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SsingSsing DanceDance: Playing on Gender in Korea's 21st Century Traditional Performing Arts

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Abstract

Gender identity would seem to be more settled in the world of traditional Korean music and dance than in any other corner of the world of performing arts. Classical *gagok* songs are divided into female and male repertoires, and women and men both dress in the gendered costumes of the Joseon Dynasty (*hanbok*) as they perform ultimate expressions of Korean moral rectitude—the story of the faithful wife, the filial daughter, the benevolent brother, the loyal minister. But a closer look reveals that gender roles in the old forms are not quite so fixed. This is particularly true, and increasingly so, in Korea's traditional folk genres. Internationally renowned cross-dressing Geonggi Folksong (*minyo*) singer Lee Hee-moon, with his various ensembles, including *SsingSsing*, is but one of many Korean artists playing with the *eum* (*yin*) and *yang* of gender in their performances of traditional arts today. Among Lee's mentors and collaborators, the traditional/*avant-garde* Korean dancer and choreographer Ahn Eun-Me is composing, choreographing, and performing irreverent and transporting works that, through movement, makeup, and continuous exchange of costumes, seek to redefine Korean gender ideals. Both Lee and Ahn point to Korea's roots in shamanic ritual, in which shamans channel and embody both male and female gods and spirits, as a source of inspiration for their work. This article looks at modern performances by Lee Hee-Moon, *SsingSsing*, and Ahn Eun-me, exploring the ways these artists are breaking down old notions of gender while carrying forward into a digital space dominated by the popular genres of the Korean Wave their updated renderings of traditional Korean music and dance.

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Introduction

On the surface, there may appear to be a no more strictly gendered contemporary artistic space in South Korea than the world of traditional music and dance—Korea's "intangible heritage." From the male and female songs of the aristocratic classical vocal genre *gagok* to separate male and female versions of the Jeolla Province-style story singing genre *pansori*, many of Korea's court and regional song repertoires are divided by gender. Not only are songs gendered, but in the performance of most traditional genres, women and men dress in *hanbok*—the gendered traditional clothing style of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897)—an almost required costume—

helping to breathe perpetual life into longstanding tenets of Korean moral rectitude. Each extant *pansori* story upholds a traditional virtue, e.g., the faithful wife (*Song of Chunhyang*), the filial daughter (*Song of Simcheong*), the benevolent brother (*Song of Heungbo*), the trustworthy friend (*Song of the Red Cliff*), or the loyal minister (*Song of the Underwater Palace*). Similar roles can be found throughout repertoires dating back to the Joseon era and earlier.

But, while representations of gender in music appear fixed, there are exceptions. Given the roots of the traditional genres, and Korean folk music in particular, in shamanic myth and ritual, the assignment of a gender role is not always restricted to the gender of the player. Examples can be found in both *pansori* and story singing in the style of the northwestern provinces (Seodo *Sori*), where, in *Baebaengi Gut* (often translated as “[Shamanic] Ritual of Baebaengi”), a single story singer expresses both male and female roles, reflecting the way a shaman accepts and expresses the spirits of both men and women through a single body. This paper studies the performances of Gyeonggi *Minyo* (folk song) singer Lee Hee-moon [Yi Huimun] and dancer and choreographer Ahn Eun-me [An Eunmi]. Separately and in collaboration, Lee and Ahn are weaving successful careers in the contemporary worlds of “traditional” music and dance out of the roots of Korea’s shamanic past, and, in the process, expanding not just the contours and audiences of Korea’s traditional genres but dissolving the once-solid lines thought to demarcate gender, sound, and nation.

Balancing Acts: Gender and the *Book of Changes*

Janice Kim, in “Processes of Feminine Power: Shamans in Central Korea,” articulates one of the prevailing general understandings of the gender binary in Korea, based on a popular understanding of Daoist cosmology. “[D]arkness and lightness are defined by contrast, the bright yang to the dark eum [Chinese yin], male to female,” she writes. “Whereas concepts of masculinity are coupled with the rational world, femininity is linked with the realm of the spirits” (113). Compare the omniscient wisdom in the following “court song” genre “men’s gagok” song to the subjective longing in the women’s:

Men’s song (namchang) example in the “placid” mode (pyeongjo junggeo)
 When one enters a mind with a firm foundation,
 filial piety, fraternity, loyalty, and faith become pillars.
 With a uniform sense of propriety, justice, honesty, and honor,
 during one thousand years of wind and rain,
 though there be ten thousand difficulties, there is still something upon which to lean.

Women’s song (yeochang) example in the “placid” mode (pyeongjo dugeo)

If a single quarter-hour notch feels like the passing of three autumns,
 how many years are in ten days?

