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Pop Gugak and E-sang: Negotiating Traditional and Pop Genre Categories
in Expressions of Identity

Jessica Ellis

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Pop Gugak and E-sang: Negotiating Traditional and Pop Genre Categories
in Expressions of Identity

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Master of Arts

Korean traditional music has a popularity problem among Korea's contemporary audiences; given the choice of what to listen to, few South Koreans choose to listen to *gugak*. To address and overcome this popularity problem, traditional Korean musicians are negotiating and reconstructing traditional Korean music by adopting, appropriating, and altering elements of Korean and international pop music. To this end, *Gugak* groups recently have been incorporating western musical practices and aesthetics in their performances in digital platforms (YouTube and reality television programs) and in concerts to contemporize the genre and develop a more positive relationship between Koreans and their national music. Groups like E-sang are redefining and re-inventing Korean folk music worldwide as something I call "pop *gugak*." New pop *gugak* is in the process of reconstructing the meaning of Korean-ness.

Keywords: Gugak, Korean traditional music, Korea, folk music, boundary-making

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Introduction

I visited the National Gugak Center in Seoul for the first time on a hot summer's day in 2016. I had scheduled to interview one of the teachers at the center later that afternoon, so I arrived early, anxious that I would get lost and be late for the interview, to meet with my translator, a native Korean college student. With some time to kill, we looked for a shady spot to get out of the sun while we waited. She noticed a small, shaded pavilion with floor cushions and Korean traditional percussion instruments that were available to visitors to the center to use. She suggested that we use the area and asked me to show her how to play the instruments in preparation for the interview.

As we sat down, I positioned a *janggu* between us. A *janggu* is a drum shaped like an hourglass with drumheads stretched loosely on either side. We joked and chatted while I showed her what I knew. As we packed up and headed towards the interview, the translator laughed and commented that she now felt “more Korean” after learning how to play, explaining that she had learned a bit in elementary school but did not learn or care much about Korean traditional music (*gugak*) since.

My translator's experience with *gugak* is not uncommon in South Korea. One thing that was clear to me from my research in South Korea is that *gugak* has a popularity problem among Korea's contemporary audiences; given the choice of what to listen to, few South Koreans choose to listen to *gugak*.

Earlier writings have discussed the effect of contemporary Korea in helping to shape the development of traditional music. Most research on contemporary traditional music has been on the changes in visibility (Finchum-Sung 2009), the creation of new music such as new compositions and fusion music (Finchum-Sung 2012a, 2012b, Howard 2006, Sutton 2011, Park

2011), globalization (Lim 2016), and various forms of accessibility (Sung 2021). This paper contributes to this body of research through an examination of traditional Korean musicians' negotiation and reconstruction of traditional Korean musical aesthetics by adopting, appropriating, and altering elements of Korean and international pop music. The paper begins with a review of genre and the opposing musical categories in Korea, followed by an analysis of recent attempts to overcome the issue of *gugak*'s lack of popularity. The paper culminates with a case study of *gugak* group E-sang to highlight strategies *gugak* groups employ as they work towards a commercially viable and contemporized pop *gugak* while simultaneously adhering to *gugak*'s musical and cultural traditions.

Genre Fluidity and Pop Music

Genre is an inevitable part of any study of music. Unfortunately, genre is widely ill-defined due to its innate ambiguity. Fabbri (1981) defined a genre as “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” (52). Fabian Holt (2003) defines genre as, “a set of symbolic codes that are organized and constituted [‘codified’] in a social network at particular moments in history, whose boundaries are negotiated in multilayered ontologies between different interpretative contexts” (84), Briggs and Bauman (1992) offer that genre is simply “a way of making categorical discriminations” (143).

In today's digital age, digital music services (Apple Music, Spotify, Melon, etc.) maintain large databases of music. These services and other online music retailers use automatic music classification (AMC), an application of music information technology (MIR), that evaluates similarities within data from audio material and user response to classify genres. Machine learning models are taught to form groupings and provide recommendations based on similarities between listener response, musical data characteristics (melody, harmony, rhythm, texture,

instrumentation, dynamics, and form), and sociological data (forums, reviews, comments) (Johnson 2018:48). AMC's limitations, however, are the same as any application of artificial intelligence. Applications are built on crystalized knowledge, meaning that while the machine may be able to recognize connections between sets of data on a larger scale, they cannot form theories or interpretations of human behavior that influence the creation of cultural categories such as musical genre. The subjective nature of musical genres coupled with increasing varieties of music being produced poses an ongoing challenge for AMC (Lau 2022, Johnson 2018, McKay and Fujinaga 2005).

Older original music material generally falls within traditional genre frameworks as determined by scholarly literature and cultural criticism. Classifications are regimented by academic institutions' narrowly concentrated exposure to certain types of music. Music of the last several decades, however, has been re-classified and re-negotiated. Shifting landscapes of social elements such as national identity, race, gender, sexuality and so on affect boundary-making and the emergence and development of genres (Brackett 2016, Lena and Peterson 2008). Classifications of musical genre are subjective and often controversial.

For example, the treatment of Lil Nas X's debut single illustrates the elusive nature of musical genres. Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" was released in December 2018 and debuted simultaneously on both Billboard's Hot 100, Hot Country Songs, and Hot R&B/Hip-Hop lists. The song was a novel crossover of country and trip-hop, featuring references to country music and cowboy imagery. Billboard's controversial decision to remove the original version of the song from the Hot Country list inspired discussion about the nature of genres and racial identity¹

¹ *Rolling Stone* reported an anonymous Billboard executive explained that "upon further review, it was determined that 'Old Town Road' by Lil Nas X does not currently merit inclusion on Billboard's country charts. When determining genres, a few factors are examined, but first and foremost is music composition. While 'Old Town

(Leight 2019, Becker 2022). Interestingly, even though the Billboard charts do not consider remixes separately in their charts, “Old Town Road” regained its place on the Country charts with the inclusion of Billy Ray Cyrus’ vocals on the remix. Musically, the song changed nothing save for the insertion of Cyrus’ added verses. For his final remix of the song, Lil Nas X collaborated with BTS’ RM on the track in what is now nicknamed “Seoul Town Road.” Similarly, the song remained unchanged save for the addition of RM’s vocals, humorously singing with a southern drawl, but the remix has gained attention as “K-pop inspired” (McCluskey 2019) and “K-Country-Pop” (Kim 2019).

The above example illustrates the complex and contested nature of genre as Briggs and Bauman (1992) would describe as “[pertaining] crucially to negotiations of identity and power” (148). On his own, Lil Nas X’s “Old Town Road” faced a controversial post-facto removal from the country charts, leading to debates on genre and race. In a clever marketing move, Lil Nas X borrows the established authorities of Billy Ray Cyrus (country music) and RM (K-pop) to decontextualize the relevant genres from their historical and social connections and recontextualize them in this current setting (country rap, K-country-pop, etc.) (Briggs and Bauman 1992). Few were debating the inclusion of “Old Town Road” on the country charts after the addition of Billy Ray Cyrus’ vocal track, disregarding the fact that nothing else changed in the composition of the piece overall.

In a similar vein, contemporary *gugak* musicians are trying something new at the periphery of pop and *gugak* genres, decontextualizing elements of both genres to create a new Korean folk genre that speaks and appeals to a contemporary Korean audience. A few examples of this are the following: LEENALCHI (Inalchi) gained popularity as a *pansori* pop group

Road’ incorporates references to country and cowboy imagery, it does not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version” (Leight 2019).

through their participation in Korean tourism advertisements, E-sang promotes themselves as a hip *pungmul* group, performing exciting music that inspires dancing, and sEODO BAND is pioneering an emerging trending genre called Joseon pop, specifically seeking to create folk music blended with pop sounds. Although, the combining and crossover between genres is called “fusion,” fusion is too broad of a term. In this paper, I will refer to this recent trend as “pop *gugak*,” as a generic term for the current trend to incorporate pop sounds into Korean folk music. In the next section, I will outline the opposing categories of music from which pop *gugak* draws its compositional inspiration.

Opposing Categories: Western and Korean

Two dominant music cultural spheres co-exist in South Korea, Western music (*yangak*) and *gugak* (Howard 1997). Listeners may have difficulty articulating the actual form and definitions of these genres, but most can instantly recognize the difference between what is *yangak* and what is *gugak*. *Yangak* emphasizes Western instrumentation and musical practices, particularly the focus on harmonic structure, exemplified in K-pop or classical style composition. *Gugak* focuses on Korean instrumentation and practices, especially “living tones” and emphasizing silence within melody (Kim 2018).

