EX ORIENTE LUMINA

HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013

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UNDERSTANDING THE ENIGMA OF TRADITIONAL KOREAN CULTURE

Andrew Logie

Traditional culture is a mask fashioned by the present onto which features believed to represent the past are painted. This article identifies and attempts to reconcile some of the key conflicts arising in the popular notion of "traditional Korean culture". It makes explicit an almost schizophrenic sense of unacknowledged divisions, or polarizations, inherent in the discourse of Korean cultural identity implied when and wherever the word "Korean" is used. Designating language, sovereignty, ethnicity, and plenty besides, the words "Korean" and "traditional Korean" are in constant use and, indeed, the discipline of Korean Studies would not exist without them.

With raced based nationalist historiography having become the mainstay of the two modern rival regimes, the homogeneity of the Korean people and their culture has become a self-professed and oft celebrated defining feature. This trait of homogeneity is widely perceived and continues to be propagated amongst Koreans and those with an interest in Korea today. It has become a self-fulfilling prophecy as features considered to represent Koreanness – language, dynastic history, kimchi, *ondol* underfloor heating, traditional *hanbok* dress, and others – have been emphasized over any other historical or cultural details which might otherwise detract from the brand image of traditional Korea.

The desire to create a nationalist cultural identity is nothing unusual and arguably quite necessary given thirty-five years under Japanese colonization (1910–1945) which in its final decade included the infamous Naisen Ittai program of cultural assimilation aiming to eradicate any separate notion of Korean identity, including the language.

In the West, the homogeneity of the Korean people has gone largely unquestioned as the notion undoubtedly merged with lingering stereotypes of neatly classifiable oriental cultures. As the Korean peninsula was arbitrarily divided into opposing halves in August 1945 and the still today unresolved internal confrontation ensued, it became in the interests of both regimes to claim a culture and clearly definable Koreanness in order to legitimize themselves in the eyes of their citizenry as well as, for the South, in the allied West's imagination. While North Korea made its own consequent beeline from internationalist Communism

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to Stalinist inspired ethnic nationalism, a similarly crude cultural nationalism quickly took shape in the South from which a more nuanced view of Korean identity, although now emerged, has yet to be fully untangled.

Tracing further back, Korea's avoidance of historical conquest and the celebrated tradition of popular resistance to invasions are important factors giving credence to modern claims of ethnic homogeneity. During the premodern historical era, the Korean peninsula was invaded several times and made subject to long term occupation on two separate occasions;[1] it was subjugated both by the Mongol Yuan Dynasty and later the Jurchen Qing but crucially has never experienced any permanent conquest or associated wholesale inward migration comparable, for example, to the 1066 Norman conquest of Anglo-Saxon England.[2]

Korean homogeneity is therefore not entirely a myth and its discourse remains valid to some degree. However this characteristic has been overemphasized or at best, left unchallenged leading to continued presumptions about cultural, ethnic and, linguistic insularity. Often overlooked both in the past and present, Korean culture and society has in fact played host to a series of internal divisions which are characterized by a tendency towards extreme polarization. It is consequently only when these often opposing phenomena are treated as constituent parts of a greater whole that a more accurate description of Korea can be achieved.

In the broadest case of traditional Korean culture itself, polarization has occurred between popular notions of "indigenous folk" and "Classical Chinese learning".[3] The chief characteristic of Korean folk culture is its strong association with Korean shamanism, *musok*, alongside oral and music traditions embodied in folk songs and performance arts. Perhaps unexpected for a country with such a propensity for higher education exhibited in both the premodern Neo-Confucian examination system and the high level of university entrance rates of South Koreans today, folk culture remains, or rather has reemerged as, a compellingly prominent feature of contemporary Korean identity. By contrast, Classical

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1 The Han Lelang Commandery (108 BC –*c.*313) and the Mongol Yuan's Eastern Expedition Field Headquarters (1280–1356).

2 In cultural terms, the closest watershed event was the 1392 coup d'état led by Yi Seong-gye (1335–1408) which although ushering in the Joseon Dynasty, in fact confirmed the complete expulsion of foreign interference (both Mongol Yuan and Han Ming) and furthered the consolidation of power under the previous Goryeo landed elite who effectively utilized the ideology of Neo-Confucianism to dissolve the power of the Buddhist temples.