My heart, when it was happy, never gave a thought to the sorrows of others.

A thousand li [away] . . .
 Since he departed for his official post, I cannot sleep.

(J. Clark, trans., 2018, 34-35, 92-93)

In this scheme, the external neo-Confucian realm of governance, and the “court music” used in its rituals, belongs to yang, while the internal shamanic and Buddhist realm of the soul, and the “folk music” that adorns its rituals, belongs to eum.

In the 21st century, anyone speaking of gender in terms of eum and yang, or referencing neo-Confucian Korea at all, is likely to be thought to have missed a century of intervening beats. But, looked at another way, traditional Daoist notions of eum and yang can be seen as entirely modern. What distinguishes the dynamics of eum and yang from the kind of bright-line western dualism, like that historically applied to gender, is the symbol’s inherent fluidity—an aspect of particular value to any contemplation of gender in the current “K-century.” Eum and yang are not simply smoothly entwined paisley boteh but merging halves, each of which integrates parts of the other—the round sun in the half moon and the moon partially eclipsing the sun. Either of the two major aspects may manifest more strongly in a particular object, depending on the criterion of the observation.

The “Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate” symbol () with which we are familiar today shows a balance between two opposites with a portion of the opposite element embedded in each section. But do these actually need to show up in balance? Or are they more free-flowing, like the fluid treatment of gender in the performances of Lee Hee-moon and Ahn Eun-Me?

Born in Seoul in 1976, the son of Ko Jurang, a student of the late national treasure Muk Gyewool, Lee is one of several traditional artists on today’s scene playing with the proportions of eum and yang in his performances. On some days, he is more eum and, on others, more yang, giving a lava lamp quality to his performances as he floats among various gendered images, not unlike a shaman’s movement through the temporal and corporal realms. “In Korean traditional art,” explained Lee in a recent interview, “male shamans, called baksu, have the body of a male. But, as mediums, they need more than a single sexual identity because they channel both male and female spirits. When I act a female character and sing, I have to overcome the fact of my being a male singer and try my utmost to bring a more neutral, unisex feeling to the performance” (Kim 2017, 1).

Traditional Music for This Age

Lee’s and Ahn’s successes highlight a longstanding debate over what actually constitutes “Koreanness.” While some take a conservative approach to preserving traditions that leaves little room for modern interpretation, others link the survival of those traditions to their ability to breathe and adapt. The musicologist Chang Sahun falls among the former, as evident in his assertion that the asset system must seek to preserve the old forms:

If one thing is appointed which is not the original form it may have lost its value. All people who are supported as Human Cultural Assets should remember to keep the original form and know the roots and characteristic skills unique to their genre. (quoted in Howard 2002, 6)

Others take a more nuanced approach to the relationship of “genuineness” to “authenticity.” Folklorist Shalom Staub claims that to endeavor to ensure historical accuracy is to step onto a “slippery path” to a place where, ultimately, artistic “genuineness” comes to be subverted to efforts to preserve the rhetoric of a pre-established presentation (Howard 2002, 6, citing Staub 1988).

In the 21st century, more and more people have begun to argue against measuring cultural “genuineness” against the aesthetics of another time and place. In the 1980s and 90s, the Korean government began to expand its cultural policy to include forms of popular culture and, by the turn of the century, had come to fully appreciate the economic value of culture and arts as part of its embrace of “soft power.” The resulting Chinese-coined Han-liu (Kor. Hallyu) in the 90s led, beginning in 2006, to serious efforts to expand and sustain the “Korean Wave,” including finding ways for the country’s traditional arts to ride it onto a world stage. The Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism created something called “HanStyle” as a traditional eum to Hallyu’s popular yang in six fields that could be prefixed with the character Han, here, meaning “Korean”: Hangul (Korean alphabet), Hansik (Korean food), Hanbok (Korean clothing), Hanja (Korean paper), Han-ok (Korean dwelling), and Hanguk eum-ak (Korean music, or gugak) (So 23). Each target language—Chinese, Japanese, and English—got its own slightly different marketing campaign. The “Han” prefix has now morphed into the K Brand—thus hallyu to K-ryu (or K-Wave, if you will)—and traditional arts are doing their best to participate with everything from “K-Sound” to “K-Shamanism.”

In a 2017 interview with Arirang TV, Lee Hee-Moon characterized his mission as to interpret the age he is in with traditional music. He says he has heard himself called a “B-class culture singer,” but that he likes that. “If you keep trying to look good and act like a lofty artist,” he says, “that will distance you from the audience even more. They [won’t] be able to feel you, and that’s no fun. You use words like minyo expecting the audience to understand, but you just can’t assume that they will know everything.”