The two styles often crossover into each other’s spheres. “Fusion *gugak*” is typically the term used to describe the broad phenomenon of mixing Korean traditional music with any other musical style. This can range from Western-styled classical music that incorporates Korean instruments to Korean traditional-style compositions that incorporate non-Korean instruments. Fusion music, as a genre, contains a gradient between *gugak* and *yangak*, sometimes representing elements from one more than from the other. To better understand compositional and

performance choices in syncretic Korean musical genres, this section will deal with the historical and formal distinctions between Western music and *gugak* in Korea.

Western Music in Korea

Western music was introduced into Korea with Protestant missionaries in the 1800s (Hwang 2009, Kwon 1992). Succeeding missionary efforts from various Christian denominations led to the building of schools around Korea in which the students learned Western hymns. Subsequently, Koreans began to regard Western music as prestigious and sophisticated due to its Western origins and proximity to formal education (Hwang 2009). Since the introduction of Protestant Christianity in the nineteenth century, Western music became the popular preference of the social upper classes in Korean society while *gugak* was regarded as the music of the lower classes as recently as the 1960s (Lee 1979). This preference remained, and was perhaps reinforced, during the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945). Even today, the preference is to learn Western classical music even in grade school with children encouraged to learn some sort of Western instrument.

The influx of Western musical traditions since the Japanese Occupation brought musical imports: trot, ballads, and pop music (*gayo*). In the early days of pop music in Korea (1940s-1990s), artists struggled dealing with gang activity, music piracy, government censorship, and struggles to earn airtime on television and radio (Oh and Lee 2014). A marked shift in pop music in Korea was the advent of the legendary Seo Taiji and Boys. In 1992, Jung Hyeoncheol, stage name Seo Taiji, released the first Korean language rap song “Nan Arayo” with the newly formed pop group, Seo Taiji and Boys. Before Seo Taiji and Boys, Korean pop music consisted of imitations of American style pop music (i.e., jazz, blues, rock, etc.). Seo Taiji and his boys introduced more Western musical genres (dance, hiphop, electronic music, reggae, etc.). This

revolutionized Korean pop (K-pop) music that dealt with Korean sentiments and language within Western styled pop music.

Gugak Appreciation

Gugak music is comprised of two main categories: *jeongak* (proper, classical music) and *minsogak* (folk music). Referred to as “proper” due to their relation to Confucian philosophies of the Joseon Dynasty, repertoires of *jeongak* include court music, music of the intellectuals, and ceremonial music (Lee and Lee 2007). *Minsogak* includes highly stylized folk and folk-art music. The highly stylized folk arts, such as *pansori* (musical storytelling), *sinawi* (ensemble improvisation), and *sanjo* (instrumental solos), are differentiated from the more informal folk genres of *minyo* (folk songs) and *pungmul* (farmer’s music).

Although formalized training in *gugak* has increased since the 1990s (So 2015), young people still tend to prefer Western-style music. This is true even though children are given instruction in traditional Korean music and instruments in elementary school. While conducting ethnographic research in a Korean elementary school in 2016, I observed the following: when assigned to report on their favorite songs, nearly every student chose a K-pop song. Those who did not report on a K-pop song reported either on a classic rock song or John William’s “Imperial March” from Star Wars. At other times, the students in her class showed obvious preference and recognition of Western-style K-pop music in class, becoming more animated and involved in music lessons that used K-pop songs. Even older and outdated K-pop songs elicited more excitement and interest than *gugak* music. When I asked the teacher about why students did not choose to listen to *gugak* music, “The students can't relate to the old music.” She went on to explain that old Korean music, *gugak*, was about an old way of life that the younger generation does not understand. Younger generations of Koreans, particularly those born after 1970, grew

up under different circumstances politically, economically, and socially than the older generations, so *gugak* along with other genres popular among the older generations become seen as old-fashioned and outdated. As illustrated by this elementary school music teacher, contemporary Korean music consumers appear to prefer modern Western ideas of music over traditional *gugak* ideas of music. This seems to further suggest for some of them, as with my interpreter mentioned at the outset of this paper, that they are becoming more distant from their own Korean roots.

Further pointing to this disconnect between *gugak* and the current younger generation, Chan E. Park (2011) explains that “the sounds and sights of Korean music have come to signify a range of haphazard things in the contemporary Korean consciousness—as exotic phenomena remaining from the mystic past, or essentializers of Korean nationality, or practices by the low-class or uneducated” (2011:27). During preproduction of Korean cable network JTBC’s *Poongryu*²: *Battle Between the Vocalists* (*Poongryu Daejang: Hiphan Sorikkundeuleui Jeonjaeng*, JTBC 2021; hereafter *Poongryu*), a traditional music crossover competition program, Chief Producer Kyojin Hwang, considered the disconnect between contemporary listeners and *gugak* performances. She stated, “When I tried to really listen to it, like *pansori*, the vocal techniques and presentation of the performances were unbelievably good. But I couldn’t understand it, so I wasn’t moved. I didn’t get the lyrics because the language was ancient.” (Oh 2022).

Each of these accounts of *gugak* music express a similar sentiment regarding *gugak* and the younger generation: the younger generation simply does not understand or connect with the style and feel of *gugak*. This points to the curious place of *gugak* among young people in South

² Poongryu (풍류, also *pungnyu*, or *pungryu*) is a Korean aesthetic of living free and unrestrained like the flowing wind. It incorporates enjoyment of natures, life, and art. In this paper, I will use JTBC’s spelling “Poongryu” in reference to the TV music competition.

Korea today. On the one hand, *gugak* is not seen as a desirable music to listen to. Most younger people in Korea today would rather listen to Western style music. On the other hand, *gugak* is seen as containing essential Korean-ness and thus indispensable. Many young people are exposed to *gugak* in schools, either public or private, or through classes at semi-public institutions such as the National Gugak Center. The result of this is that the current younger generation has had some exposure to *gugak* and considerable exposure to Western music.

One product of the exposure to both of these genres is fusion *gugak* (*pyujeon*). Fusion *gugak* is a genre of music that mixes aspects of Western and Korean sounds. Young *gugak* performers who grew up listening to Western music, whether classical or pop music, are familiar with the sounds of guitars, keyboards, drum kits, and Western harmonies and rhythms. The fusion of the two soundscapes becomes a chance for entrepreneurial success rather than relying on institutional or corporate sponsorship, as was the case with most pure *gugak* performers (Howard 2015b).

In order to better understand the features that define *gugak* in contrast to Western music, the following section describes elements of *gugak* music including its history, soundscape, and cultural concepts. These are the elements that musicians are using as they compose new genres of fusion and crossover music.

History of Gugak Performance. The earliest record of music in Korea is found in *The History of the Three Kingdoms* (Chen Shou 233-297). In multi-day celebrations of planting and harvest, people drank, sang, danced, and performed sacrifices to deities. The celebrations may have been similar to *nongak* (also *pungmul*, meaning farmer's music) performances in rural villages (Lee and Lee 2007). The music and dancing of these celebrations are possibly older forms of the modern iterations of *pungmul* (farmer's music) and *gut* (shaman rituals). Except for this early record, records of folk music before the Joseon Era (1392-1910) are rare with officials preferring to record the political ideologies wrapped up in the court and classical musics of their time (Lee and Lee 2007). Prior to the Joseon Era, court and ritual music was divided into *hyangak*, music originating from Korean and Chinese music present in Korea before the Tang Dynasty, and *dangak*, Chinese music imported during and after the Tang Dynasty.

Under King Sejong (1397-1450), *hyangak* flourished with new compositions appearing with full *hangeul* texts and spread using a standardized *jeongganbo* (box notation). By the late Joseon (1592-1910), wars and invasions had caused the destruction of much of Korea's musical heritage, especially its court music. Due to loss of instruments, *dangak* and *hyangak* were performed by a singular orchestra of mixed traditional Korean and Chinese instruments (*hyangdang gyaju*). *Dangak* by necessity became increasingly Koreanized.

