drama) or *sinpageuk* (*shinpa geki* in Japanese), were introduced through Japanese influence and began to replace the older traditional performing genres, *guyeongeuk* (meaning mainly *pansori*), that had been so popular. Andrew Killick (2008) makes a clear point that such hybridization between *pansori* and westernized melodrama, *shinpa geki*, was pioneered by the pro-Japanese writer and politician, Yi In-Jik who knew *pansori* texts and its singing style. Yi first introduced the term *sinyeongeuk* (new drama), as opposed to *guyeonggeuk* (*pansori*) in his novel, *Eeunsegye* (*The Silver World*), which was written to resemble a *pansori* text. In order to dramatize *Eeunsegye* on stage, he trained *pansori* singers in new dramatic techniques. This was a strong influence on the first archetype of *changgeuk*, thus beginning to project the invention of a new traditional Korean opera.

By 1920, fully staged versions of *changgeuk* which were stable in structure, design, and content were presented, and it is this theatrical form that we continue to see and hear even today. The male singers, all *gwangdae*, were well-established in this theatrical genre but also continued to perform traditional *pansori*. As the *pansori* teachers of *gisaeng*, they helped *gisaeng* not only sing traditional *pansori*, but because of their training, the *gisaeng* became active performers in *changgeuk* productions. And it is important to understand that this was the first time in Korean culture that women were identified as individual performers in their own rights, and were able to set the stage for future independent careers in the arts.

In this environment of mixed gender theatrical productions throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, popular in both the colonial and post-colonial

periods,[6] the question begins to take shape, namely, why female performers began thinking of the possibility of an all-female troupe. These women knew full well what the possible reaction to female performers might be. While they enjoyed great popularity in urban centers, they risked being criticized and culturally persecuted should they attempt to play male roles on stage. Even after *yeoseong gukgeuk* was established, the critic Pak Hwang, called women who played in the *yeoseong gukgeuk* productions, *bulgasari*, "monsters." They threatened the traditions of *pansori* and *changgeuk*, and would eventually destroy the structure of the already "perfect" Korean society, in other words, a male-dominated society (Pak 1976, 224). The answer is not simply based on music and theatrical productions, but issues of identity and the persisting social stigma, as well as economic inequality must also be addressed to fully understand what these women were trying to do. *Gisaeng* were known by most Koreans as courtesans first and performers second. This image was intensified during the Japanese colonial period; specifically, laws governing prostitution were the same as those governing *gisaeng*. Even with great popularity as performers, the association with prostitution was the overriding stigma endured by all *gisaeng* then and for decades to come. As members of an all-female troupe, women would overcome that stigma and assert their identity as artists, and especially as women. In addition, there was a growing dissatisfaction among *gisaeng* who were unhappy about the higher wages their male counterparts received and the male hierarchy which controlled the arts (Kim 2000, 29; Ban and Kim 2000, 79-86).

In reaction to these factors, *gisaeng pansori* singers started their own all-female, performance organization in 1948, the Yeoseong gugak donghohoe, Women's National (meaning Traditional) Music Society, in order to present productions by an all-female theatrical troupe. These productions became known as *yeoseong gukgeuk*, led by Pak Nok-ju (1905-1979) as president, with 30 other *pansori* singers including Pak Gwi-hui (1921-1993), Kim So-hui (1921-1994), Im Chun-aeng (1923-1975), Pak Cho-wol (1917-1983), Im Yu-haeng (1913-1964), and Sin Suk (1911-1970). These women were

6. As Andrew Killick has observed, "…in the postcolonial atmosphere of nation-building, the character for 'nation' or 'national' (*guk*) was apt to appear in the name of anything pertaining to Korea as opposed to other countries." Because of this thinking, *changgeuk*, the operatic presentation of *pansori*, was labeled *gukgeuk*, national drama (Killick 2008, 112).

former *gisaeng*, all trained at *gwonbon*, perhaps the best *pansori* singers at that time, and constituted a core of performers who already had some star status and public notoriety. Pak Nok-ju had already gained the reputation as feminist among *gisaeng*, as noted above. She sang in the lineage of the Eastern style, *dongpyeonje*, known for its extreme masculinity, established by men, the Song family, but women also sang this style and Pak Nok-ju was a master. Oh Tae-seok (1895-1953), one of the greatest *gayageum* and *pansori* masters, praised her masculine voice calling it voluminous, thick, and vigorous (Kim 2000, 34; Oh 1935, 177). In addition, with years of experience as a counter part to the male singers in *changgeuk* productions, she easily took on the male persona and male theatrical roles. It is not surprising, with everything in place, for Pak Nok-ju and these women to build up a new all-female troupe. It was an important historical moment.

There was some historical precedent for women playing male roles on stage, especially in *changgeuk*. Pak Gwi-hui had played a male role in the 1939 production of *Ilmok janggun* (*The One-Eyed Warlord*), a heroic character in the fictional historic drama based in Goguryeo (53 BC- 68 AD), during the Three Kingdoms period. The production company was Dongil changgeukdan led by Im Bang-ul, a celebrated *gwangdae*, who is known as the composer of *Sukdaemeori* (*Disheveled Hair*), perhaps the most popular *pansori* aria from *Chunhyanga* (*The Song of Chunhyang*). There is no record which provides a clear reason why Im Bang-ul placed Pak Gwi-hui in that role. But the record does reveal that she was very successful playing that character and audiences liked her. Prior to 1939, the *gwonbon* gala concerts often featured *changgeuk* productions with *gisaeng* who played male roles. In both instances, men held control of these productions, and those women who appeared in male roles were not perceived as threats to the usually understood male theatrical territory.

By 1948, these women were ready to step forward and move away from the male-dominated productions, excited to build up a new theatrical environment in which they dominated. By this time as well, female *pansori* singers outnumbered male singers; the gwonbon system had trained large groups of women while men only had access to individual teachers on a one-to-one basis, which continued specific hereditary lineages. Another influence was the Japanese *takarazuka*, the all-female theatrical genre influenced by popular American Broadway musicals. These Western, foreign stories were staged with women in all the roles using the Western song and dance music, without any

traditional Japanese music at all. The daring of the Japanese women was a strong influence for *yeoseong gukgeuk* pioneers who wanted to do their own all-female productions. Andrew Killick (2008, 114) has noted that these "…two genres embrace a similar aesthetic, both emphasizing sumptuous settings, gorgeous costumes, dashing heroes, and dainty heroines."