Lee’s comment captures why many fear folk song’s (minyo’s) demise in today’s “K-world.” He wants to fix the (ironic) problem of “folk song” being distant from the folk, at least as far as his own performances go.

The National Gugak Center is also working to increase the accessibility of traditional songs—folk and classical—with its new Reinterpreted series (though, gender is not yet part of the center’s “official” discussion). The first volume, *Korean Folk Songs Reinterpreted*, came out in December of 2017. It starts with the Gyeonggi Folk Song Repertoire but also includes the songs of the Southern, Eastern, and Western provinces, along with those of Jeju Island. In the preface, titled “In Expectation of the Modern Utilization and Broader Application of Korean Folk Songs,” Kim Heesun states the goal of the book is to move the lyrics of Korean folk songs closer to modern Korean:

Many find gugak difficult to enjoy and understand. This may be because in the face of drastic changes incurred by modernization, the aesthetic sensitivity of contemporary Koreans has undergone a steady metamorphosis. This may also be because gugak songs contain a multitude of archaic, Sino-Korean words derived from the unfamiliar cultural context of previous historical periods that thereby obstruct empathy with what is portrayed in lyrics. . . Thus, the National Gugak Center’s Division of Music Research planned a project to replace the lyrics of gugak songs, composed mainly of archaic and Sino-Korean words, with easy-to-understand contemporary poetic words, and to translate the new versions into

English. . . Hopefully the lyrics rewritten with the modern language can be utilized to create new songs that can more strongly appeal to today's music enthusiasts. (2017, 6-9)

Lee Hee-moon for the most part (though not always) leaves the words and even the traditional melodies of minyo alone, while entirely changing the context in which they are sung. Lines like "'I'm going out,' he said last night, and the night before last he went to see the sights, and still shamelessly he asks me to stitch up his worn out hemp stockings" (from "Song of Plum Blossoms," J. Clark, trans., 32) are read differently by an audience when sung by a man in a wig and fishnet leggings, or when dressed as his mother dressed in the 1950s, than when sung, for instance, by his mother herself. Lee's success reflects today's increasing openness to presenting the traditional music repertoires in dramatically new ways. Still, as he pointed out in his 2017 Arirang TV interview, "It's not easy to break the stereotypes against Korea's traditional musicians and cross the line."

It is not just a matter of stereotypes. It's also the law. In 2014, Olleh, one of South Korea's major telecom companies, found itself in trouble with the KCC broadcasting commission for corrupting tradition with a series of popular TV commercials featuring Gyeonggi minyo singer and child star, Song Sohui, dressed in a pastel colored hanbok singing to us about cellphone service. Olleh was warned of "advisory action" for violating a law prohibiting the use of folk songs in advertising. Paragraph 2 of Article 22 of the Regulations on Broadcasting Ad Review states that "broadcast advertisements should not be used or edited or arranged in folk songs." The jingle advertising Olleh's LTE phones was apparently too close to the Gyeongsang Province regional folksong Miryang Arirang.

Lee Hee-moon's teacher Lee Chun-hee, Intangible Human Cultural Asset No. 57 for Gyeonggi Minyo, who teaches at Seoul National University and whom he considers one of his "mothers" (see below), commented: "The concern is that the original will be damaged in some way because Korean musicians are not strong enough to protect the original." Having said that, she then went on to express her personal opinion that it was time to end such laws (Kim, I., 1).

Michael Hurt writes of the distancing effects one might feel "watching the average K-POP girl group that does stripper, pole-dancer moves in unison in front of 'conservative [...] Korean audiences'" (2019, 3). Lee faces the opposite challenge: how to pull off "old and conservative" gugak for a global K-pop audience.

A Son of Three Mothers

Lee Hee-moon, who first appeared overseas in 2014 with his band SsingSsing, enjoyed instant success internationally. While he is not yet a fully trained Gyeonggi Minyo singer, he is succeeding sonically, primarily with traditional gugak itself, relying much less on "fusion," at least as far as the vocals go. Visually, however, it is a whole other story.

Lee Hee-moon grew up in a family of traditional musicians. His birth mother, Ko Jurang, a student of the late national treasure Muk Gyeweol, is a "named/famous singer" under National Intangible Cultural Property No. 57 for Gyeonggi Folk Song. Now 43, in his youth, Lee never imagined singing professionally himself. His mom had both explained and demonstrated how difficult that road could be. Nevertheless, he was steeped in Gyeonggi folk song since childhood. As a teen, like most other teens, he became interested in pop music.

