Expressing Confucian Culture Through Kagok Songs and Their Kisaeng Performers

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In contemporary Korea, there are two quite different types of vocal genres and both have the same Sino-Korean name of kagok (歌曲). The first kagok genre encompasses songs written since Pongsŏnhwa (Balsam Flower. 1919). Most Koreans recognize these diatonic style songs as kagok. The second kagok genre is a type of traditional song cycle accompanied by a chamber ensemble, in which the poems (sijo), are related melodically but not textually. This kagok used to be called Mannyŏn changhwanjigok (萬年長歎之曲) which can be translated ‘Songs of ten-thousand-years of joy.’ The origin of kagok is traced back to the lyric songs, Chŏngkwajŏng samgigok (鄭瓜亭-三機曲), in the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). Chŏngkwajŏng samgigok almost disappeared in the seventeenth century because of its too slow tempo. The fastest part (saktaeyŏp) of the song was transformed into kagok.

Kagok was enjoyed by kisaeng and the male literati (sŏnbi) at private parties (p’ungnyubang) in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910). During the parties, literati composed poems (sijo) on kagok’s texts in terms of their experience and social ideology of Confucianism. They sometimes sang kagok, otherwise, professional kagok singers (kagaek) and professional male musical instrumentalists (yulgaek) were invited and gave performances.

The civilizing process during the Chosŏn period has been extensively discussed elsewhere; briefly, the Confucianizing process--conceived and launched by state officials--aimed at transforming society and state in accordance with a Neo-Confucian moral vision. Kagok music-making was no exception.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how musical aspects of kagok were integrated with social and cultural aspects of the Chosŏn dynasty on the basis of neo-Confucianism (Confucianism), which was the national ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty. The following musical aspects will be examined to meet this purpose: kagok’s philosophy, vocal quality, vocalization, the performance position, texts and performance order. In addition, kagok singers, kisaeng will be introduced as professional musicians, poets and artists.

1. PHILOSOPHY OF KAGOK

The philosophy of Kagok music has undeniable ties to Confucianism, which embodied the sense of the performers and esthetic sensibility of the Confucian society during the Chosŏn dynasty. From the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty Ye權 (rites or rituals) and ak樂 (music) was emphasized as the practical method to control the people for the
Confucian society. This musical belief was called Yeak sasang (‘Ideology of rituals and music’).

In Sejong sillok (Annals of King Sejong) [1418-50], the purpose of music for the literati in the Chosŏn dynasty was based on Confucianism: it was to cultivate human nature to the loftiness of sainthood by blending the spirit and men into one, to create a universe where heaven and earth are in one accord and a cosmos in which yang [representing the sun, male, right and day aspects] and yin [representing the moon, female, left and night aspects] exist in perfect balance. It originated in China and was adopted by the Chosŏn dynasty to control the people.

The concept of ‘perfect balance’ in Sejong sillok was also adopted from one of the Confucian classic texts ‘Zhongyong.’ It literally means ‘middle-common.”

The ultimate! These songs are straightforward, but not overbearing. They wind about but do not bend over. When pressing near, they do not crowd; when moving afar, they do not drift away. They move, but within bounds; they repeat but do not bring boredom. They make one attentive but do not make one worrisome. They are enjoyable, but not in an uncontrolled fashion. They are useful, but not consuming; they are vast, but not shouting; giving but not wasting. They are taking without hoarding, managing without smothering, forthcoming, but not dissipating.

As it was stated, the main function of early music was to promote moderate behavior and contribute to a smooth functioning of the state. In addition, music was treated not as a sounding art but a broad ethical concept, which is called p’ungnyu ŭmak. In order to achieve the goal of music’s ‘perfect balance,’ kagok has been adopted Confucius virtues.

2. VOCAL QUALITY (ŬMJIL)

The Korean word ŭmjil (ŭm-sound jil-quality) refers to a singer’s timbre, dynamics and volume, which can be translated as vocal quality in English. The ŭmjil of female kagok is so clear, light and soft that the sound is peaceful, lyrical and thin in texture. It does not produce a soubrette or dramatic coloratura sound. These sounds are produced more orally than nasally. Hong Won-ki, for example, did not allow either male or female kagok singers to make nasal sounds.

In female kagok, timbre change appears very often between the chest sound and

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4 Hwang Hyung-ki 1985: 32.
5 Woskin, Kenneth De 1982: 23.
falsetto. The falsetto technique is used in only female kagok songs, which have the softer, lighter and brighter tone. The falsetto sound is produced above middle F in the vocal range; on higher notes, the head sound ensures singers sing more softly. Otherwise, the notes below middle F are produced by the chest.

