

Korean Music and its Chinese Influences

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In politics, economics, society, and other fields, but most of all in culture, exchange between neighboring countries has a long and varied history. This has naturally given rise to cultural diffusion, and in speaking of this cultural diffusion we often use the metaphor of flowing water. Culture is said to flow like water from a high place to a low. When we consider that historically culture has generally been diffused from powerful countries to weaker ones, this way of speaking can seem quite persuasive. But the weaker countries have not been content to simply absorb the advanced culture of more powerful neighbors. Rather, they have developed it further to renew their own national culture, and even exported that culture in turn. Thus, cultural diffusion seems a little different from the flow of water descending continuously toward the sea.

Korea has developed its own brilliant culture through thousands of years of history. But like other countries, it has also maintained continual cultural exchange with its neighbors, and has actively adopted advanced culture from outside.

Geographically, Korea is situated at the far east of the Asian continent, with China to the west, Russia to the north, and Japan to the east. It has a long history of cultural exchange with all these neighboring countries, but its relationship with China stands out as particularly significant.

China exerted the greatest influence on the Korean peninsula, not only because of its large land area and population or its abundant natural resources, but also because of its long history and its advanced culture, always a step ahead of its neighbors. Music is no exception, and in discussing Korea's traditional music, we cannot omit the influence of China.

What, then, was this Chinese influence on Korean traditional music? Here I will introduce a few representative examples.

-II-

When Korean musicologists study ancient music, many of the sources they consult are Chinese historical works. In the Chinese official histories, the *Twenty-Four Chronicles*, the nations and peoples of China's neighboring lands in each period are

described in some detail, and records are preserved of ancient Korean kingdoms: Ancient Chosŏn during the Chinese Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 221 C.E.) and Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla during the Chinese Sui (581-618) and T'ang (618-907) dynasties. Through these fragmentary records, and through other documents and archaeological remains preserved in Korea, we can attain at least a faint glimpse of the ancient Korean society.

The first of the ancient Korean nations to achieve prosperity was Koguryŏ. The music of Koguryŏ is represented by the string instrument *kŏmun'go*. The three kingdoms that co-existed on the Korean peninsula in that period, Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla, are described in the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Samguk Sagi*, 1146), which states that the *kŏmun'go* was developed by an official named Wang Sanak who “re-made” a seven-string zither sent from Chin-dynasty China (265-420). Even today, the *kŏmun'go* is one of the most important instruments in Korean traditional music. Yet no instrument resembling the *kŏmun'go* can be found in China, nor does any Chinese instrument use the unique playing technique of the Korean *kŏmun'go*, in which a bamboo plectrum called the *sultae* is struck downwards onto strings that are pressed against frets.

Since neither the shape nor the playing technique of the *kŏmun'go* is found in China, one might conclude that the *kŏmun'go* is an original creation of Koguryŏ. But we should not jump too hastily to such a conclusion. The *History of the Three Kingdoms* is an official history written by Kim Pusik, and when it uses the word “re-made” (*kaejak*), though we cannot be sure of the exact meaning, the implication seems to be that the *kŏmun'go* was “re-made” on the basis of an existing model. Was the *kŏmun'go* simply a “re-make” of the seven-string zither from Chin?

The *kŏmun'go* appears frequently in tomb mural paintings from around the 4th century, and is also often mentioned in Chinese literary sources. The *kŏmun'go* depicted in these paintings is constructed in the same way as the modern one, differing only in the number of strings and frets. Similarly, the Chinese *qin* which appears in many archaeological and literary sources shows relatively little change between ancient and modern forms.

The *qin* and the *kŏmun'go* have little in common either in their structure or their playing technique except that both are string instruments played in a horizontal position. Thus, setting aside the question of their origin, the two instruments at first glance appear to be quite unrelated.

From an anthropological viewpoint, the origin of the *kŏmun'go* seems less connected with the Chinese *qin* than with southeast Asian instruments such as the *chakay* of Thailand or the *migyaun* of Myanmar (Burma). These instruments are struck with an implement similar to the *kŏmun'go's sultae*, and their strings are pressed against frets. Although the music played on them is quite different, their physical resemblance to the Korean *kŏmun'go* is interesting. What does it mean when a structure and playing technique unknown in China appears in southeast Asia? One possible interpretation is that the music of Koguryŏ, as represented by the *kŏmun'go*, was known beyond the Korean peninsula, beyond even China, in Asia as a whole.

The question remains whether the *k_mun'go* was completely unrelated to the Chinese *qin*, contrary to the account given in the *History of the Three Kingdoms*. I am less concerned with the question whether or not the *k_mun'go* was indeed “re-made” from the *qin*, than with the author of the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, Kim Pusik, and his view of history, his sense of beauty, and his aesthetic ideas concerning the *k_mun'go*.