After 1945, with the Japanese driven out of the Korean peninsula, Koreans were left with a battered cultural, social, and political environment. With the beginning of the post-colonial period, modernity introduced by the Japanese was now replaced by a second wave of modernity influenced by American cultural and political forces. Kim Ji-hye (2009, 249) has noted that this "… was a period in which gender norms were reorganized due to the acceleration of American modernization and socio-economic changes, and discourses about the changed status and sexuality of women expanded." The seeds of the feminist movement had already been planted in Europe and the United States; women had replaced men in many occupations during World War II; they maintained families and stabilized social organizations, and now they did not want to return to pre-war conditions. In Korea, with an intensified awareness of their identity and potential at the very end of the war, the call came from Geonguk bunyeo dongmaeng (Founding Women's Alliance Formation Committee), "Come out! Women! The door of national liberation is opened, and blood will boil in the pulse of fifteen million of our women. Our women must be the forerunners on the road ahead" (*Maeil sinbo*, August 17, 1945; qtd. in Ryu 2015, 337). The women's associations which sprang up established newspapers: *Gajeong sinmun* (*Family Home News*), *Bunyeo ilbo* (*Women's Daily News*), *Buin sinbo* (*Wives' News*), and *Yeoseong sinmun* (*Women's News*), sources for enlightenment for modern Korean women. With these new avenues of communication, the vibrant awakening and awareness of gender identity spilled over into the arts as well.

Some background to Korean cultural history is important to mention, especially with regard to the influence of Confucian philosophy, which has certainly been at the heart of the organization of court and traditional life over centuries. Within the understanding of Confucian principles, men and women had specific roles designed for, and maintained by the societal structures in which they functioned. Women were in charge of the family, raising children, providing meals, and tending to the household. Women did not usually eat with men, received training primarily related to traditional family duties, and

were denied education outside the home. What they learned about traditional music and dance was from *gisaeng* who projected those gendered options which were private and well contained. Any interaction women had with men was observed only by other family members: men controlled women in their sphere of activity and women were subservient to them. Men, in contrast, enjoyed the social rituals, education, and status that strengthened their upper hand control of women and public society. Their daily activity was more diverse and was considered to have more political value; they had the power women lacked. But the strength of established gender roles, reflected in the proverb, "Namjon yeobi" (Man, superior, woman, inferior), weakened as women gained strength and status.

The spectrum of influences that Japanese colonialism brought, the phases of Western cultural influence, and the growing public presence of women in Korean society, set the stage for changes in expressive culture to evolve in new directions. The Yeoseong gugak donghohoe had already emerged and anchored those changes now coming into full blossom. Already, the Confucian thinking that restricted women from learning music because it was seductive and not appropriate for women in private, had been challenged by the popularity that the *gisaeng* had garnered in the early twentieth century. If Confucian philosophy kept women in their place, music was now leading them toward a new place.

> The codes marking gender difference in music are informed by the prevalent attitudes of their time. But they also themselves participate in social formation, inasmuch as individuals learn how to be gendered beings through their interactions with cultural discourses such as music. Moreover, music does not just passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated.
>
> (McClary 1991, 7-8)

An application to Korean traditional music and society at this time, taken from the work of the American musicologist, Susan McClary,[7] is seen in how

7. McClary's groundbreaking book, *Feminine Endings*, a collection of essays focusing on feminist theory, gender, sexuality, and music criticism, addresses the repertoires from the early seventeenth century to contemporary rock and performance arts. Although her main emphasis is on the Western canon, it suggests cross-cultural impact explored here.

the traditional separation of male and female characters on stage was being challenged in much the same way as women had challenged men as merchants and street vendors, and began to build individual careers. The newly created newspapers gave women a more public voice and presence. They went so far as to draw the parallel between the independence from Japan and their own independence from men (Ryu 2015, 337). Women were participating more and more in their own social formation. Their growing individuality had roots in the *gisaeng* stars who performed popular music in new public venues, and who had moved away from traditional music and dance exclusively. As McClary suggests, music serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated. The old gender organization was challenged and new gender models, certainly contested, were nevertheless negotiated and adopted. The time was ripe for this in Korean society and there would be no turning back time.

After the establishment of Yeoseong gugak donghohoe in early 1948, the society was eager to present its inaugural concert, the premiere of *Okjunghwa* (*The Flower of the Prison*) in October of that year. This historic first production took place at Sigonggan, Myeongdong, the most modern theater at that time in downtown Seoul. *Yeoseong gukgeuk* was finally born with hundreds of productions in its future. The legendary *pansori* singer and president of the Yeoseong guguak donghohoe, Pak Nok-ju, was the composer, and the production featured Im Chun-aeng and Kim So-hui, who were two of the most prominent *pansori* singers in the troupe.

The production simply copied the stories and content of the *changgeuk* with the exception that all the male characters were taken and performed by women. *Okjunghwa*, for example, was an extended version of the traditional *pansori*, *Chunhyangga* (*Song of Chunghyang*).[8] Despite of the vigorous effort, this first production failed miserably. The audience came expecting something new but were disappointed because it was only a different title for a story they already knew so well. The acting was awkward and limited due to its reliance on the stylized speech and style of the vocal arias all taken from *pansori*. As a beginning for the emerging genre, the production had yet to develop the characteristics it needed to be an independent form of entertainment. The poster presented in

8. This pansori is the most beloved and well-known story of the five extant *pansori* repertoire. Everyone, including children, would have known this traditional love story and its popular arias.

Figure 2a for the first production shows Master Lee and Chunghyang together with the title "Okjunghwa" written below. The story, young lovers from different social strata, was a well-known and beloved *pansori* story. An important aspect is that the poster identifies *minjok opera*, "The Ethnic National Opera," even though "opera" was not used to suggest anything conceptually like Western opera which had been known during colonial Korea. Here the important message was that this "opera" was indeed something new, namely, a story that was uniquely Korean.

Figure 2a. *Okjunghwa*

Figure 2b. *Haetnim gwa dallim*

After a year's time, once *yeoseong gukgeuk* dealt with the failure of their first production, they turned to a different type of Korean story, a fairytale, *Haetnim gwa dallim* (*The Sun and the Moon*) in 1949, shown in Figure 2b. The poster shows the main characters separated by what is easily interpreted to be the night sky. The Sun, the Prince, is the male heroic character played by Pak Gwi-hui, and the Moon, a Princess, is the female character played by Kim So-hui. They are in love, but from separate nations, and the prince saves the princess' nation from an invasion by traitors. The success of this production was the result of many factors that came together at the right time and place.[9] In later

9. We have newspaper announcements for these productions, photos of most of the cast members, and personal recollections by eyewitnesses, but unfortunately most of the librettos and music for these

productions, the male character was played by Im Chun-aeng, who brought great success to the role, captivating the audience, and helping to generate a tour of that production.