Eventually he would go on to study film at the Toho Gakuen Film Techniques Training College, after which he became an assistant director in Japan and Korea for pop music video productions—through his mother’s connections at the talent agency managing Baby V.O.X., now called DR Music, eventually working under Cho Soo-hyun [Jo Suhyeon] who would later direct Psy’s 2012 “Gangnam Style” video.

Around this time, Lee met his mother’s colleague national treasure Lee Chun-hee. She gave him the opportunity and encouragement to start singing the songs he had been hearing since boyhood. He won the silver medal in the Gyeonggi Province Sori Contest in Ansan in 2003, only five months after beginning his studies in earnest, and eventually came to see himself as a traditional musician—albeit one who rejected “the stereotype” (Arirang 2017). After several more years of study, he met his “third mother,” choreographer Ahn Eun-me. It was Ahn who assured Lee that mixing fish net stockings and cultural heritage was OK. He never looked back. He calls these three women—his birth mother, his teacher, and his mentor—his “three mothers.”

No. 57 Gyeonggi Minyo

Like many intangible cultural properties, No. 57, Gyeonggi Minyo (Folk Song), had already gone through changes by the time Lee Hee-moon arrived on the scene. The genre is described as follows in *Korean Folk Songs Reinterpreted*:

Rather than being agricultural songs, Gyeonggi-style folk songs are “popular folk songs” sung by professional singers in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province. Gyeonggi melodies proceed stepwise generally ending on “sol” (the 5th of the scale) and thus have a gentle and cheerful feel. They use the rhythm patterns gutgeori and semachi and a light singing technique that produces a bright and clear sound. (2017, 20)

Roald Maliangkay, in his book *Broken Voices*, explains the history of the genre and how it may have come to include all the songs sung in the province in and around the capital but instead, “officially . . . came to define only the twelve refined folksongs, known as [the] shibi (twelve) japka or gin (long) japka” (2017, 96). Eight japka (usually translated as “miscellaneous songs”), and four japjapga (or “miscellaneous japga”) comprise the repertoire (96-97). The japjapga were popularized by a late-Joseon male singing group known as the Four Axes, or Sagyechuk, after the place they had presumably grown up in and around—Seoul’s Yongsan and Mapo districts of today (Maliangkay 100). Lee Hee-moon referred to the group in his show “Deep Love,” for which he dresses in Korean traditional male hanbok. When interviewers for korea.net asked him in November 2017 about his new song “Deep Sarangbang Love: Sagyechuk (Four Axes),” Lee responded:

It’s a combination of a traditional song, and then visual arts and design. The song narrates the history of the Gyeonggi Minyo genre of folk songs. In a long winter break from farming, farmers used to dig deep into the ground and make a shack with rice straw as a place of rest. That’s called a “Deep Sarangbang.” The Sagyechuk was a pre-urban pathway spanning from the front of Seoul Station all the way through to Manri-dong in Jung-gu District and to Cheongpa-dong in Yongsan-gu District. Throughout the neighborhoods came numerous singers who are now well-received. Currently, most Gyeonggi Minyo singers are female and I

myself learned the song from a female singer, too. However, the traditions date back to male singers in their original. (Xu and Sohn 2017)

Japjaga are known, in particular, for their lowbrow, vulgar lyrics. Other styles present in the music of Sagyechuk are those of Seodo Sori (from the northwestern provinces of North Korea), Hwanghae/Pyeong'an provincial folk songs, and the shamanic ritual-based Seoul Gut.

Most of the elegant and poetic first eight jagma are based on the story of the pansori "Song of Chunhyang" (or "Miss Spring Fragrance"), a brave and faithful gisaeng from Namwon who rebukes the new magistrate's sexual advances at great personal cost to keep a promise to another young man. Lee strung these songs together for his stage show Zap (or jap, from jagma) in 2014, with musicians Jang Yeong-gyu and Lee Tae-won, choreographed and directed by Ahn Eun-me, who in one video tells the crossdressing dancers and backup singers they are all Chunhyang in the production.