Kim Pusik was a man of Unified Silla which had toppled the Kogury_ kingdom with the help of China, and it was in a spirit of “serving the great” (*sadaeju_i*) that he wrote his account of the Kogury_, Paekche, and Silla kingdoms. Chinese characters were used for writing in Korea at that time, and there are many passages in his writings that emphasize the relationship with China. From the viewpoint of a historian who sought to “serve the great” and had studied and absorbed the aesthetics of China, the question whether the *k_mun'go* had originally been modeled on the *qin* might not seem very important. In those days when music was no mere source of pleasure but a governing principle of the country itself, a musical instrument likewise was more than a tool for making sound. The Chinese *qin* was played not for personal amusement but for the cultivation and edification of the character. This aesthetic concept of the ancient *qin* has dominated the aesthetics of the Korean ruling class from the time when Kim Pusik wrote the *History of the Three Kingdoms* right down to modern times: all that changed in Korea was that the *k_mun'go* replaced the *qin*. Thus, from Kim Pusik’s point of view, wherever the *k_mun'go* originally came from, it was to be described in relation to the Chinese *qin*.

Despite its long history, the deep aesthetic tradition of the *qin* is now lost in China, while the *k_mun'go* holds a preeminent place among traditional Korean instruments, and continues to be well loved by Koreans. Moreover, those who seek to preserve the ancient aesthetics of the *k_mun'go* still use it as an instrument of self-cultivation.

-III-

Korea’s medieval period can be said to extend from the Kory_ dynasty (918-1392) to the middle of the Chos_n era (1392-1910). The most important musical activities in this period took place in connection with national events centered on the royal court, and among these, especially noteworthy is the importation of Confucian ritual music (*aak*) from China.

In this medieval period, and especially in the Chos_n era, the ruling ideology of the state was Confucianism. Having overthrown the previous dynasty and established a new one, the rulers felt the necessity not only to justify their own revolution and stabilize public sentiment, but also to win the support of their powerful neighbor China. Accordingly, they adopted an ideology that met the needs of the time, the Chinese doctrine of ceremony (*yeak*). Representing a Confucian view of music, this doctrine of ceremony had been the dominant theory of music in China since the beginning of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.).

The Confucian view of music that this doctrine of ceremony upheld was a heteronomous theory that treated music as a tool for the highest ruler. It sought to use music to elevate public sentiment, improve morality and ethical sense, and edify the people socially and politically. Of course, this Confucian approach was not the only philosophy of music in China, but because it was well suited to an era that respected Confucianism, it exerted a continuous influence on the Korean peninsula over a long period.

Since the nation itself was founded on Confucian philosophy, the national rites that were considered most important in Confucianism used music imported from China's ancient tradition of *yayue* ceremonial music. In Korean, this music is called *aak*. Thus, Korean *aak* developed out of music imported from China to meet the needs of the time and the nation. *Aak* was first introduced in the 12th century during the Koryŏ dynasty, but its golden age was in the 15th century during the reign of King Sejong (1418-1450), known as Korea's greatest monarch. In that period, numerous scholars strove to revive the ceremonial music of China's ancient Chou dynasty (fell 256 B.C.), and eventually, a new *aak* was created and performed as a successor to the ancient Chinese tradition. It was a great and laborious work, since no contemporary model was available and many Chinese literary sources had to be consulted. Almost 600 years later, this revived version of ancient Chinese ritual music is still performed unchanged when the rites in honor of Confucius are held twice a year at the Confucian Temple in Sŏnggyun'gwan University.

What is most important, however, is that the Chinese Confucian philosophy of music exerted a profound influence on Korean court music as a whole. As a result, in modern times the word *aak* has come to be used in reference to all the music performed at court, including the *hyangak* repertoire of Korean origin. But while this broad usage of *aak* seems intended to tie all Korean court music to the Chinese philosophy, the music itself is unique in style and cannot be found in China, the original source of *aak*. In the traditional music performed today in China, there is nothing resembling Korean court music. True to the musical aesthetics of Confucianism, a music was born that was no less impressive than it was subdued, slow, and simple in form, that was quite unlike Chinese music, or that was at one and the same time the most Chinese and the most un-Chinese of musics. What was special about this Korean *aak* was that it arose from the music of the Korean ruling class outside the court itself. Conceptually, this elite musical tradition had been shaped by Chinese influence, but in its actual sounds – its melodies, rhythms, and tone color – it was an original Korean creation.

Another kind of music, *tangak*, was imported from China around the same time as *aak*. This *tangak* was originally a form of popular vocal music and poetry in Sung-dynasty China (960-1125). For some time after it reached Korea, it was performed in its original form, but eventually it was changed into the completely Koreanized form that is preserved today.

A comparable example might be the world-famous popular music group Buena Vista Social Club, which has absorbed the *salsa* style that originated in Afro-Cuban music and successfully transformed it into a music all its own. I believe it was a great

musical talent and open-minded thinking that enabled the musicians to absorb the powerful rhythms of Africa so naturally.

The importation and Koreanization of Chinese poetry and music is not as simple a process as this group's music-making, but I believe it was made possible by similar factors: the open-minded willingness to accept a foreign music without resistance, and the musical ability to make that music one's own.