The story was actually based on the Western opera, *Turandot*, by Giacomo Puccini, and it had a freshness that the audience liked. It was mixed with the Korean fairytale of the Sun and the Moon that reflected tradition, but also emphasized modernity from a post-colonial perspective. That, along with the appeal of its romantic melodrama character, captured the imagination of the audience. Yeoseong gugak donghohoe utilized a fantastic and imaginary stage production with better lighting and costumes. To add to the artistry, there was improved makeup, especially to project the masculinity of the male characters more vividly. There was more of a focus on acting and the completion of the drama; details were not abandoned without a proper conclusion. In short, the artistry was elevated even while the production was still experimental. The reaction was one of astonishment because the male character was so manly and believable. The male character captured the thirst for an idealistic male hero, desperately needed in Korea at that time.

It was revolutionary for this production of *Haetnim gwa dallim* to thrive in Korean culture at that time, and its success reshaped the observed theatrical reality casting male characters in female bodies. In particular, one of its most successful sequels, *Hwanggeum dwaeji* (*The Golden Pig*), in November 1949, launched the career of Im Chun-aeng, who would become known as "The Legend." She was responsible for the very existence of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, and remained an important catalyst of *yeoseong gukgeuk* as we have come to know and understand it. But in 1950 she broke away from Yeoseong gugak donghohoe to form her own group, Yeoseong gukgeuk dongjisa (Female National Drama Comrades). She became an important producer and performer, and her literally hundreds of productions dominated over those of other companies. One can state without exaggeration that Im Chun-aeng was the best-known artist in all of Korea during the 1950s.

productions was lost. What has been recreated in recent years has been based primarily on personal memory of women who performed with the troupe. The only recordings I have been able to find are for four arias from 1955 productions. After the Korean War, the country was in poverty and struggling to rebuild itself, and recording an all-female theatrical group was not a priority.

Im Chun-aeng, the Legend

During my research, inevitably the name of Im Chun-aeng was invoked as being synonymous with *yeoseong gukgeuk*. Jo Yeong-suk[10] (1934-), Sin Yeong-hui[11] (1942-), Kim Seong-ye[12] (1954-), and Yi Mi-ja[13] (1940-), and past and present performers, all made reference to her as "The Legend" without whom *yeoseong gukgeuk* would not exist, and agreed that her presence alone evoked *meot* or "style," whose artistry and personality was distinctive, captivating, and at once commanding—an all-inclusive description used within Korean culture that we might call the "total package."

Im Chun-aeng was born in 1923 in Hampyeong, Jeollanam-do to a hereditary music family. From the age of nine until fifteen, she was trained at the Gwangju gwonbon learning Korean traditional performing arts, including traditional dance and *pansori*. Thus, she had extensive training in the *gisaeng* tradition and started performing at a young age along with her parents who were both folk musicians. When she started, traditional dancing was her specialty while singing *pansori* was secondary. Her sister, Im Yu-haeng, grew to be a respectable *pansori* singer, and her older brother, Im Cheon-su, studied Western opera at the Tokyo Conservatory, which contribute to Im Chun-aeng's exposure to Western music and dance.[14] Even though the family held a lower social status as folk musicians, she was a modern girl full of imagination who had traditional training but who also had contact with Western arts, adding another dimension to her personality. In this environment Im Chun-aeng grew as a *pansori* singer, dancer, actor, stage director, choreographer, composer,

10. Master Jo Yeong-suk has been designated as a Human Treasure holding the performance lineage of the National Important Intangible Cultural Asset, No. 79, Baltal (Masked Foot Theater). A series of interviews with her took place in her apartment in Seoul: January 12-13, 2018; June 17, 22, 28 and July 10, 2021.
11. Master Sin Yeong-hui has been designated as a Human Treasure holding the performance lineage of the National Important Intangible Cultural Asset, No. 5, Pansori, Chunhyagga in the Lineage of Master Kim So-hui. An interview with her was conducted at her house in Seoul onJune 29, 2021.
12. Kim Sung-ye is a renown *pansori* singer and *changgeuk* actor. An interview with her took place in her house in Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi-do on July 21, 2021.
13. Yi Mi-ja is one a few existing *yeogeong gukgeuk* actors, known for her appearances in minor roles, especially as a male villain. My interview with her was conducted in Master Jo's apartment on July 10, 2021.
14. Her knowledge of Western opera and its stories most likely had some influence on her, adapting story lines and characters for *yeoseong gukgeuk*.

playwright, poet, and eventually, male impersonator.

My commentary about Im Chun-aeng is based on my detailed interviews with Jo Yeong-suk. She joined the company of the Comrades in August 1951, working as a secretary and bookkeeper for the theatrical company while she developed her performance skills as Im Chun-aeng's trainee, eventually acting as an understudy to Im with whom she had a close relationship until Im's death in 1975. Master Jo's reputation grew, and she was known as the best comic relief male character in the company. Jo's father was a master *pansori* singer, Jo Mong-sil (1900-1951), respected as a great performer. Im told Jo to address her as *ajumma*, a functional but friendly form of address said to an older person. Im did this because she herself called Jo's father *seongseaengnim*, master or teacher, so even though Jo and Im were more than ten years apart in age, there was a strong bond between them.

Figure 3a. and **Figure 3b.** Master Jo in Two of Her Many Roles
Figure 3c. Master Jo Yeong-suk Singing *Geumgangsan taryeong* during Our Interview

Master Jo was in a position to observe Im with great admiration. She talked about Im's natural charismatic appearance, someone who emanated light when she entered a room or walked out on stage. Im's gestures and mannerisms were all captivating. Standing at 5 feet 2 inches, she had a medium-sized, well-built body, and she wore pants and accentuated her stature using shoulder pads to create a dignified and stately presence. Such a public presence in Korea in the 1950s was in stark contrast to the submission that most women experienced.

According to Jo, Im was a natural in projecting a male persona, on or off stage. Up to that time, Korean women walked with their head lowered, in a diminutive posture intended to project the beauty and femininity of the female image. Im did not fall into that category at all. The photo of Im shown in Figure 4a, taken when she was 26, reveals her proud and visionary expression, observed from a lower angle. Figures 4b and 4c give some idea of Im's stage presence: she stands tall and erect, proud with her shoulders back and accentuated by her costume, and her face with its long sideburns, has a strong, hard surface quality that is masculine in its appearance.

Figure 4a. Studio Photo

Figure 4b. and **Figure 4c.**
Im's Roles as Heroic Male Characters

During the Korean War, 1950-1953, the Comrades and the troupe moved to Gwangju and soon after to Busan for their safety. There Im became even more of a sensation with her production of *The Golden Pig* that had been so successful in Seoul as a sequel to *The Sun and the Moon*. In this story, the pig, who is the villain, tries to manipulate the relationship between the sun, the male hero played by Im, and the moon, the female love interest played by Im's niece, Kim Jin-jin, who grew to be a famous stage partner for her aunt's portrayals of male heroes. Because of Im's great popularity, while she was in Busan she had to have a police security guard on horseback escorting her in public. The troupe toured the majority of the southern cities during the war to sold-out audiences wherever they performed.