Lee likes to translate jap (zap) not as "miscellaneous" but "mixed." As he explains,

A single pop song might have elements of ballads, rock, and hip-hop. In the same way, the jagma contains the musical language of many genres, and in that sense, the term japseureopda, meaning "mixed," is apt. . . . In fact, the jagma was the pop song of Joseon-era society. . . . Joseon-era jagma was influenced by pansori, and among the pansori repertoire the most popular is likely the [Song of] Chunhyang, . . . [who] is both the protagonist and not the protagonist of the 12 jagma. . . . To bring this story to life, the songs were rearranged in order. . . . When I become Chunhyang and sing, I have to overcome the fact of my being a male sorikkun and try my utmost to bring a more neutral, unisex feeling to the performance. It sounds silly, but I feel like going back to the sensibilities of my youth, when I liked Madonna, helps. Isn't Madonna the mother of all sexual minorities, embracing all genders? [Laughter] My teacher, master pansori [sic] singer Lee Chun-hee saw Zap and joked that she thought Leslie Cheung of Farewell My Concubine (1993) had come back to life. I think it might be a good idea to think about the sexual identities of the [Peking] opera singers in Farewell My Concubine in relation to this piece. (Song 2014)

Lee Hee-moon is quite unusual among singers in the Gyeonggi-style folk tradition today and not just for his modern take on performance. Originally sung by both men and women, Gyeonggi Minyo is now performed almost solely by women, which, writes Maliangkay, "affects the sound, movement, and semiotics of performance" (16). As Lee noted in a 2014 interview,

[t]here are currently very few male sorikkun [professional singers] among the jagma sorikkun, so at times I am treated as a rarity. Minyo are designated important cultural heritages, but the history of minyo culture contains a world of painful memories for female sorikkun. During the period of Japanese colonialism, for women who were socially looked down upon because they were gisaeng, or female entertainers, minyo and jagma were more a way to earn a living than an art form. And so, as a male performer, I turned my gaze to the history of oppression of women in the art. I also plan to continue exploring the painful corners hidden in these songs in the future. Exploring the history of the disappearing male sorikkun is also something that I plan to explore through song in the future. (Song 2014)

Lee seemed to be executing this plan in his 2017 production “Korean Men” for the National Theater of Korea, developed with Prelude, a jazz quartet from Berklee College of Music in the U.S., and performed with a Minyo duo with the cheeky name Nom Nom, which Philip Gowman (2017) translates, roughly, as “the Two Dudes.” Lee has described the production as “music for communication and healing for both men and women in Korea of this age.” The National Theater promoted the production with the following blurb:

In the ferociously competitive modern society, Korean men severely lack the time to take care of themselves while only looking “ahead” for success. Meanwhile, Korean women fail to look “ahead” properly because of childcare or having to maintain life of both a housewife and an employee. Lee and Prelude intend to arrange the time when Korean men and women understand and sympathize with each other by opening their hearts and revealing what’s troubling them through the media of music. . . . Adopting the oral tradition of witticism, they perform music of the menfolk, harmonizing the sentiments of traditional folk song and aesthetics of jazz. (National Theater 1)

Maliangkay sees the “dominant presence of women in folksongs [as] driven at least partially by a preference toward a more effeminate representation” that can be traced to post-occupation dynamics (72). While the Korean government banned Japanese cultural products well into the 1990s, the image of those products, he writes, has “long affected the interpretation of Korean traditions, including folksongs.” Referring to Gyeonggi minyo, in particular, Maliangkay notes that, in “dance, vocal style, costume, and the gender of its primary performers, the genre [has] been developed as a Korean alternative to the iconic sound and image of koto-playing geisha” (18). Later in *Broken Voices*, he gets back to this idea, suggesting that “[r]ather than their musicianship or artistry, it is their visual performance that set a standard . . . [that] was not abandoned upon liberation, but would continue to serve as an important point of reference to those involved in Gyeonggi minyo’s preservation” (131). The longstanding idea that visual performance has a central role to play in the sustenance of the genre runs through most of the work Lee is doing, particularly on the international stage, today.

At the time Gyeonggi Minyo was designated a protected genre in 1975, it was open to both male and female singers, but not many men took it up; the genre had already by that time become dominated by women performers. Maliangkay cites the proliferation of solo female recordings from the 1940s to the 1960s, when “many record jackets showed a Korean woman singing, seated on the floor with her hair tied up and dressed in a colorful traditional costume . . . reminiscent of Japanese geisha” (151).

SsingSsing’s “Unexpected Fame” Behind a Tiny Desk

Starting in 2013, Lee Hee-moon began putting together a costume in all white—white hanbok, white gat (lacquered horsehair mesh top hat for men, traditionally black), and white face—for his Zap performance. When asked in a 2019 GugakTV interview what inspired the white makeup, Lee replied with one word: “geisha.”

In melding his appreciation for the history and character of his genre with his love of the musical spectacle, Lee, working with avant-garde choreographer and dancer Ahn Eun-me, is finding success in an international music industry that continues to move toward the visual almost to the point of overwhelming the sonic.

