

Reconciling Tradition and Modernity-Elements of Korean Traditional Arts in My Theatrical Work

전통과 현대성의 조화 - 한국 전통예술의 요소를 연극 작품에 담다

NAM Inwoo 남인우

Like most Asian countries, Korea went through a period of being denied the value of our unique cultural heritage and way of life during the process of modernisation and the invasion of the Imperial Japan. We were semi-forced to take away or hide what was ours. Even after gaining independence from Japanese imperialism, Korean politics and culture have yet to reach a stage where traditional and modern influences can naturally blend.

In particular, from the 1960s to 1980s, the political environment of South Korea was dominated by military dictatorship based on modern growth, and under the banner of ‘modernisation,’ the government rejected and suppressed our traditional culture and arts.

In this process, many artists were denied this existence or dismissed as uncivilised, most artists abandoned the art they had honed, and the traditions had been built around village communities was destroyed. In the late 1980s, the government finally lifted its ban on traditional culture and arts, but the wave of Western-style popular culture that swept in with the democratisation movement did not leave room for traditional culture and arts to revive. While Korea's traditional culture and arts suffered oppression and lost their status, they also gave rise to a sense of despair and survival consciousness commensurate with the weight of that oppression. It is precisely this strict insistence on ‘preservation’ that has made ‘preservation in its original state’ a conservative and unchangeable tradition to this day. However, on the other hand, the responsibility to preserve has also created a desire to dismantle everything. With the advent of the postmodern era, the whirlwind of “preservation” and ‘dismantling’ became the desire of the era surrounding traditional art.

In the 2000s, the cultural landscape of Korea has been shaped by the expectations of the new Millennium and the need for new perceptions and approaches to our past. Against this background, traditional cultural arts have become an important medium for communicating with the modern world, rather than just a legacy of the past. The reason and method underlying incorporation of traditional artistic elements into my works can be understood within this background.

My Personal Story

I was born at 590-106 Seojeong-dong, Pyeongtaek-si (formerly Songtan-si), Gyeonggi-do. Below the

hill was a vast rice fields, and on the other side, it was the main gate of Osan Air Base, where the K-55 Division was located. In front of the main gate, there was a new road with all sorts of American goods and food, jazz bars, clubs, and shops catering to the US military. I grew up and spent my teenage in two very different cultures. Naturally, there were also many mixed-race (that's what we called it back then) adults and friends. What's really interesting is that the US soldiers' favourite hamburgers are the ones sold by Miss Lee's Hamburgers - a cart in front of the gate, not the Wendy's hamburgers sold in the shop in front of the gate, nor the Burger King hamburgers sold in the military base. It's pretty much the same except for the American cheese, steak, onions, and tomatoes, but here you can find Korean-style burgers that you won't find at other burger store: fried eggs and bread lightly toasted with margarine. Also, instead of french fries, fried squid was a big hit. Miss Lee's hamburgers are very popular among American soldiers and Koreans. With the emergence of imitators such as Miss Lee, Miss Jung, and Miss Kim, there were many different sauces (using American ingredients but with a Korean flavour). The spicy hamburger was especially delicious. At the time, I didn't realise how the clash or blending of these two cultures would influence me today. The training I received allowed me to naturally accept the differences between the two cultures. Naturally, I began to view them as my own material, which I could mix and match at any time to suit my taste. I felt neither resistance to Western culture nor any sense of debt to our own the oppressed and decadent traditional arts of Korea).

I'm going to start this story by showing you some of the things I've been working on.

Traditional Forms with Contemporary Issues

The Modern Birth of Pansori

Inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, Pansori is an iconic genre of Korean traditional art. *Sacheon-ga* (<사천가>, 2007) and *Ukchek-ga* (<억척가>, 2010) which premiered in 2007, both inspired by Brecht's play, are examples of how traditional elements of pansori have been reconstructed into modern stage language, breaking down the boundaries between tradition and modernity, attempting to communicate with the audience in new ways. These productions demonstrate how traditional arts can be reinterpreted in a modern context.

<Watching a video of a partial performance of Traditional Pansori>

<sichuan singer & umbrella singer: some performance photos and performance videos>

From a narrative perspective, Pansori has five traditional narratives and incorporates contemporary concerns and questions.

In 2007, Korea and the world were in the midst of a wave of neoliberalism and globalisation, when capital became the standard of everything, even aesthetics. The creative team wondered, "What does it mean to be a good person in this era?", "When there was a brief crisis of war on the Korean Peninsula, what is war? What does war take away from us and what does it give us?" We wanted to capture that story.

In terms of form, we deeply considered the stylistic archetypes of traditional pansori. So we chose two central archetypes and tried to preserve them. we dramatically expanded the pansori performance style of switching between narrator and character. In music, we preserved the rhythm-centred musicality while also expanding the rhythmic style and instruments.

Peerless Pansori

“Peerless Pansori” the series was created by the National Changgeuk Company of Korea to stage five traditional pansori songs (*Chunhyangga* 춘향가, *Shimcheongga* 심청가, *Heungboga* 흥부가, *Sugungga* 수궁가, and *Jeokbyeokga* 적벽가) in a contemporary way, and I composed, adapted, and directed the first and second works of the series back-to-back.