Another sensational production that Im launched was the story of *Seonhwa gongju* (*Princess Seonhwa*), a historical drama occurring during the

Three Kingdoms period in Korean history (57 BC to 668 AD). The story recounts Princess Seonhwa, the daughter of King Jinpyeong of Silla, whose beauty captivated the heart of the prince of Baekje, Seodong. In Gyeongju, the capital city of Silla, Seodong created a nursery rhyme he taught to the children that told of the secret love affair between the princess and himself. A jealous court villain, Seokpum, who wants the princess for himself, tells this to the king, who becomes enraged. As a result, the prince is imprisoned but the princess saves him and together they flee in exile to Baekje to live happily ever after.

Im composed the main arias for this production and there are at least three studio recordings of her singing much of the music. In a recent 2013 partial stage production by Master Jo, I commented that her student who played the prince was very masculine in her acting, appearance, and sound. But Master Jo was dumbfounded and quickly told me that what I heard in no way compared to what Im was as an actor with her enormous power to portray a male character that was completely captivating. She again said that Im was the composer, choreographer, and stage director—she did it all![15]

Toward the end of the war in 1953, the Comrades mounted a production of *Bau wa jinju mokgeori* (*Bau and Pearl Necklace*), a fictional historic drama from Goguryeo. The villain brother, Bongsangwang, kills the king, his own elder brother, and takes the throne. The dead king's son, the crown prince Bau, is saved by a devoted vassal who takes him away to hide in the forest. There Bau meets Arang, a beautiful young maiden, and they fall in love. Discovered by Bongsangwang, he kidnaps Arang and brings her back to the palace. Bau and his friend, Jaemo, set off to rescue Arang and engage in a big fight with Bongsanwang. With his defeat, Bau takes back the throne and is reunited with Arang. There is great relief in the nation with Bau ruling, and the love story has a happy ending. Im Chun-aeng played the role of Bau; Jeong Ae-ran played Arang; and Jo Yeong-suk played Jaemo in the production. Master Jo was delighted to talk about this production because it gave her first important role on stage.

This is a classic tale filled with tragedy, adversity, and love, all leading to a

15. Master Jo is famous for all she has retained in her memory and has a natural ability to remember details. In 2006, from her memory alone, she released a CD, a collection of *yeoseong gukgeuk* arias, Jo *Yeong-suk gugak segye* (*The World of Korean Traditional Music, Jo Yong-suk*), C. K. Jung's Korean Traditional Music Recording Series, No. 9., Music and Cinema.

triumphant victory by the beloved hero, Bau. For Korea at the end of the Korean War, this was a message of great hope and reassurance, and audiences responded accordingly. Im mounted and financed a lavish production to underscore the importance of this message, and perhaps, simply because the time was right for a more lavish production. According to Master Jo, Im spent more money than she had done for earlier productions, used to build more realistic stage scenery, and purchase better lighting, costumes, and props, including makeup that was more refined as compared with the stylized and exaggerated makeup of earlier shows.[16] Master Jo remembers clearly that nothing like this production had ever been seen before. Some of these details can be observed in Figure 5, an original group photo belonging to Master Jo, taken after one of the performances. Im is at the center, wearing a fur vest; Master Jo is in the back row, the sixth person from the left (standing next to a character with a white beard); and Yi Yu-jin, the director, on the very left in the photo. As the central figure in the story and standing in the center in this photo, Im presents herself as a strong, masculine character, standing with her broad shoulders and hands on her hips. And it is also noticeable that others have similar masculine features, too, reflecting the improved makeup.

In multiple ways, music contributed to the success of this production, and set out a future path for Im's work. Many of the original cast members had been trained as *pansori* singers and knew the specific vocal technique for that genre. Their transition to the stage was sometimes difficult because *pansori*'s melismatic text setting obscured immediate understanding by the audience, even though everyone knew the stories, including the classical references and poetry written and sung in Sino-Korean. *Pansori*, with its focus on one singer and the story, provided good singers, but on stage Im also needed good actors and dancers. The first group of actors was trained as *pansori* singers, but eventually many women who were attracted to Im and her work, and eventually joined The Comrades, were not trained in *pansori*. For the musical numbers to work on stage there needed to be a simplified vocal technique and melodic structure, and lyrics in a syllabic setting that everyone could easily understand, very similar to the German singspiel format that preceded opera in the 18th century. There was

16. Master Jo remarked that for the earliest productions, the makeup was thick, heavy, and layered, and she felt as if she was wearing a mask. With this production, Im used better cosmetics that were not so irritating to the skin.

an equal demand for skills in music, dancing, and of course, acting. By building on all these elements, this production elevated Im to her stage presence as "king" of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, and the Legend was firmly established.

Figure 5. Group Photo Taken After the Production of *Bau wa jinju mokgeori*, 1953

Im and her troupe did not limit their productions to Korean fairytales and historic dramas. They mounted productions of hundreds of other stories. There was *Cheongsil hongsil* (*The Blue and Red Strings*), which was based on *Romeo and Juliet*. *Heukjinju* (*The Black Pearl*), was the story of Othello. And probably the biggest hit of all was the 1957 production of *Gyeonu wa Jiknyeo* (*The Altair and the Vega*), the Korean fairytale about the bright star lovers on the western and eastern edges of the Milky Way. In the newspaper ad for *Gyeonu wa Jiknyeo* in Figure 6, Im is pictured as the male character, Gyeonu, with no emphasis on the main female character, Jiknyeo. The striking notation in the lower right-hand corner asks if this theatrical production is like a movie, "*Cinerama*?" or perhaps, even better than a movie. This reflects that Im's productions were able to compete with imported movies from Hollywood that were making their way to Korea[17] (Ban and Kim 2000, 575).