Having worked as an assistant director in the music video industry, Lee is no stranger to the spectacle. He started SsingSsing for his three-part “Order-made Repertoire,” named to highlight the change he is bringing to his genre. He describes SsingSsing as a band with “authentic Korean traditional vocals with rock band music, combined with an extravagant visual style and stage manners” (Kim 2017).

The group attained sudden international fame in 2017 with an American National Public Radio “Tiny Desk Concert.” At this writing, the 15-minute performance has been viewed over three and a half million times on YouTube.¹ Judging from comments posted in English, most who keep coming back do not have the language of the lyrics but are drawn to the clothing and mannerisms, the innovative use of voice sounds, the mix of reggae, rock, jazz—and, no doubt, that special sonic ingredient most cannot name: Gyeonggi Minyo. As commenter TheEric0009 writes, “I have NO idea what they’re saying, but I thoroughly enjoyed every single second,” and Flying Chef notes, “...FUN! I love the fluttering eye lashes on the last song . . .” One viewer, Sam Lee, has gone so far as to (roughly) translate the gendered and archaic (but seemingly to western listeners irrelevant) lyrics of the first medley of songs SsingSsing performs on the video:

Chorus: eh-heyo~ The weaving girl is in agony as the loom making love song.
 Let’s set up a loom. Let’s set up a loom.
 Let’s set up a loom on the porch. [Chorus]
 To whom is she giving the fabric?
 She has been sobbing all the time in her life. [Chorus]
 Hey rooster, please don’t crowing.
 She is not done weaving yet. [Chorus]
 2nd Chorus: eh-heyo~ uh-huya~ the spring breeze blows by azaleas.
 The wild pear tree on the peak of Mu-bong mountain still looks good
 even after having the branch cut off. [2nd Chorus]

Through winds blowing and clouds breeding,
 I’m going to travel forever like wildflowers. [2nd Chorus]

Shall we go boating on Han river of deep clear water?
 My dear Han River, listen what I’m saying.
 I’m telling you which way you should flow.

Let’s sing for frogs - eh huya ya huya~
 Let’s do anything - ehhhh hey~
 Ribbit ribbit It’s a tree frog - eh huya ya huya~
 You’re named after tree but live jumping around it - ehhhh hey~
 It’s floundering in the shallow stream - eh huya ya huya~
 It’s exhausted struggling in the mud - ehhhh hey~
 Look around waterside plants if you want to see flogs - eh huya ya huya~
 Look around barn if you want to see toads - ehhhh hey~
 (sic)²

The NPR Tiny Desk Concert brought “unexpected fame,” said Lee in an interview with The Korea Times: “We were in the middle of our U.S. tour and had a free day, then the radio show’s producer asked us to perform and we said yes. We didn’t expect it would have such huge repercussions afterwards.” He goes on to say he was not all that happy about the sudden

fame. “SsingSsing’s music is like traditional songs wrapped in different packages. It is of course fun to perform, but it is . . . [also] breaking all social taboos. Breaking what a man should be like, including his physical appearance, made the band appear as a shock to audiences and experts who even tried to find the social meanings of our band” (Park 2017).

Lee originally started SsingSsing on the second theme of his Order-made trilogy,³ “(KKWE),” or “Pleasure” (or happiness):

Since I wanted to show that Minyo originated from shamanistic music, but with some modern touches, I tapped into rock music sessions. . . . The colorful costumes came from the images of shaman who like to wear glittering jewelry and vividly colored clothes. Cross-dressing has been created to express the male shamans’ genderless quality, because it is as if they are mediums channeling both male and female, and young and elderly spirits. Since I could be a different me, I become wilder and more confident on stage. I like the explosive energy that my different ego has. (Park 2017)

SsingSsing’s performances often feature elaborate costuming and accessories. The singers dress in drag, both reiterating and reinterpreting the old Korean traditions in what The New York Times describes as an “irreverent but intriguing hybrid” (Pareles 2017) and NPR calls, “very glam, very rock and roll, and very ready to play with the concept of gender” (Tsioulcas and Boilen 2017).

It is interesting that Lee frames the drag elements of his performance in the tradition of the male shaman, the baksu, sometimes translated as “sorcerer” and, at others, as “doctor” or “healer,⁴ as opposed to the most common Korean word for “shaman,” mudang, the (by now derogatory) word primarily connected to female shamans, who don the costumes of male spirits in their rituals. As Heinz Insu Fenkl (1989) writes of cross-dressing mudang, “the woman, by signifying man, gains access to male power and authority [while] the authority of the male icon is demeaned by expression in a female medium.”

