

## Tradition as a Present Tense

현재형으로서의 전통<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction

What do we call “Tradition”? In Chinese characters, the word 傳統 (tradition) is a combination of the word “傳”, which means to pass on or connect, and “統”, which means to unite or to form a system or to make into one. In other words, tradition is a form that has been passed down through time without changing. If we have been thinking about tradition in terms of time, it is time to think about tradition in terms of space. Tradition does not divide human culture into national or regional units, but rather unifies it into a single flow. What are the universal values that unite Korea, China, Hong Kong, and other Asia countries/regions and the West, and in what form can we express them?

### 2. A Fusion of Tradition and Modernity

When we think of tradition in the present tense, we often think of fusion, which is the mixture of Eastern and Western forms. However, when this mixture is a combination of Eastern and Western elements, it does not become a form that we enjoy ourselves, but a form that we present to others.

But when we combine our old forms with the format enjoyed by the younger generation today, we can get a response in our domestic market and, as a result, in foreign markets as well. Changgeuk (唱劇), a genre of traditional Korean opera, is an example of this. Changgeuk combines the traditional one-man theatre form of pansori with the opera format, which is sung by multiple characters.

While pansori is a genre that originated in the 17th century, Changgeuk is a relatively new genre that emerged in the early 20th century. The new genre gained popularity in its early days, but did not attract much attention after the 1980s. However, in the late 1990s, the National Changgeuk Company of Korea entrusting stage direction to theatre directors, and audiences accustomed to musicals began to be attracted to Changgeuk, which has a different musical style but the same dynamic drama as musical theatre. Today, Changgeuk has become a genre as popular as musical in South Korea. The National Changgeuk Company of Korea was officially invited to perform at the Edinburgh Festival in 2023,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a reprint of a manuscript that was originally presented at the BeSeTo Festival “International Symposium” in Shenzhen, China, in November 2023. At the BeSeTo festival, the Chinese side wants to keep “tradition” as a topic of discussion. Perhaps because dealing with the 'present' usually involves social conflicts, which is a sensitive topic, they prefer the format of the past rather than the present.

and in 2024, the company performed King Lear in London and was nominated for an Olivier Award in the opera category. However, when discussing tradition, Korean traditional theatre is loved by the younger generation in Korea is more important than it is gaining popularity overseas. Changgeuk is no longer a traditional genre, but a contemporary genre.

### **3. Relive the Moment When Tradition Was Born**

Tradition is the core of self-identity. It is the essence of how I construct my identity within the history of my community. However, in the field of art, tradition takes on a specific form. In China, there are traditional forms such as Jingju and Yueju; in Japan, there are traditional forms such as Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku; and in Korea, there are traditional forms such as Pansori and Talchum. All three countries have many artisans who carry on these traditional art forms, and we value their work.

But when we talk about tradition in the present, we should view our own ‘traditional forms’ through the eyes of others. Othering means viewing an object objectively. By viewing it objectively, we can understand the reasons behind its form.

The contextualisation of tradition is also a process of questioning and answering the meaning of traditional forms in the present. The question is: ‘Why is this form necessary?’ However, the answer to this question cannot be found simply by following traditional forms. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to create conditions for rebirth within existing forms.

In 2014, Yoon Han-sol and GreenPig Theatre performed a work titled The way of storytelling, the way of singing. The main content of the piece is that the actors learn pansori, a traditional Korean musical form. From the repertoire of pansori, they sing Jeokbyeokga. Jeokbyeokga is one of only five traditional pansori pieces in existence. As its title, Jeokbyeokga recreates the "The Battle of Red Cliffs" of the Three Kingdoms period, a story about the war between the three kingdoms of Wei-Shu-Wu.

To recreate the East Asian classic in Korea's traditional one-man musical theatre format, the actors of GreenPig Theatre learn pansori on stage. However, for director Yoon Han-sol, Jeokbyeokga is not intended to follow in the footsteps of previous traditions. The actors do not train in the technical aspects of learning the ‘Pansori’ style of singing, but to understand the emotions behind the song. Part of Jeokbyeokga, Soldiers’ Lament is a verse that deals with the lamentations of soldiers who were drafted into war during their honeymoon period. Yoon finds the key to understanding this passage in Fujiwara Shinya's All Oriental Road. During a trip to South Korea in 1981, Shinya Fujiwara heard pansori on a taxi radio. He felt the song's tragic sense and guessed that it must be similar to the songs sung by the young people who died in the Gwangju Uprising in 1980.

What Yoon learned from Shinya Fujiwara is that the gaze of “the others” can penetrate the energy of a traditional form at the moment of its inception. The young people involved in the Gwangju Uprising were extremely angry. And the soldiers who were conscripted during their honeymoon to fight in “the Battle of Red Cliffs” would also be very angry.

Therefore, GreenPig's actors earned to express this anger. And they learn how to express this emotion of anger in the accent of Jeollanam-do, the home of pansori. Thus, what the actors learn in The way of storytelling, the way of singing is not only the techniques of pansori, but also an understanding of the emotions that the work sought to convey through the form of pansori. More importantly, it is possible to revisit the moment when these emotions were born in the form of stories and songs using the language of this specific region, Jeollanam-do.