Despite the lack of historical records, Korean folk music is speculated to have derived from adaptation and variations of shamanistic music (Lee and Lee 2007). Folk music and shamanistic music usually have the same modes and rhythm cycles, allowing them to be adapted or even substituted for each other. Shamanistic music may be played as folk music and vice versa. Classification of shamanistic music and folk music are often the same as well with each being categorized into one of five music areas. Shamanistic music and folk music are heavily

rhythm based with subordinate and oft times dispensable melody accompaniment (Koudela and Yoo 2016). This is especially true for *pungmul* ensembles.

Pungmul is the composite art form found in itinerant performing groups (*namsadang*) that combines music, dancing, acrobatics, and costuming. Performers played for village entertainment, rituals, and exorcisms (Hesselink 2004). *Pungmul* exists as the oldest surviving form of traditional Korean folk music and has been used since the 1970s and 1980s as a political symbol of the everyday people of Korea, or the concept of *minjung* (Lee 2012:188). It remains an important cultural symbol, having been added to the UNESCO list of intangible world heritages in 2014 (UNESCO 2014), and is presently used as a source of entertainment for festivals, celebrations, and tourist attractions.

Japanese colonial occupiers identified supposedly “backwards” aspects of Korean culture. In efforts to overturn these colonial distortions of Korean traditional culture, the Republic of Korea designated resources for academics to record and learn about Korean folk culture to re-establish and promote Korean identity, likely to establish an authentic Korean-ness especially with regard to North Korea. Since the student resistance movements of the 1970s and 1980s, a period known as “the great struggle for democracy,” South Korea experienced a resurgence of folk culture amidst outcry against the authoritarian government under Presidents Park Chun Hee and Chun Doo Hwan (Lee 2012:180). Contrary to government efforts for cultural preservation and authenticity, the *minjung munhwa undong* (people’s cultural movement) inspired a folk revival that presented *gugak* and other folk arts as tools for engaging in political activities (Willoughby 2002, Kwon 2015). Traditional culture’s political significance among South Korean people rose during the democratic movements of the 1980s. Along with

other forms of traditional Korean culture, *gugak* was often used in political protests, providing legitimacy to the struggle for democracy (Lee 2012).

During this time, former namsadang performer, Kim Duk Soo (Kim Deoksu) established a small group of performing percussionists called SamulNori. The name SamulNori came from the terms "samul" meaning four and "nori" meaning to play. Like its name implies, SamulNori revolved around the playing of four instruments: two drums (*janggu* and *buk*) and two gongs (*kkwaenggari* and *jing*). The group's contemporary approach to traditional art brought them immediate success and fame. They were fresh, new, sexy, and most importantly, unlike the slow, "backwards" music of the older generation. SamulNori loaned its name to the newly created *gugak* genre *samullori* (or *samulnori*). *Samullori* groups differ from *pungmul* groups in that they forego the dramatic elements of costumes and dance. Most groups are seated allowing for more elaborate improvisation and rhythmic interpretation. The *samullori* group is typically a touring percussion group and does not include the dance and costumes associated with *pungmul* (Hesselink 2004). The popularity of *samullori* groups increased demand for Korean percussion instruments, likely influencing the prominence of *pungmul* in activist movements of the 1980s (Lee 2012).

Although after the June Democratic Struggle, a nation-wide movement calling for democratization, and the establishing of the Sixth Republic in the late 1980s, public interest in protest and demonstration decreased, one can still find elements of *pungmul*, minimally including the aforementioned instruments, present at public protests and demonstrations. While conducting field research in 2016 and 2018, I saw uses of these instruments at various smaller protests, such as at a small anti-nuclear weapons procession that I observed in Insadong in Seoul in 2018. These were in evidence at the protests that led to the ouster of former South Korean

President Park Geun-Hye. Nonetheless these anti-Park protests generally took on a different character as they became “candlelight” protests – thus suggesting a much more subdued, some might say “civilized” atmosphere as compared to the sounds of a protest full of drums and gongs. Whether this is a result of the loss of popularity of the sounds of *gugak* or whether it is evidence of the ideological emergence a modern/neo-liberal Korean subject (cf. Harkness 2014), the decreased use of drums and gongs for engaging in political protest suggests that *gugak* has lost another context that helped to keep it relevant as an adjunction to political protest during the democratic struggles in the 70’s and 80’s in South Korea.

Soundscape Musical texture in Korean traditional music is heterophonic³ with ornamentation used to embellish simple melodies. Its musical scales are built on anhemitonic pentatonic scales, five-tone scales without semitones (Kwon 1992). The three basic modes are *gyemyeonjo*, *pyeongjo*, and *ujo* (Mueller 2013). Although Korean pitches do not map perfectly onto Western equal-tempered scales, the Korean scales are somewhat comparable to Western tonality. *Gyemyeonjo* is similar to natural minor pentatonic scale and the *pyeongjo* and *ujo* are similar to mixolydian pentatonic and major pentatonic scales respectively (Rockwell 1972). The *gyemyeonjo*, as minor scale, expresses sadness, as exemplified in the *pansori Chunhyangga*. The more major *pyeongjo* and *ujo* modes express joy and gallantry (Yoo 2000; Mueller 2013). *Ujo* in particular is associated with heroics as seen in the *pansori* piece *Simcheongga*, which tells the story of the heroine's devotion to her father.

Ornamentation in music are additions to melody, harmony, or rhythm to provide a moment of added interest, expressiveness, or emphasis. Compared to Western music in which music has a fixed tempo and pitch, Korean music, especially using *sigimsae*, can feel uneven in tempo and sound distorted in pitch. *Sigimsae*, meaning "living tone," is embellishments of pitch and rhythm that may be applied before or after a tone (Choi 2021). The most basic types of *sigimsae* are *yoseong* (vibrating sounds, called *nonghyeon* when applied to instruments), *chuseong* (sliding to a higher pitch), *toeseong* (sliding to a lower pitch), and *pyeongseong* (flat tone) (Jung 2023).

³ Musical textures describe how music is layered to produce its overall sound. The most common types of musical texture are monophony, homophony, polyphony, and heterophony. Monophony comprises of a single melodic line without accompaniment. Homophony is the most common texture in Western music in which an emphasized melodic line is backed by a harmonic accompaniment. Polyphony, or counterpoint, is when multiple, independent melodic lines occur simultaneously. While seemingly similar to polyphony, heterophonic texture is comprised of a single melody performed in variation by multiple voices simultaneously. An example of heterophonic texture in Korean music is JAMBINAI's "In the Woods" where *piri*, *haegeum*, and voice simultaneously play variations of the same melodic line (JAMBINAI 2019).

Jangdan (long-short) refers to the basic rhythmic element of Korean traditional music. I learned about and how to play different *jangdan* from a casual *samullori* group that met in an exercise park in Sindaebang. Defined by tempo, accent, and structural code, the *jangdan* functions as the rhythmic foundation or structural building blocks of traditional Korean music. Usually a single measure, the semi-ostinato nature of *jangdan* carries emotional and situational connotations. It ranges from *jinyang* (slow), *jungmori* (medium), *jungjungmori* (medium-fast), *jajinmori* (fast), *hwimori* (very fast). The slower and simpler *jangdan* are typically present in court music while folk music is typically faster and favors a compound triple meter. The foundational rhythm cycles function as semi-ostinato patterns, but unlike a typical ostinato, these allow for improvisation and alteration throughout a performance, sometimes to the point of being non-metrical.

Korean Cultural Concepts In addition to the more strictly “musical” aspects of *gugak*, certain Korean cultural concepts are relevant to, perhaps even defining of the genre of *gugak*. At the forefront of these concepts is *han*. It is the “heart of a person or people who has/have endured or are enduring an affliction, but the pains, wounds, and scars are not always apparent or visible because they are the kind that occur deep within the heart or soul of the person” (Son Chang-Hee, 1997:10, Willoughby 2002). I do not wish to try to define *han* as the term is difficult to properly define, and the Korean performers I have talked to all had different definitions and ideas of who could feel *han* and where *han* could be felt. But most people I spoke with described it in terms of a deep sadness and melancholy as a result of some unrequitable harm or injustice. Importantly, *han* has come to index “Korean-ness” in general. Thus, one would expect that music that has *han* is more likely to be seen as Korean.

This supposedly essential Korean sorrow is a major theme of four of the five traditional *pansori* songs as well as in the variations of the Korean folk song “Arirang”, with the latter often being seen as songs that represent the nation-state. The pervasiveness of this concept also appears in popular culture. In the 1993 blockbuster, *Seopyeonje*, *pansori* singer Yu-bong, in his desperation to bring out her full potential, blinds his adopted daughter with wolfsbane. Yu-bong believes that if his daughter acquires more *han*, her artistic talent will be actualized (Park 2011:27). Many scholars of *gugak* have described the importance of *han* for being a good performer. For example, it is often said that cultivating the sound of *pansori* involves damaging one’s vocal cords so that they will scar over and such that the scars can be heard in their voice (Harkness 2014, Willoughby 2002).