Ahn Eun-me’s “Techno-Shaman” Influence

Lee Hee-moon’s ideas about what is today acceptable on the gugak stage, and the traditionally rooted ideas as to why, have been heavily influenced by his “third mother.” With her shaved head, Ahn Eun-me (b. 1962, Yeongju, North Gyeongsang Province) evokes the image of a Buddhist nun—someone who has cut off confusion, hostility, and attachment to everything down to “their” sex. Her irreverent and transporting works, often designed around continuous costume changes, question old notions of man and woman in a perpetual gender-swapping dance. Her choreography, built on repetitions and contrasts, creates striking visual effects that exalt the complexity of gender identification while questioning other aspects of identity and the place of the individual in our modern societies.

Ahn started performing dance when she was 12 and eventually made her way to the Tisch School of Arts in New York City. Awards followed, from the Choreographer’s Fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts to the Nam June Paik Art Center Prize. Some call her the Pina Bausch of Korea. “[Pina Bausch] changed dance history,” said Ahn in an interview, “[When] I met her in my country in 2000 in Seoul. I couldn’t breathe,” she said, describing her excitement (Yi-Joung 2016).

Ahn has been nicknamed “the techno-shaman of our time” (Noh 2016). She often works in the primary colors used in Korean folk traditions, including shamanism, incorporating them into her fluorescent stage settings, costumes, and techno-music. In her piece “Let Me Change Your Name,” eight young dancers move in the empty space of the stage, removing, changing, and exchanging their neon-colored clothes, as if removing their skin, mixing and confusing their identities.

As Ahn explains, the choreography was built from simple everyday movements, such as sitting down, walking and jumping, and stretching to see how far the body could extend and possess the room. Gender identities receive the same treatment: beginning with an equal formation of male and female, dancers’ identities are stretched to the point that they are stripped away, creating a new unified body moving as one. “Toward the end, all dancers break free to express their inner desires in a sublime display of different personalities. The game of clothes swapping is repeated once again through fast-moving sequences, where dancers put on or take off brightly colored skirts, roll up clothes, throw them in the air, and whip the floor” (Marotto 2017). The continuous change reminds us of the impossibility of enclosing the complex realm of gender into a universal binary,

Ahn describes “Let Me Change Your Name” as “embody[ing] the essential instincts of democracy . . . The mix of male and female dancers is one way of showing that the body is democratic, as men and women are essentially the same.” As Josa Luckman writes in the *Jakarta Post*, “The fluidity of gender cloaked in androgyny is very much apparent in the dancers’ routine, as the dancers in one segment remove their dresses completely without any sense of seduction, throwing the garments to one another to put on and throw away again. Even the program book acknowledges the costume-as-gender analogy, describing the costume change “as if exchanging skins, gender” (Luckman, 2018). For Ahn, it is as if the circles of opposite female yin and male yang have expanded, remaining in balance but taking up space almost equal to each’s host.



In another acclaimed piece, Ahn, according to *The Korea Times*, “combines the Korean aesthetics of welling joy (heung) with resentment (han) within herself . . . [t]hrough her encounter with the shamanic tale of Princess Bari” (Han 2010). “Princess Bari” is made of two parts: “Princess Bari—The Life,” the story of the seventh daughter of a Korean king raised by fishermen and destined to travel the underworld, was staged in 2007 (then invited to the Pina Bausch Festival in 2008 and to the Center for Fine Arts in Brussels, or the Bozar, in 2009). The sequel, “Princess Bari—The Death,” written to celebrate the first anniversary of the opening of Myeongdong Theater in Seoul, debuted in 2010 (and was subsequently staged in Bonn and Dusseldorf, Germany, among other cities). “The 2007 work depicted the story of Bari being kicked out of the kingdom and later searching for a cure to save the king, while the recent performance will show Bari journeying into hell to save the king. . . . In the first series, Bari was kicked out for being a bisexual, but, in the sequel, she is kicked out for being disabled,” writes the *Korea Times* reporter.

In Ahn’s production, Princess Bari is played by a man and, in the piece’s premiere, that man was Lee Hee-moon, who, at the time, was just four years into his start as a Gyeonggi

Minyo singer. “Why do we have to separate gender through costume?” Ahn asks rhetorically. “I believe everyone has two genders in their mind. It’s not separated. He has a beautiful figure and a beautiful voice. He looks like a female, but he is a man. So the audience can enjoy both sides of power from the one body” (YouTube 2011).

Ahn describes Princess Bari as a “shamanistic character who travels along the boundaries of life and death. She is ironic because she longs to escape death and bring back life, but still understands that the dead cannot survive in the real world. . . . The performance may depict princess Bari searching for a cure, but it can be translated as a human being searching for the ultimate answer to her existence” (Han 2010). In this piece, as he explains below, Lee manifests his essential nature as a human being while Ahn explores and expands her shamanic core.

