

PARK, CHAN E. *Voices from the Straw Mat: Toward an Ethnography of Korean Story Singing*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. xii + 339 pages. Illustrations, figures, glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$44.00; ISBN 0-8248-2511-X.

Comparatively little has been written in English about *p'ansori*, the Korean genre of narrative songs performed by one singer and a drummer, with the latter providing vocal encouragements and responses as well as the rhythm. The scarcity of scholarly attention to *p'ansori* is surprising, for with its highly developed vocal techniques, dramatic expressiveness and texts that are a fascinating blend of the sublime and the very, very down-to-earth it is one of the most characteristic and appealing products of Korean culture. The studies that have appeared in English mainly have dealt with the "classical," pre-modern phase of *p'ansori* (Marshall Pihl) and with *changgük*, an early twentieth-century adaptation

of *p'ansori* intended to make it fit a more Western theatrical format, with several singers playing the roles of individual characters in the story (Andrew Killick). *Voices from the Straw Mat* takes the story further to the present day and provides a different perspective. Its author, Chan Park, has unusual qualifications. An academic with a PhD from the University of Hawai'i, she also is a skilled performer of *p'ansori*, and moreover has created English-language adaptations of pieces of the *p'ansori* repertoire for performance in the United States. In her native Korea she has actively participated in debates among performers and scholars concerning the course *p'ansori* should take to remain a vital form of art. This personal involvement in the practice of *p'ansori* naturally predisposes her to choose a "performance-centered approach" for her study.

The book is divided in two parts. The first part is essentially historical. In Chapter One, "Locating Kinship," Park attempts to sketch out the complex genealogy of the genre, which supposedly arose in the eighteenth century and came to flourish in the nineteenth century, borrowing both from shamanic traditions as well as from Confucian elite culture. In the second chapter, she describes how upper-class patronage and coaching of singers contributed to the gentrification of *p'ansori* in the nineteenth century, the time also when the first attempts were made to put the texts, which initially had been oral, into writing. The development of *ch'anggŭk*, to which Park assigns "the critically modern task of reconstructing tradition on the modern stage," is the subject of the third chapter. Chapter 4 deals with thematic continuities between the old, classical repertoire and newly created pieces. The latter have sometimes been nationalistic, praising national heroes who resisted Japanese encroachments, such as Yi Sunsin, the admiral who defeated the Japanese at the end of the sixteenth century, or Yi Chun, the secret envoy King Kojong sent to an international Peace Conference in The Hague in a failed attempt to prevent annexation. In the last quarter of the twentieth century new pieces frequently dealt with the struggle against South Korea's authoritarian regimes. Examples are the *p'ansori* adaptations of the narrative poems of Kim Chiha, or a "*p'ansori* requiem" for the victims of the Kwangju massacre of 1980.

The second part of the book is about the actual practice of *p'ansori*. It first discusses how *p'ansori* is learned (Chapter 5), and how the learner digests and internalizes the lessons of the teacher (Chapter 6), with intriguing details someone who had not practiced the art would be unable to furnish. Chapter 7 deals with gender and the consequences of the late nineteenth-century innovation that allowed women to sing *p'ansori* in general and the implications this had for the interpretation of the canonical narratives in particular. Because *p'ansori* is a performing art, the audience is an integral part of the performance, particularly in the original setting, in which the singer from his position on the "straw mat," not from a raised stage, is closely confronted with the public, who with their shouted responses make an essential contribution. In Chapter 8, Chan Park discusses the audience in the light of changes in performing practice over the years, lambasting recent overly self-conscious efforts to stick to "authenticity" that testify to the demise of the tradition rather than its vitality. The final chapter, "The Cross-Cultural Voice" is the most personal. Here Chan Park writes about her own attempts to make *p'ansori* meaningful to audiences in the United States, by using English and inserting local references. She suggests, and not without justification, that perhaps this has brought her closer to the singers of the days before *p'ansori* became a canonized National Cultural Asset, who reached out to communicate with the hearers rather than merely providing an iconic rendering of a classic.

*Voices from the Straw Mat* fills several lacunae in the English literature on *p'ansori*. It is, moreover, an engaging read, not least because of the strong personal voice of the author, which marks every page. The author's intimacy with the subject yields amusing anecdotes and telling details, and extensive quotation of *p'ansori* texts allows readers

unfamiliar with the genre to get a taste of its verbal art. In certain respects, however, it disappoints somewhat. Compared with the literature in Korean, it is not always very original, particularly in Part I. In some ways, the book also contains both too little and too much. Many issues are briefly touched upon without going into the problematics in detail. Too often the author prematurely concludes a discussion of current theories with a personal judgement that is mainly speculative or rests on insufficient or unconvincing evidence. I regretted this most in the chapter on gender, where it remains quite vague in what ways exactly *p'ansori* after the introduction of female singers served, as Chan Park claims, "as a voice for Korean women's feelings, emotions, thoughts, worldviews, and artistic sensibilities." On the other hand, some of the references to academic theories and comparative studies are little illuminating and could very well have been omitted. It should be added that the text is not as free as one might wish of inaccuracies, particularly in details that are not directly related to *p'ansori*. The patriotic Yi Chun, for instance, did not commit suicide (a popular myth, but a myth all the same) and went to The Hague in 1907, rather than 1906. Despite these reservations, however, I shall be happy to recommend *Voices from the Straw Mat* to my students.

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