3 "Traditional culture" as a vague but frequently used term, in official as well as colloquial contexts, can be considered to typically refer to the documented cultural milieu as it had evolved by the end of the 18th century before exposure to distinctly foreign notions such as Christianity or industrialization. Origins of "traditional" intangible cultural items are assumed to be at least several centuries old and will often be believed traceable to the Goryeo Dynasty (936–1392) or beyond.

Chinese learning refers to literacy in Chinese and is now chiefly associated with Neo-Confucianism which had been the male preserve of the yangban literati elite from early on in the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). This cultural divide was not just between the educated, landowning elite and peasant farmers but included, for example, female patronage of *musok* all the way up to palace ladies and queens owing to their own blanket exclusion from participation in the Neo-Confucian ritual practice of ancestor worship.

If the contemporary popular notion of "traditional culture" is assumed to refer to the culture of the Korean peninsula as it had evolved by the latter centuries of the Joseon Dynasty, then Buddhism falls on the folk side of the divide as it similarly faced official discrimination from relatively early on in the long lived dynasty in spite of having originally been introduced to the peninsula, together with Confucianism, principally through writings in Classical Chinese and itself having served as the dominant religious ideology until the overthrow of the Goryeo Dynasty (936–1392).

An inaccurate but popularly imagined model of Korean cultural history therefore assumes an indigenous, Old Korean speaking *musok* substratum culture upon which the Chinese language and Buddhism were first introduced before in turn being supplanted by Neo-Confucianism which relegated *musok* and Buddhism to the lower classes and women. The extension of this assumption is that if the Neo-Confucian layer were peeled away from Korean culture, a more indigenous substratum of folk culture would be recoverable beneath. This was something actively attempted during the left-wing Minjung people's movement which, coming to prominence in South Korea during the 1980s, sought to reinvigorate and, where necessary reconstruct traditional folk culture with the emphasis firmly on ideals of indigenous folk arts and *musok* actively downplaying the earlier heritage of Chinese learning.

A key aspect influencing popular perceptions of the "folk versus Classical Chinese learning" divide is found in what can be termed the "Joseon Dynasty effect" created by the impressive longevity of a dynastic period throughout which the idiosyncrasies of Neo-Confucianism dominated the ruling stratum and those who aspired to it. This half millennium persistence of strictly exclusionary Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, itself a contemporary neo-traditionalist movement,[4] strongly contributed to, if not created, the antagonisms between *musok* and Chinese language erudition.

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4 In Joseon Dynasty Korea the Neo-Confucian movement attempted to recreate what was imagined to be the ritual practice and lifestyle of ancient Han China. See Deuchler 1992:107.

Meanwhile in contemporary Korea a potent symbol of the "indigenous folk culture versus Classical Chinese learning" divide is the relationship between the use of the vernacular *hangeul* alphabet and *hanja* Chinese characters. *Hangeul*, from the outset of its historic promulgation in the mid-fifteenth century, was very much conceived of as a writing system for the common people. Infamously rejected by court officials, it was until the modern era chiefly used by educated women and poets for composing Sino-Korean *sijo* poems and translating works from Classical Chinese; wider spread usage and association with Korean nationalist sentiment did not begin in any earnest sense until the late nineteenth century. Throughout the same period Classical Chinese rendered in *hanja* continued to maintain a firm monopoly as the official written language of the Joseon court, Neo-Confucian yangban intelligentsia, and Buddhist monks.[5] In both Korean states today, *hanja* is consequently perceived as an elitist script and viewed as a borrowed item of foreign "Chinese" origin.

However, since the introduction of *hangeul*, and until recently when *hanja* was systematically phased out by both the North and South regimes, the modern Sino-Korean language was written naturally enough with an appropriate combination of *hangeul* and *hanja*. This had the effect of making visible "pure" Korean vocabulary and distinguishing it from Sino-Korean words in the vernacular Korean language. In South Korea today, those with a neo-traditionalist interest in reviving indigenous Korean culture and who attempt to reduce the volume of loanwords (both modern English and ancient Sino-Korean) in their usage of the modern Korean language naturally profess allegiance to *hangeul*.[6]

The Korean term for "pure Korean language" is *uri mal*, literally meaning 'our speech' and in its strongest connotation, for which it is regularly employed, it distinguishes pure Korean from Sino-Korean vocabulary.[7] The *uri mal* movement is thus associated with *hangeul* nationalism and treats *hanja* vocabulary as an occupying foreign entity where the continued study and usage of *hanja* is essentially only tolerated as a necessary evil in acknowledgement that so much of the peninsula's historical heritage was, up until the end of the nineteenth century, recorded in Classical Chinese.