Ahn’s dark shaman legend of Princess Bari was a runaway success in 2007, with its eye-popping “eccentric collage of contemporary and traditional music and choreography seamlessly influenced by both east and west” (Bain 2011). As she points out, through this work, “spontaneous dance without any learning involved is free and true dance that exposes the history of one’s body” (Noh 2016). According to Ahn, the dance depicts a historical scene in which the dancers’ bodies expressed the full spectrum of life. She calls it “Anthropology of the body”: “The wrinkled body was the book and container of their story. The dance was a crystalized beauty of life made from the condensation of sagas” (Noh 2016). Accordingly, the role of choreographer is to help them—the bodies—find such expression on the stage. To Ahn, shamanism not only lies in the tradition itself but is deeply rooted inside her nature as a choreographer.

When Lee Hee-moon was asked how much influence Ahn has had on his life and work, he talked about his role as Princess Bari:

In this production, everything that I wanted to hide, everything that I hid behind the concept of shamanism, everything that I hid in general, exploded. Ahn reminded me that everyone was different. Society is pressuring everyone to be the same, but she pierced through things in me that were repressed. She told me that certain things shined because I (and only I) did them, that I should not get stuck in a frame, that I should not be embarrassed by my feminine side . . . Ahn Eun-mi is the one who made me feel confident that I can make something completely new with traditional sounds. Since then, I have made a “creative imitation” of the “Ahn Eun-mi Company” with my “Lee Hee-Moon Company” and have been working on my own projects, which are modern but preserve the traditional way of singing. (PentaPost)

In the original tale and Ahn’s production, Bari’s parents are told, “Abandon her, abandon her, abandon her!” Lee Hee-moon instead embraces her, and, like Bari herself, saves the “family”—here, traditional music.

Conclusion

Nietzsche wrote “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a diction added to the deed – the deed is everything.” Extrapolating, Judith Butler adds “there is

no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990, 25).

Ahn sees her role in Korean society as one who can alter the ways men, women, and girls are perceived. “I can change the image of the Korean girl,” she declared in an interview in Edinburgh (Noh 2016). Her medium for doing this is not only her own work but also by directing and guiding her “son,” Lee Hee-moon. These two popular performers are bringing their respective art forms, Korean folk song and traditional dance—both genres with shamanic roots—into the newly K-branded universe of today’s digital era. But they are doing so without severing the roots of the traditions out of which their works grow. Their invocation of shamanism articulates a modern brand of sovereign identity as well as an indigenous spirituality that their performances are proving is timeless. Rather than a nostalgic attempt to return to the past, here in the 21st century, Lee’s and Ahn’s performances are making a place for Korea’s traditional genres on the global stage of the future.

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Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLRxO9AmNN0>; in contrast, a YouTube video of a make-up-less Lee appearing in traditional Korean *hanbok* has been viewed less than 8,000 times. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcfTUMSducc>.
2. The first two verses of this song appear as “Song of Weavers” in the National Gugak Center’s Korean Folk Songs Reinterpreted (70-71).

- 1) Bring a loom. Bring a loom. Bring a loom to the jade balcony.
(Refrain) *Eheyo*, weaving maid, you sing a love song but only worries are mounted on your loom.

Lee seems to also sing verse 10 and then moves on to the song “Song of Mt. Obong” and sings the same version sung by members of the National Gugak Center (68-69):

- 1) On top of Mt. Obong eruhwa though the branches of wild pear trees are snapped and broken eruhwa they still look fine.
(Refrain) *Eheyo eoheoya*, a spring breeze [blows over] Mt. Yong's reds and greens.
- 2) Blow, wind, eruhwa. Come out, cloud. My body, which wanders around aimlessly, wants to move forward without end, without limit.

From there, he moves to the chorus of the song “Ballad of the Han River” (58-59):

- 1) Let's take a boat on the deep and clear Han River, *eruhwa*, let's amuse ourselves boating.
(Refrain) *Aha eheyo eheyo eoheoya eolssahamma dunggediyeora*, my love

- The “Song for Frogs” does not appear in the National Gugak Center’s book of lyrics.
3. The “Order-made Trilogy” comprises “(ZAP)” (mixed), “(KKWE)” (happy), and “(TAM)” (desire).
 4. *Baksu* may be a Korean adaptation of similar terms from Siberian languages, such as *baksi*, *balsi* or *bahsih* (Lee, Yong-Shik 2007, 159).

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