#### 4. Contents of Traditional and Modern Life

Directed by Kim Poong-nyun, the art of war:卒, by the theatre company Jakdangmoe, performed at the Seoul Performing Arts Festival in October 2023. Although this work does not borrow any traditional drama form, it is a work that leaves room for the audience to think deeply about 'tradition'. This work is about a poor, single, elderly man. His parents' homeland is North Korea, and since his wife recently died, he has been living alone in Seoul. It's Lunar New Year, but he is lonely without his family to celebrate the holiday with. He recalls the memory about the radish soup his mother used to make and plays janggi with the village elders. His unremarkable life is, as the title suggests, just a nobody(卒).

His only pleasure is playing janggi (將棋) with the elder of his age in this poor neighbourhood. janggi is a traditional game played in Korea, Japan, and China, but the rules are slightly different. In particular, xiangqi(象棋) in China and janggi in Korea are quite similar yet different. In janggi, the kings of the two teams represent King Xiang Yu(項羽) of the Chu(楚) Dynasty on one side and King Liu Bang 劉邦 of the Han(漢) Dynasty on the other. However, people who play janggi generally don't necessarily remember 楚漢志 while playing this game. The play the art of war:卒 recalls the fight between the Chu and Han dynasties and the anecdotes surrounding it.

Among the elderly villagers, the protagonist's chess skills are not very high. One day, he suddenly defeats all the masters in the village. He plays janggi against the best player, but loses all his pawns and is left with only one pawn - 卒 and one opponent, the king.

The situation seems to be that the protagonist is defeating the King of Chu, but in fact the protagonist identifies with the situation of the King of Chu rather than the war. At the end of his life, he is fighting to survive in poverty and loneliness. He grew weary of this miserable life, as he had never enjoyed any

high position in his lifetime. He lost his beloved wife, and moved far away from his hometown, misses the taste of his mother's home cooking. Then, in sadness, he sings songs of longing for his hometown. He is now literally in the midst of 四面楚歌. Before his final fight, he sings. The song he sings is part of a funeral dirge in the pansori Simcheongga, "T The crayfish is retreating, the squirrel is sitting picking up chestnuts, the tiger in the distant mountains is drunk.". Therefore, it has nothing to do with 楚漢志. However, when watching this scene, it is not difficult for us to recall the story of Xiang Yu's Annals from Shiji, which written by Sama Chen.

<p>The strength could move mountains, and the spirit could cover the world,</p> <p>but fate is against you, and even Ochu-ma will not advance.</p> <p>Ochu-ma will not advance, so what should be done?</p> <p>Woo-bu-in, Woo-bu-in!</p> <p>What should be done with you?</p>	<p>역발산혜기개세 시불리혜추불서 추불서혜가내하 우혜우혜내약하</p>	<p>力拔山兮氣蓋世， 時不利兮騅不逝。 騅不逝兮可奈何， 虞兮虞兮奈若何！</p>
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In the end, the art of war:卒 is a play about how impoverished and powerless citizens in Korean society, can remain undefeated and emerge victorious in their struggle for survival. Even though his life may be considered insignificant, he does not feel inferior in his own life.

Although this story come from ancient Chinese history, it is a story that every Korean knows. However, the play makes us realise that this story is not just a knowledge of an event that happened long ago, but a story that is happening again in our lives today.

Moreover, this play draw even more attention with its very unique staging and stage composition. Dozens of tape measures hanging from the batons that hold the stage lighting. The tape measures hang in mid-air, like janggi pieces(棋物). The drooping metal tape measure resembles a battle sword emitting a clanging sound. and the way they are clustered together and held in the hand brings to mind

the decorative patterns on the costumes of characters in Chinese Peking Opera. Actors wear roller skates on only one foot, sometimes glide gracefully across the chessboard of life, but sometimes limpt. A photograph of the work is shown here to help you visualise it.



(Photo: Jae Yoon Shin, PD at Saksdangmo)

## 5. Conclusion

Although tradition is precious, its place is gradually shrinking in the modern world we live in. But tradition sometimes triumphs over its longevity, with moments of brilliance. It's not time for modern people to acknowledge the splendid and authoritative forms of tradition, but for them to rekindle the energy of tradition's inception. All artistic expression stems from a sense of loss. The pain of life comes from our desire for the things we lack in life. In the past, traditional art forms satisfied this desire, and modern art certainly exists to satisfy it as well.

When we discover this form of satisfying universal values, it will become our tradition. And when I say "we", Furthermore, the 'we' I refer to here does not refer to a single country, but to those of us who perform theatre in East Asia, including South Korea, Japan, and China, as well as in various other countries. As a universal value, the "longing for deficiency" and the creation of forms to express this desire will give us "something that can be passed on to each other and bind us together," that is, tradition. Tradition is not so much about the past as it is about the present, which is integrated with the past here and there in space.