One of my informants, Park Eunha, further illustrates the importance of *han* for competent cultural performance. Park Eunha earned her PhD in Dance Studies, but her talents

extend to other musical forms. She is currently a drum teacher at the National Gugak Center in Seoul and is honored as a keeper of the Intangible Cultural Property of Korea number 3, *namsadang nori*. During an interview I conducted with Park Eunha, she shared the story of her mother's experience of not being allowed to fully express her own artistic talent.

“Uhm, my mother—and it is the custom in Korea that the women, whether playing the instrument or other things, were very conservative compared to foreign countries – my mother was born into a family with musical and artistic talents. But back then they didn't allow her to do those things as well as studying. But after getting married, my father's household is a very educational household—so, my mother had that artistic talent, and my father had a rational, idealistic, educational mind.

My mother learned very little, but because of her talent; [she performed] like a grand artist. However, she was not able to be active with it. She had a great talent, and they say that I received those talents during that time as I was in the womb. So when I was born, I received those talents.”

While her mother was born into a musically talented family, she was not allowed to develop those talents until much later, and her mother suffered as a result. The restrictions placed upon Park's mother are an example of *han*, the feeling of sorrowful injustice and longing. She had talent within her that she could not express because of circumstances she could not control, but when she did finally learn what little dance she could, she performed "like a grand artist."

With the above examples, we can see that *han* is thought to be correlated not only with ethnic Korean legitimacy but also with ability and talent as a performer.

A second Korean cultural concept that is important in *gugak* music is *jeong*. *Jeong* is also difficult to describe in English. The National Institute of the Korean Language describes *jeong* as “a state of mind where one feels love or affection for someone,” but it describes a kind of emotion or relationship that one has with intimate others in which one's own self begins to merge with the group of which one is a part. Harkness (2014) defines *jeong* as “a feeling of communion with others, an inclination toward generosity in times of scarcity, and a relationship-building disposition of trust and care” (Harkness 2014:32). It is love, affection, bonds, and

feelings that result in the ability to empathize and share personal emotional feelings with others. *Jeong* implies a kind of connection or bond with someone and can even be negative where people are connected by mutual anger or frustration. Happiness, anger, worries, sadness, joy, hate, and fear are the seven *jeong*-related emotions (Yang 2006).

Because it is defined by a variety of differing emotions, *jeong* can be a voluntary or obligatory sense of interdependence and togetherness that is accumulated through shared experiences and produces a sense of a communal and de-individuated self (Yang 2006, Kim and Yun 2007). This togetherness and the sharing of mental and social spaces lead to a de-differentiating of the self and the other. One's emotions begin to be reflected in the emotions of the other and vice versa. Common Korean sayings about *jeong* include, "You laugh when she laughs, and you cry when she cries" and "Married couples can live without love but not without *jeong*."

Jeong, however, is not an emotion but an expression of shared emotions. Rather than saying "I feel *jeong*," in Korean, a person would say "jeong deulda", meaning "I am possessed by *jeong*" or "I am saturated with *jeong*." *Jeong* does not come from within an individual but occurs simultaneously in the heart of a person and the space between people (Yoon 2016).

Jeong is also something that can develop in performance spaces, such as between performers and audience. The cultivation of *jeong* between performer and audience can be seen in *pansori*. *Pansori* is the Korean art of story singing where a solo singer, accompanied by a drummer, narrates and sings an epic story. The term *pansori* comes from *sori*, meaning sound, and *pan*, which designates a physical and mental location for whole-hearted participation (Park 2000). These performances can last hours with the solo singer acting out and singing all parts of the story.

Inherent to the term, participation of the singer, drummer, and audience is imperative to the performance of the art form. While the singer performs the audience is expected to actively participate by performing displays of encouragement and appreciation, called *chwimsae*. Through *chwimsae*, the relationship between the singer, drummer, and audience becomes closer and stronger.

The earliest performances of *pansori* likely occurred outdoors without formal demarcation of audience and performer. Since the shift towards formal performance environments with stages and seating, audience participation has declined (Jang 2001). The lack of audience participation threatens the performance of *pansori* and causes anxiety to the singers who have no way to gauge the audience's reaction and reception. Singers put forth effort to encourage, and sometimes even teach, their audiences how to do *chwimsae* and when. Without instruction, audiences will occasionally do *chwimsae* at inappropriate times or in inappropriate ways (Jang 2001).

Chwimsae in *pansori* is a unifying force where “communal sharing of heritage between performer and audience in the form of familiar oral, melodic, or rhythmic segments, ethical values, and ethos ascertain and reinforce their connectedness” (Park 2000). It is through *chwimsae* that *jeong* is cultivated in musical performance.

Attempts to Solve *Gugak*'s Popularity Problem

Although the teacher mentioned above may have been correct to note that young people are not interested in *gugak*, this is not necessarily the case for older people. In 2016 I befriended members of a group of older gentlemen who frequently meet in an exercise park in Sindaebang. The exercise park was located under pedestrian and subway bridges that stretched as far as I could see. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, this group of musicians meet on a wooden

platform built off the side of the running path and next to the stream to play *gugak*, most often *samullori*, and drink.

When I first approached them in June 2016, the group waved me over to join them and offered to teach me how to play their instruments. I took off my shoes and seated myself on the laid-out straw mat. One of the players, Kim Hyeongcheol, motioned for me to sit behind an hourglass-shaped *janggu* drum and handed me a stick and a mallet. Slowly, the music began with a *kkwaenggwari* player. Kim Hyeongcheol pointed to another player, indicating to copy what she was doing. My attempts to copy the other player triggered the snickering of another member of the band who shook his head and laughed at me. Oddly enough, it was a very welcoming laugh that was part of what made me feel a part of the group – as someone who could be laughed at and laugh with others in the group. This was so much the case that I would regularly play with them during my time in the field in 2016 as well as when I returned in 2018.

Members of the group have various levels of training in Korean percussive arts, Kim Hyeongcheol being the most trained of the group. Kim explained that they gather each week as an excuse to hang out and drink. In the down times between playing and getting lunch, Kim and other more experienced musicians take the time to teach others who are interested in learning how to play or teach each other how to improve their playing. Kim and the group were excited by my interest in traditional Korean music, complaining that most visitors to Korea are interested in Korean dramas or food. My interest in traditional arts, specifically drumming, earned me some respect from them. At the end of my time with them, they encouraged me to come back and learn formally so I can become a “superstar.”

I did not observe any other groups similar to this *samullori* group while I was in Korea, but during our conversation, Park Eunha shared that during her adolescence it was common to

see groups of men playing together like this, and she similarly learned how to play the instruments from them. The older Korean generation, as exemplified by this group at Sindaebang, actively participate in traditional music as a social pastime. I was the weird element of their group. They expressed surprise and delight that a younger person, an American even, was interested in and seemingly talented at traditional Korean percussion music. In our first meeting, they were delighted to find out that I was ignorant of most K-pop groups outside of Seo Taiji and Boys and that my entire purpose in travelling to Korea was to learn about their traditional drumming. Members of the group even lamented that their own children and grandchildren are uninterested in *gugak*.

While I, myself, might never fulfil the hopes of this older group of drummers, already existent superstars are not strangers to the Korean musical traditions. K-pop music is no stranger to incorporating traditional elements into their music, demonstrating that *gugak* does enjoy some amount of popularity among the younger generation of Koreans. In 2013, BIGBANG's G-Dragon incorporated samples of traditional music in his song, "Niriria," MONSTA X used the *taepyeongso* (double reed instruments similar to oboe) in their 2019 hit, "Follow," and even Psy incorporated *taepyeongso* and percussion elements in his 2014 collaboration with Snoop Dogg, "Hangover." The *gugak* elements take a background role in these pieces, adding novelty to the song rather than being a true crossover, which aims to appeal equally to all represented musical genres.