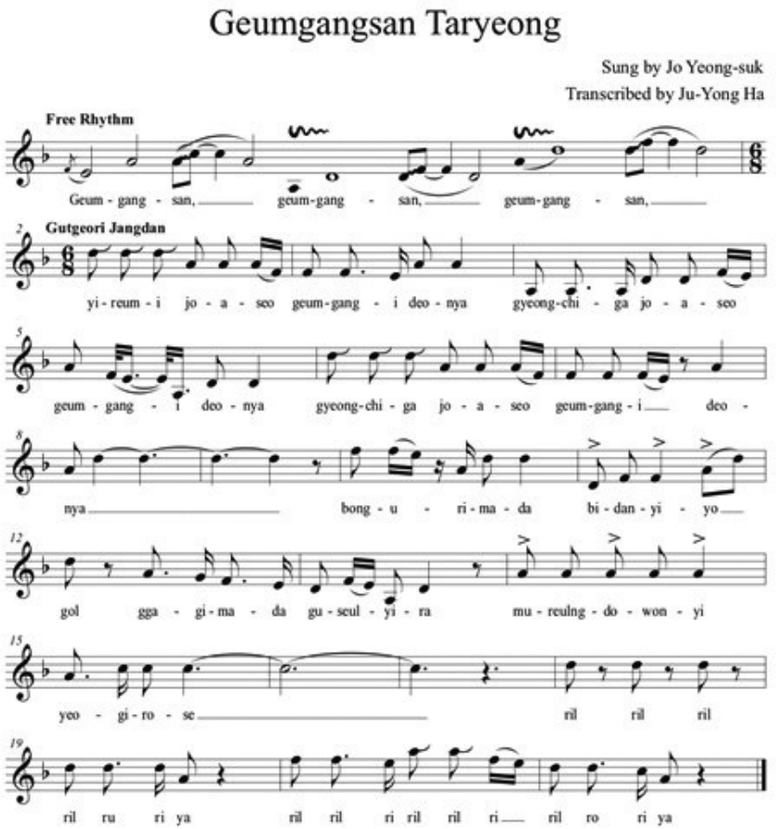
17. This production was created for a tour in Japan, mainly for a Korean-Japanese audience. Master Jo reported that while on tour, Im had the best microphone on stage and others had to compete to be heard. Im found better equipment in Japan and brought some of it back to Korea, including a sparkling ballroom mirror-ball.

Figure 6. Newspaper Advertisement for *Gyeonu wa Jiknyeo*

The most famous, and perhaps the greatest aria from all the *yeoseong gukgeuk* productions is, *Geumgangsan taryeong* (*Song of Geumgang Mountain*) from *Gyeonu wa Jiknyeo*. Example 1 is my transcription of the song as sung by Master Jo. As famous as this aria is, the composer is ambiguous. Some suggest that Im composed it alone, while others argue that it might have been composed collaboratively by Im and some male composers, a possibility supported by Master Jo when I spoke with her. No authentic ownership can be found for this aria, and collaborative composition was common for the *yeoseong gukgeuk* productions, and Im took advantage of having other composers available to write music she needed.

The popularity of this aria cannot be underestimated either for the time when it was first performed, or for the present day where it is known and continues to be sung by the young and the old. This aria begins with large leaps throughout the vocal range, a very dramatic opening that reflects the majestic mountain, suggesting echoes between heaven and earth. In general, although Im drew on traditional *pansori* vocal style and aria structure, this aria is clearly a dramatic departure from traditional norms. Im borrowed Western operatic elements, namely, an extremely wide vocal range and the use of falsetto voice. Falsetto was taboo in *pansori* except when evoking the sounds of birds and nature, or ghosts and spirits, or for a lyrical expression in the music. A significant factor in this aria was the relative ease and flow of the melody that encouraged the general public to sing along once they had heard it in the

production. This bond between performer and the audience was at the heart of Im's great popularity. The Legend strengthened this bond and she and her troupe continued to have the enthusiastic support of the Korean audiences.



Example 1. Transcription of *Geumgangsan taryeong* Sung by Jo Yeong-suk

Given all the music Im wrote, there are only four studio recordings of Im's singing in existence,[18] and unfortunately, no visual record of any live

18. The four existing recordings: 1. *Sancheona jalitdeonya* (*How the Mountains and Rivers Are*), 2. *Ggotnipui iseul* (*Morning Dew on the Flower Petal*), 3. *Gimaegi* (*Weeding*), and 4. *Kgumsoke sarang* (*Love in My Dream*) have been restored by Im's niece, Kim Jin-jin, in her 2003 CD, *Yeoseong gukgeuke yeowang, Kim Jin-jin* (*The Queen of Yeoseong gukgeuk, Kim Jin-jin*), Hana Music.

performance exists. Audio recording was available in the studio, but the performances themselves existed for the theater in an era when portable recording was neither practical nor available. The music on the studio recordings is all composed by Im, and one aria in particular is from the production, *Kong-jwi Pat-jwi*, a Korean fairytale about two stepsisters, similar to the Cinderella tale, recorded in 1955. My interpretation is that Kong-jwi represents the image of Korean women, kind and modest, yet enduring hardships. Her stepsister, Pat-jwi, is evil and manipulative, who always stands in the way of Kong-jwi's happiness. Like any other fairytale, there is a happy ending and Kong-jwi eventually meets and marries a prince. In the recorded aria, *Kkumsoke sarang* (*Love in My Dream*), Kong-jwi is dreaming about the prince, and Im, as the third person narrator, describes the dream. Her singing is remarkable for its husky quality and mature sound, especially for a young female voice because Im was only thirty-three when the recoding was made. The vocal quality is dark, with great emotional expression, comparable to *pansori* masters from among her contemporaries. This recording gives us some insight into how much Im owed her legendary status to her singing, in addition to her acting skill, which both contributed to her unique ability to project male characters on stage.

The overall success of *yeoseong gukgeuk* was built on many positive factors. At the forefront was the shining star of the movement, Im Chun-aeng. Her musical and theatrical talents were brilliantly balanced by her leadership qualities that sustained her company and productions. This success was also because of the enthusiastic reception audiences gave this new public genre. It was a new voice for Korean women that called for a new way forward to raise their status for the future of Korean society. For the first time, Korean women were at the center of popular public entertainment. Their portrayal of male characters was an awakening to the inner persona and strength they could project, and this undoubtedly was a boost to their personal confidence and initiative. The music of these new productions also contributed to the popularity of *yeoseong gukgeuk*. The songs had melodies that were easy to listen to and perhaps more importantly, easy to sing. These were melodies designed for the theater and catered to popular taste and sentiment.

With such popular support and strength, why did *yeoseong gukgeuk* so

quickly disappear by the early 1960s? There are really two sets of factors: one is very public, and the other more personal in nature. On the public side of things, production had been increasing, but the quality of the productions began to decrease. In that environment, music, in particular, suffered, and the melodies that were so singable and beloved no longer had the appeal they once had. Without that special charm to capture audience attention, there was competition for public entertainment by movies, especially Hollywood movies, that were becoming popular by the end of the 1950s. And if that wasn't enough, entertainment came into Korean homes once major television stations were established. The *yeoseong gukgeuk* theatrical productions gradually grew less competitive with movies and television so readily available.