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5 It was occasionally learnt by women such as the poet Heo Nanseolheon (1563-89).

6 For example, the former Buddhist monk, democracy activist, and celebrated poet Go Un (b. 1933) has declared, "King Se-jong is my god. I have no other gods but Se-jong. I am so thankful for Hanguel, and I will do anything to guard it." See Hwang 2010.

7 Ironically there is no pure Korean word for "pure". It can only be implied by the "our" of "our language", though for absolute clarity the *hanja sun* (純,순) must be incorporated to make *sun uri mal* (純 우리 말).

Otherwise the movement for the sole use of *hangeul* in the modern Sino-Korean language has been highly successful,[8] though writing Sino-Korean exclusively in *hangeul* has subsequently had the converse effect of renaturalizing *hanja* loanwords which continue to account for a significant portion of daily vocabulary and this has further reinforced popular perceptions of homogeneity.

In a more nuanced contrast to immediate nationalism, the *uri mal* movement is simultaneously one aspect of what might be termed the "Altaic Theory effect" which sees some Koreans actively seeking cultural and linguistic connections with other ethnic groups in Northeast Asia based on the premise of a shared northeast Asian shamanic heritage. *Musok* is thus associated with Siberian shamanism whilst Old Korean, the ancestor of *uri mal*, is treated as an "Altaic language", albeit based on etymologies now widely regarded by comparative linguists to be false reconstructions. Even if not linguistically correct, the Altaic Theory has remained compelling because it supports the quest for Korean regional identity outside of the Chinese cultural sphere. The Altaic Theory effect can thus be understood in large part as a reaction to the Joseon Dynasty effect: it is anti-Sinocentric and through its active omitting or downplaying of Chinese learning, presents itself as a solidarity movement against Asian imperialism. By locating Korean culture in the wider nexus of Northeast Asia, it also attempts to liberate its identification from the straightjacket of East Asia in which the peninsula is still widely treated as a passive conduit for Chinese learning to have reached Japan.[9]

Hangeul and *hanja* are thus representative extremities of the contemporary "indigenous folk versus Classical Chinese learning" divide, however it is incorrect to believe that beneath the cultural layer of imported Classical Chinese lies a recoverable substratum of indigenous Korean folk culture because the introduc-

8 Just as the nationalist association with Korea's folk identity was born out of the independence movement and search for identity during the Japanese colonial era, it can be speculated that *hanja* has been purged from modern Korean not just for its Chinese origin but because Sino-Korean written with a combination of *hangeul* and *hanja* too closely resembles the appearance of modern Sino-Japanese which had been the language of occupation. The claim that *hanja* is simply cumbersome to the written language would otherwise be countered by the consistently stellar literacy rates displayed in Japan where the usage of Chinese characters has evolved in a far more complicated fashion than when used in Korean. There is nothing either to imply the South Korean education system has significantly moved away from the cumbersome method of rote learning that was inherited from the study of *hanja* and has in large part been transferred to English.

9 *Hangeul's* association with the Altaic Theory in turn provides a legitimizer for Koreans to project their recently gained economic and "soft power" influence over weaker "Altaic" countries such as Mongolia and the Central Asian states; though this represents a nascent and relatively benign form of economic imperialism, if scaled up, the justification of shared ethno-cultural roots for the choice of countries Korea acts upon would soon echo similar claims made by Japanese scholars to support the annexation of Korea. See Caprio 2009: 102, 121; Pai 2000: 39.

tion of Classical Chinese to the peninsula significantly predates the emergence of any pan-peninsula culture identifiable as specifically Korean.

On the premise that an indigenous Old Korean was the dynastic and likely dominant language of Silla during the Three Kingdoms period, it would not have begun to spread widely across the peninsula until following the Silla conquests over Baekje (660) and Goguryeo (668). Classical Chinese however was introduced to Silla at the very latest with the official adoption of Buddhism in 527 but undoubtedly earlier given *hanja* terms used to designate native institutions such as the *hwabaek* (和白) council and *golpum* (骨品) hereditary status system as well as names and titles.[10] In the case of *hwabaek* and other recorded Old Korean, or Silla, words where the characters have been employed for their phonetic value, rather than their meaning in Chinese, there still had to be sufficient knowledge of Chinese in order to utilize their sound value and choose characters with attractive meanings.[11] It is most likely therefore that the language of Silla was already Sino-Korean before its expansion in the late seventh century.