BTS member Min Yoon-gi's 'Daechwita' (August 2020) marked the beginning of *gugak*'s crossover to pop culture, appealing equally to *gugak* and pop genres. He borrows the title from a type of "court military marching band music for the king's leaving and return to the palace during the Joseon Dynasty," and blends his own rapping and synthetically produced

backbeats with samples from the National Gugak Center's recordings of "Daechwita" (Kim 2022:32). Joseon Dynasty imagery and costumes in the music video emphasize the rap/*gugak* crossover.

Songs that more substantially incorporate *gugak* themes have also enjoyed some success and notoriety in Korea. For example, in July 2020, the Korean Tourism Organization collaborated with Korean music group LEENALCHI and released a series of short music video advertisements promoting cities around Korea titled "Feel the Rhythm of KOREA" (LEENALCHI 2020). Each video featured dancers dressed in fantastical, colorful costumes reminiscent of hanbok but mixed with modern styles such as adidas pants dancing through famous locations within Seoul, Busan, Jeonju, Mokpo, Andong, Gangneung, and Incheon. The music of each video was written and performed by LEENALCHI, a *pansori* pop band. The videos achieved rapid popularity, reaching over 1 million views in less than a day (Yoo 2021).

In similar fashion, LEENALCHI's first full-length album, "Sugungga" (2020) married the beats and harmonies of pop music and *pansori*, creating a type of *pansori* pop. In January 2021, the 18th Korean Music Awards awarded LEENALCHI "Musician of the Year," "Best Modern Rock Song," and "Best Jazz & Crossover Album (Yoo 2021). The explosion of popularity of LEENALCHI showed public interest in creativity and innovation in the *gugak* genre.

Globalization and the Cultural and Historical Context of the Proliferation of Fusion Gugak

"Korean Wave," or *Hallyu*, is the phenomenon of the proliferation of Korean popular culture locally and abroad. The term was first used by Chinese media in 1998 when describing the popularity of Korean popular culture among Chinese youth (Lee and Nornes 2015). The rising popularity of Korean cultural products began in East and Southeast Asia in what is called

the “first wave.” The buzzword of the first wave of hallyu was “globalization,” but at the time, globalization meant American cultural imperialism which put pressure on the Korean government to allow foreign cultural products. During this first “wave,” Korean dramas and movies were at center stage.

By the late 2000s, when English-speaking scholars of Korean culture had all but declared the Korean Wave over, Korean culture made a comeback on the global stage through K-pop idol groups (Lee and Nornes 2015). With the ebbing of the first Korean Wave and popularity of Korean dramas, K-pop became an integral part of Korean Wave 2.0. The advent of social media and media sharing sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter led to the expansion of K-pop and Korean culture out of Asia. The success of the Korean Wave 2.0 manifests in the popularity of Korean pop artists abroad, most famously Psy's "Gangnam Style" (Psy 2012). Released in 2012, the popular song, which was the first video to reach one billion views on YouTube, gained massive popularity outside of Korea. "Gangnam Style" reasserts a sense of Korean national identity through its international success. The song contains lyrics, and the video, images, specific to Korean culture. "But, in the recognition of success, ears and eyes were and are closed, so that the song's knowable lyrics and the video's familiar locations were, and are, simply, ignored" (Howard 2015a).

In spite of its parodying of the Korean urban lifestyle, comedic dance, and other possibly offensive messages, the song has been celebrated and accepted in Korea as a symbol of the international spread of Korean culture because of its success abroad, even making it to number 1 on Gaon Charts (the rough Korean equivalent of the Billboard music charts in the US).

"Gangnam Style" has become such an accepted symbol of Korea's growing political standing

that it played during the inauguration of former President Park Geun-hye for thousands of guests and foreign delegates (Howard 2015a, Oh and Park 2013).

The Korean Wave has not only spread Korean culture abroad, but it has affected Korean culture at home. The rise in popularity of K-Pop and K-Pop idols has led to an increase in commercialism and a change in image for Korea itself; as described by Willoughby (2006) and Finchum-sung (2009): "image is everything." Heather Willoughby (2006) notes that the sexuality of women as K-Pop idols has only changed in the way the way the media presents them. Where they were once sophisticated beauties, they are now skimpily clad and more open in their sexuality. The entertainment companies with which the idols sign determine this image and other images of idols and idol groups. Of the existing K-pop entertainment agencies, S.M. Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment control significant portions of the music industry. These companies, often called the "Big Three," contribute greatly to success of the Korean Wave 2.0 and to the raising of the image and prestige of South Korea (Oh and Park 2013, Lee and Nornes 2015).

The global popularity of K-pop stands in stark contrast to how Korean culture was viewed for much of the 20th century. Under the impetus of modernization, traditional Korean culture was considered, both in Korea and in many other places around the globe, to be "backwards." This was particularly so under Japanese colonization and this perception continued in post-liberation Korea well into the 1970s. By the 1980s, Korea experienced a revival of national enthusiasm for local culture, resulting in large-scale efforts from intellectuals and the Korean government to develop a national culture and cultivate the people's ideas concerning their culture.

Traditional Korean cultural activities rose in popularity and political importance as Korean scholars began to contemplate ideas of “Korean-ness.” *Hanguginnon*, discourse concerning Korean-ness, started developing in the late 1980s as a continued effort to revitalize, maintain, and strengthen the national cultural identity of Koreans (Han 2003). This cultural nationalism in Korea was a way to separate Korean culture from the foreign influences the nation was subjected to in the past.

In this context, the cultural hybridity found in the formation of new Western pop music groups like Seo Taiji and Boys understandably was met with some criticism. Because K-pop is a mix of global musical influences and cultures, the art is perceived to be lacking Korean-ness (Sim, et al. 2017). As Lee Suwan (2016:79) suggests, “the key point in understanding K-pop lies in the tension between ‘K’, which signifies Korea, and ‘pop’, which signifies ‘American popular music’.” Some argue that there is no inherent Korean-ness in K-pop exports, and the “K” is just a signifier of a global Korean brand not unlike Samsung or Hyundai (Lie 2012), but it seems likely that K-pop still exhibits some characteristics of traditional Korean cultural traits such as *jangdan* or *jeong* (Kim 2022). Elements of Korean-ness that come out in hybridity with pop elements may include such things as in the relationship between idols and their fans, Korean lyrics, musical hybridity, and stage and costume designs (Lee 2020, Kim & Kim 2015).

Kim (2022) argues that regardless of previous debates, contemporary K-pop groups should be distinguished from earlier K-pop due to increasing incorporation of traditional arts and culture. Using sounds, visuals, and performance, K-pop appropriates elements of Korean cultural heritage to assert its right to the “K” as a signifier of Korean identity (Kim 2022). The most obvious methods of borrowing traditional sounds include incorporating instruments, using *jangdan*, or inserting *chwimsae* (audience reaction) into their lyrics, like ONEUS’ “Lit” using

the *jing* and *gayageum* in their intro and incorporating “eolssu!”, a common phrase used in *chwimsae* (ONEUS 2019). Visual elements incorporate Korean images like hanbok, palaces, tigers, or hanok houses while performance elements include various traditional dances. ToppDogg’s “Arario” music video goes all out incorporating *pungmul* groups, mask dancers, and traditional musicians in hanbok (ToppDogg 2014). Notwithstanding these somewhat superficial incorporations of *gugak* into popular music, *gugak* is not generally popular among the general Korean public, and as a result, these incorporations have not translated into commercial success or interest in *gugak* as a genre.

Heritage Consumption

Perhaps in response to loss in musical records due to occupation and war, conservation efforts have increased significantly since the mid-20th century with many performers trained at and affiliated with institutions such as the National Gugak Center (Finchum-Sung 2012b). Legislative efforts in conservation included the Cultural Heritage Protection Act of 1962 and implementation of UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2005. In addition to legislative acts, Korean intangible cultural heritages (ICH), including various aspects of *gugak*, are protected under three government institutions: the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and the National Intangible Heritage Centre of Korea (NIHC). The Korean government expanded these existing cultural policies to include forms of popular culture in response to increasing globalization, and particularly the economic value of exported Korean popular cultural products.

In an effort to promote Korean traditional culture, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (KCMST) developed HanStyle, which has become an effective source for tourism in Korea (So 2015). The HanStyle includes *hanbok* (traditional clothes), *Hangeul*

(Korean writing), *hanok* (traditional houses), *hanguk eumak* (traditional music), and more. As an effort to increase the value of the Korean “brand,” under the HanStyle promotional movement and through the KMCST, the Korean government provides funding for festivals such as concerts at the palace and the Namdaemun Market Global Festival. These events and concerts are open to the public at low-to-no admission cost.