In this way, while Korean music, or at least the music of the ruling class, was strongly influenced by Chinese music, in the process the imported music was thoroughly Koreanized and acquired a unique character that cannot be found anywhere in China.

-IV-

In speaking of the Chinese influence on Korean music, the first example I mentioned was an instrument called the *k_mun'go*, but many other Korean traditional instruments also have links with China.

My own main instrument is the *kayag_m*. Accounts of the history of the *kayag_m* frequently cite Kim Pusik's work which I mentioned before, the *History of the Three Kingdoms*, which states that the *kayag_m* was developed by the ruler of the small Korean kingdom of Kaya (c. 42-562 C.E.) on the model of the Chinese *zheng*. But in the light of recently discovered archaeological remains as well as existing records, this story too appears to be a politically motivated piece of writing in the spirit of "serving the great." Admittedly, the string instrument excavated recently in southern Korea does not exactly match the modern form of the *kayag_m*, so we cannot say that Kim Pusik's account is definitely wrong, but to my knowledge no instrument corresponding to the *zheng* and dating from before the Current Era has so far been excavated in China. Only instruments resembling the *se* and *qin* have been found.

The *kayag_m* was also taken to Japan, where a similar instrument, the *koto*, still exists. Like the Chinese *zheng*, the *koto* has 13 strings, while the Korean *kayag_m* has 12. The additional string comes in handy in performance. Why, then, has the *kayag_m* stuck to 12 strings? While many interpretations are possible, the prevailing idea is that the instrument is meant to embody the harmony of heaven and earth, in which a year consists of 12 months. The idea of making a physical object represent cosmic principles is certainly ubiquitous in East Asia. One could also point out that this idea corresponds to the philosophy expressed in one of the Chinese classics, the *Book of Changes*.

The Korean *haeg_m* is a bowed instrument resembling the Chinese *erhu* and imported through China from its origins among the nomadic peoples of northern China. However, while the *erhu* has metal strings which are pressed against a finger board, the *haeg_m* has silk strings and produces a variety of effects by pulling the strings with the fingers. Although the two instruments share a common origin, today they differ in construction, tone color, and playing technique. Since the strings of the *erhu* are pressed lightly, the instrument is agile and well suited to fast pieces, which indeed comprise its

main repertoire. The *haeg_m*, on the other hand, produces wide pitch variations on single tones through the pulling action of the left hand, and its special character is more apparent in slow pieces.

The difference between the Chinese *dizi* flute and the Korean *taeg_m* is of the same kind. The music played on the Chinese instrument is generally very fast, technically brilliant, and high in pitch. The Korean instrument, by contrast, is typically played in a low register, with less emphasis on technical brilliance than on the depth and meaning of the music.

This is because the musical philosophy that has come down to us through the centuries from Korea's ruling class remains faithful to the musical philosophy of ancient China. Yet in practice, this philosophy has given rise to a distinctive Korean musical culture that is quite different from the music of China. Now let us listen to some music played on the representative string instruments of each country, the Chinese *qin* and the Korean *k_mun'go*. By comparing these two kinds of music, we can understand how the music of China and Korea pursued different paths.

(example)

-V-

So far, we have considered the musical culture of Korea's ruling class, the social elite that centered on the royal court. Now let us turn to the music performed and enjoyed by what might be called the "ruled class," the common people.

The music of the common people was primarily vocal music. The general population mainly sang folk songs, while professional singers performed somewhat more complex and musically developed songs. In these songs of the common people, Chinese legends, poems, and historical figures frequently appear.

For example, the popular children's song "Moon, Moon" (*Tara tara*) contains the lyric, "Moon, moon, red moon, the moon where Yi T'aebaek used to play." The name Yi T'aebaek refers to the famous Chinese poet Li Po. Not only the songs of the professional singers, but those of the general population and even of children, are full of references to China. But the Chinese component is limited to the mention of historical figures or famous literary phrases, while the melodies are purely Korean and quite unrelated to Chinese music.

Thus, the Chinese people, places, events, and expressions that appear in Korean vocal music serve only to elevate the tone and enrich the content of the lyrics, while in the music there is no direct influence from China at all.

It need hardly be said that throughout Korea's cultural history the influence of China has been strong. But the field that received that influence most directly was the visual. Not only the visual arts such as architecture, handicrafts, and painting, but also poetry and literature (art forms that similarly depend on the visual medium of writing) were profoundly influenced by China both directly and indirectly. Even these visual fields did not simply accept Chinese things, but developed them into something more sophisticated to create a distinctive Korean product.

We could say that in the purely aural field of music, the influence of China was relatively weak, while the original Korean element was correspondingly stronger. In music, Koreans followed the Chinese only in philosophy and general principles, while the instruments, melodies, rhythms, and actual sounds of the music were original Korean creations, almost uninfluenced by Chinese music. This is perhaps why Koreans frequently say that traditional music (*kugak*) is the spirit of the nation.