However, the hypothesis that Old Korean was only spoken in the homeland region of Silla and not the much vaster territory of the two modern Korean states, is not widely promoted or accepted amongst Koreans today because it undermines said claims of homogeneity. In particular the implication that the dominant language of Goguryeo was genetically something other than Koreanic, possibly Tungusic or Para-Japonic,[12] would be particularly grave for North Korean ethnic nationalism as well as South Korean irredentists who make at least cultural claims on Goguryeo's former continental territory in southern Manchuria.[13]

The preferred assumption is that variants of Old Korean were spoken in all of the Three Kingdoms' territories from time immemorial. However, whilst it is possible that Old Korean was widespread on the peninsula as a relatively indigenous language prior to the Silla expansion it almost certainly was not spoken in the South Manchurian ancestral territory of Goguryeo and would not have begun to spread there until following the kingdom's demise.[14]

By contrast, *hanja* was fully established across the whole of the Three Kingdoms' combined territory by the sixth century at the very latest, whilst in the territory of Goguryeo the population would have been familiar with *hanja* and associated

10 See Song 2004: 179.
11 See Song 2004: 152.
12 Suggested by Janhunen (2005) and Beckwith (2005) respectively.
13 For discussion of North Korean scholars professing a single Three Kingdoms' Korean language, see Song 2004: 181 notes 7, 8, and 9.
14 Though at some point significantly earlier, Old Korean would presumably have had to have entered the peninsula from the continental mainland.

Classical Chinese learning – Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism – up to half a millennium before they were exposed to Old Korean which, by the time they were and as concluded above, would already itself have been Sino-Old Korean.[15]

Pure Koreanists or folk nationalists, might respond that the vast majority of the Three Kingdoms' populations were in any event illiterate and Classical Chinese learning remained the preserve of the elite aristocracies: this would likely be correct but describes essentially the same circumstances as persisted all the way up until the modern era and so cannot prove that Classical Chinese learning was any less influential in the more distant past than recent past.

What becomes evident then is how the "folk versus Classical Chinese learning" divide was existent from the most formative period of Korea's cultural and historic origins. To reach a point where an indigenous culture associated with only pure Old Korean could be conjectured requires going back still centuries further, but in relation to any practical description of the modern Korea's traditional culture this would simply be too early and *hanja* should be understood as being as indigenous to modern Korea's traditional heritage as the illiterate "folk" element.

It should further be recognized that whilst, since at least the Three Kingdoms period, oral folk traditions, including songs and storytelling, may have been performed and enjoyed by those illiterate in Classical Chinese, the language employed would still have been Sino-Korean and stories told heavily influenced by Chinese learning.[16] In this regard the solo operatic *chantefable* art of *pansori* can be considered as a representative example of popularly imagined traditional Korean culture and has indeed been designated as Important Intangible Cultural Property Number 5 by the South Korean government in 1964. Native to the Jeolla provinces in the southwest region of the peninsula and with its surviving repertoire first written down by the provincial yangban, Shin Jae-hyo (1812–1884), *pansori* is thought to have enjoyed its heyday from the late eighteenth through to nineteenth centuries.[17]

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15 Early use of *hanja* in Goguryeo is evinced by inscriptions found in fourth century tombs and on the Gwanggaeto Stele (erected *c.*414). At the latest, *hanja* would have been first introduced to the peninsula by the Han commandery of Lelang (established in the Taedong River basin 108 BC) if not nearly a century earlier with the arrival of refugees led by Wi Man, though this depends both on whether either historical legend is true and whether either of them were ethnic Han Chinese or not.

16 The raw literary talent of oral storytellers should not be underestimated: both the *biwa hōshi* tradition of blind storytellers in premodern Japan, as well as current day singers of the Tibetan Gesar epic attest to this.

17 There is perhaps an argument that *pansori* should not be considered representative of Korean culture owing to its distinct regional association, but all traditions have to have some place of origin and it could equally be noted that the Kalevala tradition forming the bases of Finnish national identity was based on oral poems collected in the remote White Sea Karelia region outside of

Pansori remains understudied in the West and undervalued in South Korea, in part because it epitomizes the perceived "folk culture versus Chinese learning" divide and so remains difficult to approach for those of either inclination. To an anthropologist or ethnomusicologist the length of plays and large volume of Classical Chinese is intimidating whilst to scholars of premodern literature, pansori is equally difficult to study for a lack of familiarity with performance tradition and the limited availability of authentic texts.