Howard (2015b) considered whether state sponsorship rather than participation in the market economy affected *gugak*'s survivability and concluded that *gugak* is not well suited for commercial purposes. Audiences at *gugak* performances usually are family, friends, and students of the performers. He observes that as it is, *gugak* consumption is a “circular network of exchange” in which students attend their teachers' and university professors' recitals and then when these students graduate, they join various *gugak* ensembles which commission composers, who are the teachers and university professors.

To overcome this circular network, *gugak* needs to appeal to younger Koreans and, possibly, to an international audience. Part of the HanStyle development effort aimed to do just that. In 2008, the government sponsored the MIJI project which entailed the formation of MIJI, a *gugak* girl group made up of K-pop idol hopefuls (Finchum-Sung 2012a). The group persisted for a few years, promoting themselves through television appearances and teetering precariously between promoting *gugak* and participating in popular culture, until the government withdrew their support in 2010 due to limited commercial success (So 2015).

A notable exception to *gugak*'s unpopularity and unsustainability is the previously mentioned SamulNori. Since the first concert in 1978, SamulNori garnered attention, attracting praise and criticism alike. On one hand, the group revitalized Korea's traditional percussion genre, adapting it to the smaller, indoor stages and shortening the length of the program to suit

audiences more accustomed to Western concert experiences. Being indoors, the group performed seated, an unprecedented change that allowed for more virtuosic playing without the added acrobatic and dance performances typically present in *pungmul*. SamulNori was a hip, contemporary take that attracted significant popularity. SamulNori flourished. Their popularity allowed the group to be self-sufficient in producing concerts, albums, and eventually branching out into SamulNori Hanullim Inc. On the other hand, SamulNori was increasingly becoming less like *pungmul*, its source material. Purist critics decried the performances, highlighting that SamulNori lacked the ruralness, participation, and dances associated with “real” *pungmul* performances (Hesselink 2004).

Site: Poongryu

Gugak competitions already existed in South Korea before *Poongryu* aired. Organizers of these competitions design these competitions especially for students and young professionals. For example, the Dong-A Gugak Concours limits applicants to two distinct divisions: the general division for university students or *gugak* students under 35 years old and the student division for high school students or non-enrolled youth of similar ages. The participants compete under specific categories based on instruments or composition, needing to pass a private preliminary round before competing with on-stage public performances. Judges score the individuals and determine winners based on their scores.

Unlike these untelevised *gugak* competitions, *Poongryu*'s format followed the format of its audition or talent search reality television predecessors. Beginning in the early 1990s with shows such as the UK's *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol*, reality television talent search shows have become a world-wide phenomenon. A key element leading to the format's international success was the use of interactive elements to captivate and influence audiences. Despite the differences

in application between shows, a standard structure for reality competition shows emerged from the *Idols* format. Participants perform for a panel of judges and either move on to the next round of competition or leave the competition. Viewers are invited to participate in the judgments via phone-in or electronic voting systems.

Following the *Idols* format, *Poongryu* contestants are invited to perform an original song or arrangement of an existing song to a panel of judges and the judges determine which groups advance to the next round of competition. The judges are well-known figures in the music industry: Song Ga-In (trot singer), Kim Jong Jin (Four Seasons), Solar (Mamamoo), Woo Young (2PM), Lena Park (R&B artist), Sung Si Kyung (singer-songwriter), Lee Jeok (singer-songwriter), and Kolleen Park (Korean American music director)⁴. Judge Song Ga-In was very enthusiastic about the show because early in her career, she trained in *gugak* but gave up a career in *gugak* to become a trot singer, and she is aware of the challenges of a *gugak* performer. Except for Song Ga In, producers decided not to invite judges with strong backgrounds in *gugak* in order to emphasize that they were doing something different with *gugak* music. A different kind of advising is needed, especially advisement in appealing to public, but the judges are experts in their own genres (Oh 2022).

Music-oriented reality television permeates the Korean TV-scape. Two of the most prominent shows, *Superstar K* and the *Produce* series, have altered the music industry. As explained by producer (“PD”) Kim YoungBum of *Superstar K*, idol groups produced by the “Big 3” (SM Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and YG Entertainment) had a chokehold on the charts in the early 2000s. Frustration with the barriers for entry into the music scene erected by the idol industry inspired the creation of programs like *Superstar K* and *Produce*. These

⁴ Kolleen Park was not a judge originally. She filled in for Song Ga-In, who was out due to COVID-19, and joined the main cast of judges starting the third round of competition.

programs presented a new platform for musicians representing other genres, different ages, and idol hopefuls who were barred from debuting by their agencies in favor of more popular groups (Herman 2019).

Kyojin Hwang, Chief Producer of *Poongryu*, explained that the production team wanted to do something different from the existing *gugak* competitions, but during pre-production, they did not find enough musicians doing something interesting with *gugak* for an entire program (Oh 2022). LEENALCHI's popularity stemming from the "Feel the Rhythm of KOREA" campaign inspired *Poongryu* Executive Producer Hwang and her colleagues to start getting things together for their reality television program. In an interview with the Korea Society, Producer Hwang explained:

Then the LEENALCHI Band exploded onto the scene, and we saw a more creative and innovative approach to *gugak*. So we began to search again. In just a couple of years, the scene was very different, and there were many *gugak* artists doing something new. And it gave us confidence that maybe we can try something new with them. As we observed their various effort, as we met and spoke with the artists, it struck me that they are very much of today and now, a new generation. We all have this stereotypical image of what a *gugak* musician is in our minds, but I realized that they are different. They want to start a new trend. They want to try something that wasn't done before, and I felt that they want to break free from the tradition. And that led us to produce this program. (Oh 2022)

Hwang and her team were inspired by the new pop *gugak* groups popping up that were doing something new and different with *gugak* music but discovered that these groups would need some convincing to join the program. Many of the groups were already well known within the *gugak* community, some even touring the world, so the performers were worried that they would be reproached for creating music too different from traditional *gugak* music (Oh 2022), but the groups have exhibited a willingness to "break the mold" and try new things with *gugak*.

Before appearing on the show, groups like sEODo BAND, AUX, and E-sang were already known for their unique styles. sEODo BAND, the progenitor of Joseon pop, had appeared on other television programs, garnering interest in his pop style take on *gugak*. AUX

represented Korea at an international contest, becoming known for their “psychedelic” style. E-sang was more well-known internationally, having toured abroad and experimented with a variety of genres both Korean and non-Korean.

Despite worries of criticism, Hwang reported that the program received a positive reaction from members in the *gugak* community. Initial misgivings became an appreciation for the new approach to *gugak*, and the potential of these musicians to bring *gugak* closer to the public (Oh 2022). *Poongryu* managed to present a new framework for *gugak* that appealed to a wider audience while appeasing its community. The performances on the show varied. Some groups performed adaptations of traditional songs such as E-sang’s “Aekmaegi Taryeong.” sEODo BAND performed original songs based on pansori stories such as their modern version of “Sarangga,”⁵ inspired by *Chunhyangga*. Groups also performed mashups of pop songs and *gugak* pieces such as AUX’s mashup⁶ of Mino’s “Fiancé” and selections from *Chunhyangga*.

Due to the wide variety of pop *gugak* performances and knowing that some of its audience may not be as familiar with Korean traditional music—the production team did not have much experience with *gugak* before the program either—*Poongryu* provided subtle clues to help explain and mark moments within performances where *gugak* became especially prominent.

AUX’s mashup from episode 4, for example, was a mashup of Mino’s “Fiancé” and *Chunhyangga*. The piece starts with just vocalist and piano, lyrics displayed on the bottom left-hand side of the screen. *Taepyeongso* and *bara* (hand cymbals) players join in, accompanied by a brief explanation in white on the bottom of the screen, reading “the stage opens intensely with *taepyeongso* and *bara*.” *Taepyeongso* and *bara* are colored purple, emphasizing the names of the traditional instruments. The song abruptly shifts mood as the vocalist begins singing

⁵ A recording of sEODo BAND’s “Sarangga” can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O_bsO6kjbl

⁶ A recording of AUX’s performance can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOL59tNGLkA>

Chunhyangga. Similarly, the lyrics are displayed on screen, but the font is noticeably different, changing from a modern style to a more traditional-looking style with a little purple box above the lyrics letting the audience know the source is *Chunhyangga*. Further emphasizing the source materials for the mashup, on-screen annotations inform the audience, “AUX’s <Fiancé> mashup with *Chunhyangga*.” By the end of the piece, the audience will have also learned about *jajinmori jangdan* and more about *taepyeongso* and *kkwaenggwari*. On-screen comments are not unique to the program, but *Poongryu* takes advantage of the on-screen captions to help the audience keep up with what is happening musically on stage.