On the more personal side of the decline of *yeoseong gukgeuk* was the competition by troupes throughout Korea. The Comrades had to compete with twelve other all-female troupes, in and outside of Seoul. They were, with the date when established: Samseong yeosong gukgeukdan (1953), Silla yeoseong gukgeukdan (1954), Nangrang yeoseong gukgeukdan (1954), Hwarang yeoseong gukgeukdan (1955), Nangja gugakdan (1955), Yeohyeop (1955), Uri gugakdan (1956), Sehan gukgeukdan (1956), Sehan gukgeukdan (1956), Jingyeong yeosong gukgeukdan (1957), Baekdohwa wa geuilhaeng (1958), and Dongmyeong yeoseong gukgeukdan (1958). Many actors were shared among these troupes, sometimes "stolen" through negotiation from one to another. Most significantly, two of Im's nieces, Kim Jin-jin and Kim Gyeong-su, who had often performed with her, betrayed her and established Jingyeong yeosong gukgeukdan in 1957, eventually copying Im's productions. According to Master Jo, that destroyed Im personally and hurt her emotionally. Im slipped into a deep depression, started drinking and using drugs (probably opium), and her physical health declined until her death in 1975. But even with this personal pain, Im continued to work. She mounted only one production in 1959, *Motnijeo* (*Cannot Forget*), and in 1961, *Heukjinju* (*Black Pearl*), her final production. After 1961, interest in the other troupes gradually declined. Everyone I interviewed agreed that when Im withdrew, everyone else withdrew. As Master Jo said, "When the captain dies, the ship sinks," and "The king dies, the nation collapses." It was the end of an era for Korean women and their role in a unique Korean theatrical genre.

Gender Performance and Performativity

Within the framework of gender studies, the question that I would like to address is what made Im's performance of male characters on stage so compelling. How can we begin to understand the power of this female actor to create such vivid portrayals of men? In other words, how was she able to convey masculinity to her audience? Certainly, by any theatrical standard, there are elements that an audience must accept. A male character walks with a limp from a war injury; an elderly dowager comes on stage drunk and slurring her words, and the audience sees this and accepts it. Of course, the male character is still a man, and the female character is still a woman, but that observation doesn't speak to the masculinity of one or the femininity of the other. In that respect the audience relies on the cultural norms and social processes that have been applied to "male" and "female" since birth. A male is identified as a "boy" and through a series of life-long processes amasses masculinity, doing masculine things, all of which reflect back to being a "boy" and having been labeled as such. Along the way, there may be some feminine influences and even some expression of "femininity" may develop.

The work of Judith Butler offers some useful concepts about how gender is created and understood within culture. She maintains that gender is culturally inscribed, that gender is an act or sequence of acts and is therefore "doing" rather than "being," and the enacting of gender takes place within a rigid regulatory framework (Butler [1990] 1999, 25). It is important to focus on the central position of the cultural context because it is the essential reference within which gender is initiated and developed, and the acts of the process of gender are both enacted and restricted. What a male person does to achieve masculinity is prescribed by a culture which also sets the limits of those actions; the restraints of the framework allow for some individual expression, but within the understood and accepted limits. These aspects of gender, taken together, constitute gender as performance according to Butler (1994, 33), who actually distinguishes between performance and performativity "…whereas performance presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the subject." Butler uses linguistic theory to support her argument. Linguistic performativity and the connection to gender is summarized by Sara Salih (2007, 56), "Gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a 'masculine' man or a 'feminine' woman. Gender identities are constructed

and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language….'[I]dentity is a signifying practice, and culturally intelligible subjects are the effects rather than the causes of discourses that conceal their workings' (Butler [1990] 1999,145). It is in this sense that gender identity is performative." The thread through this theoretical discussion is that gender is culturally inscribed and constitutes separate acts and sequences of acts, and that language is the vehicle by which we identify and name those activities and the persons themselves. One might simply state that within a specific cultural context, one is known by his or her actions, and that those actions allow others to name what he or she appears to be. The expected link between the masculine and the male body, or the feminine and the female body, might not necessarily exist, and masculinity might be enacted and linked with the female body, and femininity linked with the male body. This might be understood to be outside the cultural framework for gender performance, but it is nevertheless an option, albeit understood by many as a radical option.

When we turn our attention to theatrical productions, we encounter a particularly rich matrix of elements related to gender performance. There is the use of language and all its associations, and performers bring with them their own personal interpretations of how stage characters are brought to life. There is the language of the story itself; the elements of the staging; additional artistic expression, such as music and dance, among others. Working together, these elements create the ideal gender in characters that are, for example, strong, heroic, suffering, noble, and brave. And throughout the presentation of the story, an audience suspends its belief in reality to accept the theatrical reality and whatever is presented.

If we recognize the everyday presentation of masculinity, how did Im achieve such a command of the masculine presence on stage? How was her masculine presence better than reality? There was her stature, her husky voice, and her expressive singing style—all of which gave her a commanding stage presence. Her face was also an important factor that significantly changed her when combined with the proper make-up. She literally made herself into a male character. Her femaleness and her femininity were cloaked behind the make-up and the costume. Within the context of the production and how lighting was used, she brought to life someone else, who was in this case, a masculine man. As Master Jo recalled, Im stood straight and tall, with broad shoulders and an open chest, holding her arms firmly. She walked with her feet out,

taking measured, strong steps. Her facial expression was always serious, her mouth closed, and her eyes sharply focused, like a tiger, staring straight ahead. When she moved on stage, her whole body was engaged. To Master Jo and others in the company, Im's stage presence was like a giant rock hanging down, completely solid and immobile.

Master Jo continued to discuss how Im told the actors that they had to live like men, on and off stage. The troupe had a house and lived together during their early days. Their waking hours were spent in rehearsal and practice, especially important for those actors who played male roles. No one had any specific training in how to play a male character, but they watched and eventually mimicked what Im did on stage. They all learned that gender was acquired by performing masculinity, and that came with practice and hard work. Living together was like a real-life workshop or experiment, "becoming" masculine by the process of practicing masculinity. Their daily interactions were reshaped—those who played male characters grew in their "masculinity" and were eventually able to transfer that to the stage, similar to the process of how a boy mimics other boys and men, eventually becoming more and more masculine.

Figure 7. Master Kim Seong-ye Demonstrating a Typical Male Stage Gesture during an Interview

An interesting side effect of women playing male characters was suggested in my interviews with Kim Seong-ye, a celebrated *pansori* singer and actor who has played female characters in the revival of *yeoseong gukgeuk* since the 1980s, and who continues to perform today in occasional productions. Kim noted that she has had a better connection with a woman playing a male character than she has with a man playing a male character because, she believes, a woman playing a male character brings more to the role than a man might bring. A woman has to create the male character from the inside out. In order to make it believable, the male character on stage has to be better than reality. The woman as male character has a greater empathy with the woman as female character. There is more connection between the actors because the woman playing the male character better understands the woman as a female character, and the interaction on stage is better.