< Peerless Pansori I >

“Peerless Pansori I” is the *Sugungga*, performed by two male sorikkun (singer of pansori), Kim Junsu and Yoo Taepyeong.

Sugungga is originally about 4-hours long in full, but it was compressed to a 2-hours performance, and the role of a single performer was replaced by two performers. Two sorikkun switch between narration and characters, with no fixed roles, but rather performing in a cross-over style depending on the situation. switching between narrative and character, with no fixed character, and switching according to the situation.

< Peerless Pansori II >

Peerless Pansori II are the *Chunhyangga* and the *Jeokbyeokga*, performed by two female sorikkun, Lee Soyeon and Min Eunkyung.

Chunhyangga is originally about 6-hours long in full, and *Jeokbyeokga* is originally about 3.5-hours long in full, and both were recreated to 2-hours long, with themes of love and war. Personally, I felt a gender conflict in the way the words and situations in traditional pansori were presented to the

current generation. I also felt that there were things that should not be passed down. In particular, the attitude towards women was problematic. This has been revised.

Changgeuk: Musical Theatre based on Pansori

Changgeuk is a hybrid performance style that emerged in the late Joseon Dynasty during the modernisation period in the early 20th century, incorporating Western theatrical techniques into pansori. Although changgeuk has a relatively short history of only about 100 years, its singing method (pansori) has long been recognised as a traditional art form. Until 2010, most changgeuk productions were adapted from the five classic pansori stories (*Chunhyangga*, *Shimcheongga*, *Heungboga*, *Sugungga*, and *Jeokbyeokga*). Under the leadership of Kim Sung-nyeo, who was appointed artistic director of the National Changgeuk Company of Korea in 2010, various changes began to take place in the company's productions. I have collaborated with the company on two productions, both of which coincidentally dealt with themes of gender identity and queer narratives.

In 2012, I wrote and directed *My Name is Oh Dongu* <내 이름은 오동구> (adapted from the film *Like a Virgin*), which tells the story of a transgender youth's coming-of-age. In 2024, I wrote and directed *Jeongnyeon* <정년> (based on the webtoon *Jeongnyeon: The Star Is Born*), which highlight feminism and homosexuality in a female queer narrative set against the backdrop of the female traditional Korean opera that flourished in Korea in the 1940s. *My Name is Oh Dongu* was the first traditional performance to incorporate a queer narrative in both the private and public spheres at the time.

Why and how should we share the stories of older generations with future generations?

<The Story of the Good in the Good to Children and Young Adults _ The Drought Baby

Gamoonjang Baby <가문장아기> is a performance based on a story of Samgongbonpulyi in Jeju Island. They performed on traditional Korean instruments, using Jeju horses and costumes.

It is said that gender awareness develops from the age of seven, but there were no performances that could serve as role models for girls. All the heroes were men, and all the tormented characters were men.

For example, I ponder life like Hamlet, but I thought my girlfriends lacked such philosophical thinking and insight into life. This is because they had never read it in the play, and all the female characters they had encountered were jealous, scheming, and blindly loving or seductive. So, my

colleagues and I decided to create female characters who took charge of their own lives. Later, we happened to discover such a character in a very ancient witchcraft ritual. That character is Samgongbonpulyi's Gamoonjang Baby.

Two beggars fell in love while begging for food and give born to three daughters, the youngest is Gamoonjang. As soon as she is born, the family becomes very wealthy, and when the father asks his daughters whom owe their lives, the other two daughters say that they owe their lives to heaven, earth, and their parents, but Gamoonjang says that in addition to heaven, earth and her parents, she also thanks her womb under her belly button. but they owe their lives to me (in Good, the pregnancy line under my belly button). For that reason, her father is angry and throw out Gamoonjang of the house.

In Asia, the words such as 'tradition' and 'old stories' are often associated with a conservative worldview. However, my work strives to reinterpret traditional culture and art in order to explore contemporary social issues and provide audiences with new perspectives and entertainment. This creative approach helps to rebuild cultural identity and achieve harmony between tradition and modernity.

Additionally, in the performances *Knock, Knock, Knock*<똑, 똑, 똑> for people with developmental disabilities and *Gamoonjang Baby*<가쁜 장아기> and *A Bird Story* <봉장취> for children and teenagers, traditional elements are combined with modern themes to create new meanings. These performances emphasise that traditional culture is not merely a legacy of the past but an important resource that spans the present and future. It is particularly important to convey important contemporary values to future generations through stories from the past. Especially when it comes to gender issues, in a patriarchal society and within the narratives that have long dominated us, discovering and revealing things that can shake the foundations of these ancient narratives is like overturning the ‘original’ immutable arena. It is a force that opens up new possibilities.

For Northeast Asians, the task of connecting elements of the past, or 'tradition', with contemporaryity is not simply a stylistic or material combination. Our work is operationalised differently t from Westerners combining Eastern styles and narratives, and the performance must also be interpreted differently. This is slightly different from the contexts of “preservation” and “deconstruction” or “natural combination (identity)”. I am not a theorist, so it is difficult for me to express this in beautiful sentences, but I ask the critics here to view and interpret the work with a broad perspective that transcends ‘cultural identity’ and thereby broaden our horizons.

Thank you.