Gugak never faded into absolute obscurity, maintaining its importance as a means of preserving traditional Korean culture, but public interest in *gugak* as a popularly consumable musical genre was nearly non-existent for the 30 or so years prior to the debut of *Poongryu*. The following is a case study of the group E-sang’s rise to popularity as a pop *gugak* group. In what follows, I trace out how the *gugak* group E-sang works to produce a popular and commercially viable *gugak*.

Site: *Gugak* Group E-sang

Similar to the adaptations made by SamulNori to contemporize *gugak* for its urban audience, fusion *gugak* emerged as a possible way of creating a sustainable form of *gugak* music that could become popular with the current younger generation of South Koreans. As noted above, this was the intent of the live audition program *Poongryu*.

Boasting world tours to over 40 different countries, *Gugak* Group E-sang (E-sang) is a traditional Korean music performing group in Seoul that provides an example of a live audition program’s (*Poonryu*) efforts to produce a *gugak* superstar. The group focuses mainly on performing and reinvigorating traditional Korean music by performing at palaces, stages, and

temples across Korea, but the members also venture into other genres. The group is labeled a “*pungmul* band” due to their incorporation of percussion-heavy music, acrobatic dances, singing, and plate spinning in their performances. *Poongryu* introduced the group as an “Exciting *pungmul* band beyond imagination.”

Prior to their appearance on *Poongryu* in 2021, E-sang won a 21st Century Korean Music Project Gold Award in 2015 for their performance of “Aekmaegi Taryeong” before producing their debut album *Urban Pungryu* in 2017. They appeared in government sponsored concerts around Korea and abroad. In addition to their live performances, E-sang uploads videos to their YouTube channel as well as updates on their group Instagram page. The YouTube channel is relatively new, having started in 2020, amassing a total of 1.1 million views since its creation.

I was first introduced to the group in 2018 through drummer Kang Sung Hyun (Sunghyeon), who at the time was a drumming and dance instructor at Sangmyung (Sangmyeong) University in Seoul. Kang was raised in Seoul where he attended a performing arts high school that specialized in traditional Korean arts. He trained under former SamulNori member, Choi Jong Sil, who encouraged his students to learn drumming and dance in different areas of the world. His fellow band mates include singer Sin Yeju, *piri* player Son Saeha, and “Janggu Hunter” Lee Hyun Cheol who was trained under SamulNori founder, Kim Duk Soo.

In June 2018, I walked around the empty grounds of Gyeongbokgung Palace waiting for E-sang to finish setting up their equipment on a stage set up in front of the one of the many buildings at the palace. They were appearing that evening as part of a series of scheduled traditional Korean music concerts hosted by Gyeongbokgung Palace over the summer. Having been invited by Kang Sung Hyun, I arrived earlier to help the band transport their equipment into the palace and interview the band members as part of my research.

As other groups moved about on stage, setting up equipment and performing sound checks, Kang Sung Hyun and I walked a short distance away, far enough that we could hear each other, but close enough to still see the stage in case his band needed him. We sat along a short wall, chatting about music and his band. We had bonded a few days earlier, discovering that we are both percussionists trained in similar styles. At one point, he had even wanted to study anthropology and music in college, so I asked him more about his training and career plans in music. He expressed his and the group's desire to modernize traditional Korean music by "Looking at tradition and creating modern and contemporary things." When incorporating the techniques and instruments of other musical traditions, Kang states that he's pursuing traditional music, but as things come and go, you have to adapt with the changes. He and his group are working to create imaginative performances that fit with this era of globalization and convergence.

The palace opened back up just before 7PM, and small crowds of people began to fill up the rows of plastic chairs facing the stage. Colored, rainbow lights lit up the stage as the performance began. Performances for the night included an all-female drumming and dance ensemble, a solo *janggu* player, and another all-female dance troupe performing a fan dance. E-sang was the last group to perform. They were a delightful mixture of traditional and contemporary culture. Two percussionists and a bass guitarist sat stage right dressed in black with plain, thick vests of beige and navy. The beige-vested percussionist sat behind a *janggu*. The navy-vested percussionist sat behind a drum kit comprised of a variety of symbols, gongs, and drums, Korean and non-Korean alike. The *piri*, *gayageum*, and *taepyeongso* players sat stage left of the rhythm section, dressed in all-white. On the far left was the keyboardist. The main vocalist of the group danced across the stage in a green, floral hanbok-style dress.

That evening, they performed an original composition, “Urban Piri”, an upbeat piece heavily featuring a solo *piri*. The piece begins with the *janggu* player providing a swing-style backbeat. The drumset joins in with the tambourine with the piano and bass providing a simple chord progression. The *gayageum* also joins in playing a melody mimicking the rhythm of the *changgu*. When the *piri* soloist finally joins in, the crowd and band are bobbing and swaying to the funky beat. For the most part, it seems like the *piri* soloist is improvising through much of the piece save for moments where the *piri* and *gayageum* are playing the melody together.

The closer of the night, “Aekmaegi Taryeong,” was a song that encourages audience participation. Described as a song that exorcises evil spirits that bring bad luck, E-sang taught and encouraged the audience to cheer, sing, and dance. Under the guidance of the main singer of the song, the audience practiced call and response cheers (“eolssigo!” and “jotda!”) and singing the chorus (“Eoru aegiya, eoru agiya on jicheone aegiro guna”) amidst giggles and cheery shouts. After their practice, the keyboardist struck a low chord in tremolo, and the lead singer slowly began the song. The *kkwaenggwari* played fast and the song instantly picks up tempo with everyone singing the chorus. Members of the band and audience clapped their hands and thighs. The song repeated in slow moments of solos and fast chorus broken up only by a brief drum break. The song ended loud and fast, punctuated by loud applause from the audience.

This concert demonstrates E-sang’s range when performing fusion *gugak*. On one end, “Urban Piri” follows a Westernized musical structure featuring Korean instruments. On the other end, “Aekmaegi Taryeong” leans more heavily into *gugak* musical traditions, following the forms and lyrics of the traditional song and simply adding Western instruments into the ensemble. The stylistic choices of “Urban Piri” are intentional choices made by the song’s composer, Lee Changhyeon, who works to create new *gugak* compositions.

Lee Changhyeon is a composer and performer of *gugak* music based in Seoul. He is a former member of E-sang, who perform his compositions under the name “Changtique.” The name is a portmanteau of his own name, “Changhyeon,” and “antique” to emphasize his adherence to Korean traditional musical styles and elements in his own compositions and arrangements.⁷ Unlike his work with E-sang where the emphasis is on performance of *gugak*, Changtique’s focus is on new compositions of *gugak* and fusion music. Most of his compositions are uploaded as live and prerecorded videos on YouTube⁸ garnering around 92,000 views total and 811 subscribers to his channel. The goal of his channel is to allow his audience to feel like they are watching a real performance and to spread the popularity of *gugak* music and new compositions in *gugak*.

The second piece described above, “Aekmaegi Taryeong”, is an adaptation of a style of shamanistic song, *taryeong*, which is a type of ritual evocation of the spirits as well as entertainment for the shaman and their audience. True to the intent and tradition of this type of song, E-sang actively encouraged their audience to sing along and cheer for the performers throughout the piece. Like other folk songs, “Aekmaegi Taryeong” is strophic in structure, meaning each chorus and verse are sung to the same melody. E-sang’s performance shows the other end of *gugak* fusion or crossover music where the music primarily follows conventional *gugak* elements with some Western musical elements included.

Hip Pungmul

In 2021, E-sang made their TV debut as participants on JTBC’s *Poongryu*. beating out 51 other *gugak* bands to place within the Top 6 of the competition. During their stint on the show,

⁷ Original: 창티크는 창현 + 앤티크 의 합성어로 귀중한 우리의 음악을 널리 알리고자 합니다.

⁸ Lee Changhyun’s compositions and performances can be found on his YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@changtique>.

E-sang leaned into the strong percussion background of its members, dubbing themselves a “hip *pungmul*” band, and focused on mashup and crossovers with familiar traditional songs. One of which was the groups adaptation of “Aekmaegi Taryeong.”