But who was going to these productions? It was a predominantly female audience, with many schoolgirls. Master Jo reported to me that looking out into the audience was like looking at a pot of black bean sprouts, schoolgirls with their black hair and black uniforms. Women appreciated what this all-female troupe was doing; they liked the stories, and they enjoyed the entertainment. And herein lies the other important element that contributed to Im's success. In Korean culture women endured great submission to men and masculine heroism, but now they could relate to their shared inner strength and courage. In these productions, women saw a masculine character on stage who was not threatening. They could identify an internal strength which they all shared, but which might not have been easily expressed by many, and the communication of this must have been powerful. Women saw Im as a strong and powerful character. She was able to transcend the physical reality to create a believable theatrical reality. From a theoretical point of view, Im's internal gender identity was so well grounded that she could take on masculinity with absolute conviction. In those moments on stage she was completely masculine.

Conclusion

Yeoseong gukgeuk arose at a particular time in Korean history. By the close of the 1940s, Korea saw an end of the Japanese colonialization period coupled with post World War II reconstruction. And in the early 1950s there was the

conflict on the Korean peninsula. With so much emphasis during this time on the reality of men going off to fight, *yeoseong gukgeuk* offered a new "masculine hero," needed for social stability, who could offer a refocused encounter with the ideal masculine.

If these social and political factors contributed to the success of *yeoseong gukgeuk*, or at least to its rise to popularity, why was it so short-lived? There are several reasons why this happened. By the end of the 1950s other forms of public entertainment began to flourish. Radio was often replaced by TV and families could now watch new programs at home. The movie industry was growing rapidly and created new audience experiences. These new technologies created a shift away from traditional theatrical productions, even those with an all-female cast. Also, the Korean government was not interested in supporting *yeoseong gukgeuk*; there was support only for the mixed gender groups of the National Changeuk Company (Gugnip gukgeukdan, later name Gugnip changgeukdan).

Another factor in the decline of *yeoseong gukgeuk* and its productions was the harsh criticism leveled by the critic, Park Hwang. He suggested that the productions were obscene with sexual content, and that the stories were taken from old fables and fairytales. He wanted to regain "heroic masculinity," and perhaps the "feminine" masculine hero was more than he could accept. He had already been generally critical of *gisaeng*, and continued his attacks on female performers that were acting and performing in *yeoseong gukgeuk*. It is easy to assess that he was not fair to *yeoseong gukgeuk* and what they were promoting.

My own observations are that Im Chun-aeng was the star of the all-female casts. There was really no one else to replace her talent and stage presence, especially after her health declined steadily due to her drinking and drug use. *Yeoseong gukgeuk* declined and became peripheral by the 1960s, and by the end of that decade it was gone.

Finally, if indeed the all-female cast with women playing male characters was seen as resisting the "oppositional, destructive violence of heroic masculinity" (Macarthur 2016,144), it did so by also enriching (rather than disrupting) the musical text through the lens of social and political change. Women had just witnessed the horrific results of the reality of what men and their heroic ambitions created. Now was the time to expand the social and political conversation through a new interpretation that was neither threatening to women nor to men, and one that would explore the strength of feminine

masculinity and its potential in artistic expression.

References

Baek, Hyun-mi. 2000. "1950 nyeondae yeoseong gukgeuk ui seongjeongchiseong yeongu" [Gender Politics of Yeoseong gukgeuk during 1950s in Korea]. *Hanguk geuk yesul yeongu* 10: 153-82.

Ban, Jae-sik, and Eun-sin Kim. 2000. *Yeoseong gukgeuk wangja, Im Chun-aeng Jeongi* [Biography of Im Chun-Aeng, the King of Yeoseong gukgeuk]. Seoul: Baek jung dang.

Butler, Judith. (1990) 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

——. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519-31.

——. 1992. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism." In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 3-21. London: Routledge.

——. 1994. "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler." *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (Summer): 32-39.

——. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.

Citron, Marcia J. 1993. *Gender and the Musical Cannon*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Contogenis, Constantine, and Wolhee Choe, trans. 1997. *Songs of the Gisaeng: Courtesan Poetry of the Last Korean Dynasty*. Rochester: BOA Editions.

Ha, Ju-Yong. 2006. "The Grand and the Majestic: Ujo in P'ansori Tradition." *Eumakg wa munhwa* 15: 135-54.

——. 2015. "Lifting Up the Sound: Ujo in Pansori Tradition." *Dongyang eumak* 38: 199-240.

Halberstam, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Jang, Yu-jung. 2004. "1930 nyeondae gisaeng ui eumakhwaldong ilgichal" [A Study of the Musical Activities of Gisaeng in the 1930s]. *Minjok munhwa nonchong* 30: 463-510.

Jeon, Seong-hui. 2008. "Hanguk yeoseong gukgeuk yeongu (1948-1960): Yeoseong gukgeuk ui beonseong gwa soetoe ui wonin eul jungsimeuro" [A Study of Yeoseong gukgeuk (1948-1960): Focusing on the Reasons of Development and Decline]. *Deurama yeongu* 29: 111-40

Killick, Andrew. 1998. "The Joseon Seongak Yeonguhwe and the Advent of Mature Changgeuk Opera." *The Review of Korean Studies* 1: 76-100.

——. 2001. "Ch'anggek Opera and the Category of the Traditionesque." *Korean Studies* 5 (1): 51-71.

——. 2002. "Korean Changgeuk Opera: Its Origins and its Origin Myth." *Asian Music* 33 (2): 43-82.

——. 2003. "Road Test for a New Model: Korean Musical Narrative and Theatre in Comparative Context." *Ethnomusicology* 47 (2): 180-204

——. 2008. "Korean Opera, Changgeuk." Vol. 2 of *Korean Musicology Series*. Seoul: The National Gugak Center,.

——. 2010. *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera: Discourses of Changguk*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kim, Gi-hyeong. 2009. *Yeoseong gukgeuk 60 nyeon sa* [A 60-Year History of Yeoseong gukgeuk]. Seoul: Munhwa cheyuk gwangwangbu.

Kim, Hee-sun. 2021. "Geunhyeondae jeontong gongyeon yesul jedo wa jeongchaek ui gendeo jangjeom" [Gender Issues in the Institutionalization and Policy of Korean Traditional Performing Arts]. *Hanguk eumak sahakbo* 66: 51-84.

Kim, Ji-hye. 2009. "1950 nyeondae yeoseong gukgeuk ui gongyeon gwa suyong ui seongbyeol jeongchihak" [Gender Politics in Performance and Acceptance of Female Gukgeuk in 1950s]. *Hanguk geukyesul yeongu* 30: 247-80.

——. 2010. "1950 nyeondae yeoseong gukgeuk gongdongche ui dongseong chinmilseong e gwanhan yeongu" [A Study of Intimacy between Women in the 1950's Female Gukgeuk Community]. *Hanguk yeoseonghak* 26 (1): 97-126.