In spite of Shin Jae-hyo's contribution, which involved editing texts and coaching singers, *pansori* remained a genuinely oral tradition with variations of the plays being passed down through generations from master to pupil and as such has avoided being committed to paper until recent decades. *Pansori* performers were drawn from the lower classes of hereditary *mudang* shamans and itinerant entertainers, and, though able to achieve recognition for their talents, were consequently denied status in the Neo-Confucian dictated social hierarchy which squarely placed them at the bottom. These facts taken together, *pansori* would appear to be firmly on the "folk" side of traditional Korean culture.[18]

The content of the pansori plays, however, is heavily influenced by Classical Chinese with a high volume of *hanja* and allusions to Chinese learning. These are commonly explained as being the result of increased yangban patronage from the late eighteenth century onwards with pansori performers presumed to have begun including highbrow Classical Chinese references to satisfy the tastes of their audience when performing, for example, at the parties held to celebrate a yangban scholar's success in the civil service examinations. The implication of this, however, is that the pansori performers would have to have been sufficiently literate and knowledgeable in Classical Chinese in order to have made the appropriate changes and embellishments: an idea which fails to tally with the *hangeul* nationalist ideal of shaman-descended, illiterate folk performers. Yangban patronage may have influenced the selection of repertoire leading to an emphasis of Confucian themes within existing tales and songs but it would not have provided for a complete education in Classical Chinese literature and nor, notably, did it lead to any severe censorship of for example, Buddhist references.

The sole explanation of Neo-Confucian yangban patronage is consequently unable to account for the depth of Classical Chinese learning inherent in pansori texts which were maintained almost exclusively as an oral tradition. Even

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Finland proper. See Pentikäinen 1999: 228.

18 Its continued association with the politically discriminated Jeolla provinces further secured its Minjung credentials following the May 1980 massacre of citizens by government troops in the South Jeolla capital of Gwangju.

the Confucian themes of loyalty and filial piety present in the remaining five playsare not explicitly Neo-Confucian,[19] but rather are based around the more fundamental "Three Bonds" and "Five Codes" defining human relations inherent in original Confucian doctrine, and are fully integrated with equally blatant Buddhist and Taoist thematic devices.[20]

Pansori, as well as the substantial repertoire of preserved folk songs, are therefore better understood not as the direct results of an indigenous folk item having been altered and refined to suit the tastes of eighteenth century Neo-Confucian yangban but as the product of an already indigenous Sino-Korean heritage which the performers were equally in possession of in spite of their low social status. It might be further postulated that pansori was not so much adjusted to match the tastes of the yangban literati but that its inherent Sino-Koreanness appealed as much to some provincial yangban as it did to more common folk and consequently attracted their patronage. After all, not all yangban were lofty Neo-Confucians and though the ideology they were encouraged to aspire to may have been exclusionary, Sino-Korean folk culture including the older Chinese transmitted traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, were not.

In conclusion, both claims of homogeneity as well as the polarization between the folk and Classical Chinese learning elements present in the modern Korea's traditional heritage can be explained as results of the Joseon Dynasty effect which through its longevity sustaining an exclusionist ideology and the invention of *hangeul* led to a distillation of a Sino-Korean culture long indigenous to the peninsula. The perception of division is most evident in the polarization exhibited between *hangeul* and *hanja*. Where *hanja* itself has historically been the medium for both Buddhism and subsequently Neo-Confucianism, *hangeul* today is similarly utilized at once as a vehicle for cultural nationalism as well as in the search for a pan-northeast Asian "Altaic" identity.

However, when examining concrete examples of what is referred to as "traditional Korean culture", such as *pansori*, it becomes evident that Korean heritage and identity has been from its most formative period a product of both folk and Classical Chinese learning.

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19 The five *pansori* plays still performed are "Song of Chunhyang", "Song of Simcheong", "Song of Heungbo", "Song of the Water Palace", and "Song of Red Cliff". The Confucian themes presented in the first four plays respectively are a wife's faithfulness, filial piety (notably of a daughter), behaviour of brothers, and loyalty to one's sovereign whilst the fifth play is an adaption of the historic Chinese episode "Battle of Red Cliffs".

20 A Confucian academy (not to be confused with a Confucius Institute) was recorded in the *Samguk-sagi* (1145) as having been first established in Goguryeo in 372, the same year as the official adoption of Buddhism. Another was established under Unified Silla in 682.

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