Unlike the concert at Gyeongbokgung Palace, E-sang’s televised performance of “Aekmaegi Taryeong⁹” did not allow for the same level of audience interaction. Kang Sung Hyun did not instruct and practice singing with their audience. The ensemble, too, was slightly different. Removing the drum set, the percussionists only played *janggu* and *kkwanggwari*. The members were dressed in bright yellows and reds and baggy pants rather than their muted costumes. Despite these slight differences, the performance still was heavily influenced by *gugak* musical elements, using traditional instruments, vocal techniques, *jajinmori jangdan*, and even cultivating *jeong* with their audience through *chwimsae*. The keyboardist begins the piece with a low tremolo. The main vocalist, Sin Yeju, joins in, embellishing her low and slow melody with *sigimsae*. The performance plays out largely like their performance at the palace. Of note, however, is the *chwimsae* heard from the audience during the instrumental breaks.

E-sang’s bass guitar player begins the instrumental break, performing an improvisational solo, accompanied by shouts from his fellow musicians. In particular, Sin Yeju repeats, “oelssigo!” Focus shifts to the percussionists, Kang Sung Hyun and Lee Hyun Cheol, give an exciting duet. Kang Sung Hyun, more mobile with his *kkwaenggwari*, spins and dances. The ensemble continues their shouts of encouragement, and more quietly, off stage, a couple of indiscernible shouts ring out. One particularly loud shout leads to the apparent amusement of Sin Yeju, who smiles and giggles.

⁹ A recording of this performance can be found on JTBC Music YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMy15vjndPI>.

One of their more popular performances was their last performance on the show, heavily featuring elements of a *pungmul* performance and up-beat, Swedish disco beats¹⁰.

E-sang's number was a hefty, nearly 7-minute-long mashup of Swedish 70s pop music and *pungmul*. The soft hum of a synth fills a dark screen as a dim orange light descends on a lone drummer wearing a loose, white outfit. The drummer dramatically strikes a large, 4-foot diameter drum. Shortly after, a *gayageum* begins plucking out a simple melody. Dressed in a flowy white dress, the Sin Yeju joins the simple, serene music with the lyrics for "Dal Taryeong." A cymbal roll signals an abrupt shift in tone as the rest of the band joins in, drums accompanying *taepyeongso* playing the familiar opening instrumental of ABBA's "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!" The mashup continues until about half-way through the piece, yielding to extra musicians dressed in *pungmul* style clothing joining in a namsadang-esque drum break complete with *beona-nori* (spinning dishes), giant flag waving, and acrobatic dancing. Returning to the serene, ballad-like mood of the beginning of the performance, the singer reclaims her place on stage and gradually builds energy and volume with the band before ultimately reprising the pop/traditional song mashup to the end.

This mashup has three distinct sections happening in the performance. The first section starts with the beginning ballad section where singer, Sin Yeju, incorporates more *sigimsae* and *pansori* style singing. The music is quiet and subdued. Accompanied only by the large background drum and the *gayageum*, Sin Yeju projects a feeling of longing, perhaps a nod to *han* and more traditional expectations for a *gugak* performance. The next section is the upbeat, disco beats and melody appropriated from ABBA where pop sounds take precedence. The beat does not stray from the even disco feel, even in the *kkwaengwari* and *janggu* players. Although the

¹⁰ A recording of a live performance can be found on *Poongryu*'s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvYHWqOUM4g>.

lyrics being sung are from the “Dal Taryeong,” the lyrics are adapted to the melody of “Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!” In an abrupt inversion of this, the *pungmul* section is void of pop sounds. Similar to “Aekmaegi Taryeong,” Sin Yeju and the other group members perform *chwimsae*, cheering for their group members and the added performers. Unfortunately, I could not hear if the audience participated in *chwimsae* during this performance, but an attempt was made to encourage participation and cultivation of *jeong*.

After placing within the Top 6 on Poongryu, E-sang joined fellow top contestants on a nation-wide tour, promoting the television program and their own bands. E-sang continues to perform at state sponsored events and increasingly appears at events featuring more popular forms of Korean arts such as Belgium’s “Korean Culture Days” held at Hallyu Town in Place de Brouckère in June 2023. In a celebration of Korean Wave, “Korean Culture Days” hosted a K-pop concert including well-known singer Paul Kim, K-pop Boy group OnlyOneOf, K-pop girl group CSR, and E-sang. Perhaps for the first time in their career, E-sang performed on the same stage as K-pop artists, actively included in promoting the Korean Wave. Advertised as a Korean traditional group, E-sang represented a contemporary take on the folk, traditional Korean identity.

More recently, E-sang announced that they have signed with Gogeu Production and Entertainment, a record label and content producer that signs many *gugak* artists, including some ICH holders. Gogeu is partnered with various music services both domestically and abroad.

Conclusion

Korea has a long history of conservation, documentation, and promotion of its traditional arts, specifically its performing arts. The Korean government has ensured continued transmission and performance through institutional frameworks established to enable elements of traditional

performing arts to be taught in schools, universities, and local transmission centers such as the National Gugak Center in Seoul. The international proliferation of Korean popular culture, specifically through the Korean Wave, highlighted the capacity of tourism and the culture industry to boost national image and GDP. This inspired more state support to raise public awareness of traditional culture through various festivals, exhibitions, and other performances both domestically and internationally.

Despite, and perhaps because of these efforts, *gugak* remained an unpopular genre. *Gugak* musicians struggled to survive on their art, and many were forced to other avenues. Although it helped some *gugak* musicians, the funding provided by government organizations created a need for stricter adherence to the “traditional” stylistic and cultural concepts that emphasized preservation without allowing for experimentation or innovation. *Gugak* musicians who attempted to contemporize traditional arts, such as SamulNori, faced criticism from purists and were excluded from the same protection and promotion afforded to state recognized musicians and ICH holders. Even those who perform the preserved art forms deal with criticisms of inauthenticity; because the context of their performances is different socially, politically, and economically from the traditional contexts, it is difficult to say that their performances really exhibit traditional cultural components such as *han* or *jeong*.

In comparison, globally popular exports from the Korean Wave, most notably K-pop and K dramas, owe their success to a variety of factors some of which are intentional marketing and planning from entertainment companies, the rise of social media and music streaming services, and government support for developing cultural exports but which allows for variety and innovation. K-pop appeals to a wide-range of audiences who have immediate access to music through streaming services and emotional connection to the artists through social media. Yet, the

Western musicality along with formulaic and deliberate composition of K-pop songs, groups, and images contribute to criticism that K-pop lacks Korean-ness and is unrelated to traditional forms of Korean arts. It could be argued, however, that these cultural exports do a better job of exhibiting Korean cultural concepts such as *han* and *jeong* as contemporary young Koreans would experience them because they express *han* through song lyrics that reflect the feelings and problems of Korean youth and *jeong* through idol and fan interactions via concerts and social media (even imitating *chwimsae* through the practice of fan chants).

New pop *gugak* musicians seek to overcome the disconnect between modern Koreans and traditional folk music through mixing varying combinations of musical elements from *gugak* and pop music. Through making music that sits on the peripheries of traditional/pop, Korean/Western, and old/new, pop *gugak* musicians are making music that translates the lyrics and sounds of traditional art into sounds and messages more accessible to contemporary Korean ears. Despite reservations about potential criticisms from their teachers and others in the *gugak* community, pop *gugak* musicians recognize that changes and musical innovations are necessary means to keep traditional Korean music alive. Sitting on the peripheries of the traditional Korean musical genres breaks down the artificial separation of the categories. Afterall, *gugak* and K-pop have similar goals: negotiating Korean identity, providing entertainment, and making money.

Although pop *gugak* bands like E-sang are unlikely to become as globally popular and successful as K-pop groups because of preexisting ideas about *gugak* and a bias towards Western-style pop in many of the richest global markets, the success of reality television program *Poongryu* and the limited popularity of LEENALCHI show that there is still interest and importance given to Korea's traditional music. Similar to my conversation with my Korean translator at the National Gugak Center, even for a younger generation, *gugak* is tied Korean

identity. As a result, efforts to make *gugak* more accessible and appealing to the Korean public tend to be viewed positively by both the *gugak* community and Korean public. Like E-sang's performance at Hallyu Town, pop *gugak* represents a new innovation on traditional Korean music that embraces its traditional cultural forms in an idiom that appeals to contemporary audiences.

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