——. 2011. "1950 nyeondae yeoseong gukgeuk ui danche hwaldong gwa soetoe gwajeong yeongu" [A Study of the Troupe Activity and the Declining Process of the 1950s Female Gukgeuk]. *Hanguk yeoseonghak* 27 (2): 1-33.

Kim, Seok-bae. 2000. "Pansori myeongchang Pak Nok-ju ui yesul segye" [The Artistic World of Pansori Master, Pak Nok-ju]. *Gujeon munhak yeongu* 10: 23-52.

Kim, Sung-hee. 2010. "Yeoseong gukgeuk ui jangreujeok seonggyeok gwa

yimijI roseoui yeoksa" [The Character as Genre and History as Image of Female Gugguek]. *Hakguk yeongeukhak* 40: 61-96.

Kim, Yeong-hui. 2006. *Gaehwagi daejungyesul ui kkot, gisaeng* [Gisaeng: The Flowers of the Performing Arts of the Modern Era]. Seoul: Minsokwon.

Kwon, Do-hee. 2001. "20segi gisaeng ui eumak sahoehakjeok yeongu" [A Socio-Musicological Study of Gisaeng in the 20th Century]. *Hanguk eumak yeongu* 29: 319-344.

——. 2003. "20 segi chobangi ui minsokakgye hyeonseong e gwanhan eumak sahoehakjeok yeongu" [A Socio-Musicological Study of the Formation of the Folk Music Circle in the Early 20th century]. PhD diss., Seoul National University.

Lee, Byong-won. 1979. "Evolution of the Role and Status of Korean Professional Female Entertainers (Gisaeng)." *The World of Music* 21 (2): 75-81.

Macarthur, Sally. 2002. *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*. London: Greenwood Press.

——. 2016. *Towards a Twenty-First-Century Feminist Politics of Music*. London: Routledge.

McClary, Susan. 1991. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minnesota and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press.

No, Dong-un. 1995a. "Gisaeng seongnyeo inga seongnyeo inga?" [Gisaeng: Prostitute or Saint?]. *Eumakgwa minjok* 10: 180-88.

——. 1995b. *Hanguk geundae eumaksa I* [The History of Modern Korean Music I]. Seoul: Hangilsa.

Oh, Tae-seok. 1935. "Namchang i bon yeoryu myeongchang" [The Female Pansori Singer: A View from a Male Pansori Singer]. *Samcheonri* (November): 117.

Paechter, Carrie. 2006. "Masculine Femininities/Feminine Masculinities: Power, Identities and Gender." *Gender and Education* 18 (3): 253-63

Pak, Hwang. 1976. *Changgeuksa yeongu* [A study of the History of Changgeuk]. Seoul: Baengnok chulpansa.

Ryu, Jin-hui. 2015. "Haebanggi (1945-1948) yeoseongjuche ui busang gwa yeoseong seosa ui changchul" [The Creation of Female Narrative Literatures during the Liberation Period (1945-1948)]. Paper presented at The 4th Western Pacific-Asia Conference on Korean Studies, Chinese Culture University, Taipei, Taiwan, June 13-14.

Salih, Sara. 2007. "On Judith Butler and Performativity." In *Sexualities and*

Communication in Everyday Life: *A Reader*, edited by Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M, 55-68. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications..

Son, Tae-do. 2005. "1920-60 nyeondae jeontong gongyeonmuldeul e daehan myeondam jaryo" [A Collection of Interviews on the Productions of Traditional Music from 1920-1960]. *Yeoksa minjokhak* 21: 381-522.

Song, Bang-song. 2002. "Sinminyo gasu ui eumak sahoehakjeok jomyeong" [A Socio-Musicological Study of the Sinminyo Singers]. *Nangman eumak* 14 (3): 7-68.

Song, Yeon-ok. 1998. "Daehan jeguk ui gisaeng dansokryeong changgi dansokryeong" [Laws for the Regulation of Gisaeng and Prostitutes during Colonial Korea]. *Hankuk saron* 40: 215-62.

Yi, Kyung-min. 2005. *Gisaeng eun eoddeoke mandeulleo jeotneunga* [How Was the Gisaeng Formed (?)]. Seoul: The Center for the Research of Photo Archive.

Yi, No-hyung. 1992. "Hanguk geundae daejung gayo ui yeoksajeok jeongae gwajeong yeongu" [A Study of the Historical Process of Korea's Modern Popular Music]. PhD diss., Seoul National University.

Ju-Yong HA (ha@hartford.edu) is a composer and ethnomusicologist who also has an extensive background in producing festivals and concerts of Korean traditional music in the United States. His music has been performed at Lincoln Center and Symphony Space in New York, and most recently in Seoul and Bogota, Colombia. His research has focused on *pansori* and *sanjo*. He is Assistant Professor of Music at Hillyer College of the University of Hartford.

Abstract

Female Masculinity, as discussed by Judith Halberstam (1998), comments on the cultural anxiety at the prospect of manly women and asserts that "heroic masculinity" is dependent on the subordination of alternative masculinity, masculinity mapped on other than male bodies. Although there are musical traditions in which men take on female roles, such Japanese *kabuki* and Chinese *jingju*, the opposite presentation, women taking on male roles, is much less common with the exception of "pants roles" in Western opera. In Korean cultural history the female shaman, mudang, often took on a male persona, and in the masked dance, *talchum*, males play female roles. At the beginning of the early 20th century, *gisaeng*, the female entertainers, began to perform *changgeuk*, an operatic version of *pansori*, which had a tradition of male performers up to that time. By post-colonial Korea in the late 1940s, another version of *changgeuk* was created by women with only female singers. This all-female theatrical cast genre is known as *yeoseong gukgeuk*. The legacy of *gisaeng*, already dismantled in the 1930s, was re-interpreted and *yeoseong gukgeuk* developed, gaining enormous popularity among mostly female audience members. Seeing women in male roles and through this "alternative masculinity" lifted Korean women out of their own oppression. In this article I examine how the construct of gender roles in musical performance in Korea in the 1950s was re-interpreted by female performers, thus disrupting social and cultural heroic masculinity. The performers presented an idealistic reality, along with sexual fantasies, that were appealing to a female audience. This paper concludes that *yeoseong gukgeuk* emerged at a specific time in Korean history for a limited period and addressed issues of masculinity before mass media gained control of sexual images and their promotion.

Keywords: *yeoseong gukgeuk*, *changgeuk*, *gisaeng*, theatrical genre, gender theory, sexuality, female masculinity, feminism, *pansori*

Submission: 2021. 10. 4. Referee/Revision: 2021. 10. 25. Confirm: 2021. 11. 4.