[Plate 2: Chosŏn yŏnŭi siksa (Women’s supper in the late Chosŏn dynasty) painted in 1902 by Joseph de LA Nézière]

In contrast, male kagok never used falsetto techniques in singing but the chest sound was always used. Using the chest sound makes the singers sing with a louder voice, especially at a higher pitch. A strong and powerful sound can be produced from the chest resonance. Males in the Chosŏn dynasty were strongly encouraged not to be weak, light and passive but strong, brave and active. The roles of men and women show a rigid distinction in the Chosŏn dynasty. A good example is the rule that males and females do not sit together, after they reached the age of seven. (Namyŏ ch’ilse pudongšŏk) This aimed to prevent personal contact between men and women outside marriage. In addition, family members even husband and wife did not have a meal together in the upper and middle classes; males had meals in their room, each with portable dining tables, which were always served by female servants or wife. Females had meals together with only females.

The above painting was painted by a foreigner in the late Chosŏn dynasty. The totally different dining custom from a Western country probably looked strange for the foreign painter. It is natural that differing gender roles also affected the vocal style of music-making, in accordance with society’s expectation at that time.

The ‘flow’ of kagok singing was often described as being like a spring breeze, a green willow tree or the sleeves of a robe. All of these images express not artificial beauty but natural beauty and harmony. Consequently, female kagok requires neither the higher pitches of the soprano, nor a very low sound. The vocal range of kagok is not wide, around two octaves, which is a comfortable sound for kagok singers and audiences.

3. PRONUNCIATION OF KAGOK TEXT

Cho Soon-ja, the Korean Intangible Cultural Asset of Kagok, often reveals that the singer’s mouth is never opened wide, and her lips always cover the teeth during kagok singing. The singer’s mouth gradually changes shape during her singing. This movement is able to prevent to produce the sound from the hard palate, because it requires the mouth to be wide open. Hong Won-ki also explains this technique in his female kagok notation book. The strong sound of syllables such as ‘kka’, ‘ppa’ and ‘jia’ from the hard palate should be sung on the soft palate, sounding like ‘ga’, ‘pa’ and ‘ja’.

The gradual change of singer’s mouth technique affects the pronunciation of the diphthongs and double vowels in the text. They are sung by gradually separating the two vowels. For example, the word ‘toego’ should be sung as ‘to-i-go’ in the first section of the first song of the kagok han pat’ang and t’aep’yŏng is sung as t’a-i-p’yŏ-u-ŏ-ŏng in the first two syllables of t’aep’yŏngga.

6 Hong Won-ki 1981: 23.
7 Joseph de LA Nézière. (French painter), from his collection of paintings L’Extrême-Orient en images 1904.
10 Hong 1981.
The reason that the female sound is especially not strong and coloratura but soft and light, is again related to Zhongyong, ‘perfect balance.’ Confucian governments, as in the Chosŏn dynasty, emphatically inhibited extremes of behavior. Women in the Chosŏn dynasty were meant to be passive and avoid behavioral extremes: they were not allowed to shout or make eye contact with older people and men. They were required to be calm. Even women’s footsteps should be silent. The following extract shows how Confucianism was firmly entrenched in women’s lives during that time.

According to Confucian morals, women could not stroll in their garden or venture out during the daytime except under certain conditions. Two of the conditions were receptions for royal visitors or Chinese envoys, and welcomes or farewells for family members on trips. To see off and greet members of her family was an expression of affection and therefore could not be prevented. As a rule, women were allowed in the streets only at night, after the men were restricted to their homes by a 9 P.M. till 2 A.M.

When she went outside the house, a woman had to veil her face. She was not to be seen by men who were not close relatives . . . Considering such social conditions, it was not surprising that women’s social life in the Yi [Chosŏn] dynasty was limited to special groups and occasions. Most involved gatherings of neighbor women or relatives on special occasions such as the New Year festival, the Full Moon festival, and birthdays.11

4. VOCALIZATION (PALSŎNG)

Although the female kagok singer’s voice is not very loud or strong, the sound itself is always clear and conveyed with tension during the long phrases. While singing, it is important not to push the sound out of the mouth, but keep it resonating within the body, usually for thirty seconds, for one breath. In order to do this, long breaths are essential. The longest breath in female kagok is around one minute and twenty seconds, through three syllables, in the slowest song, p’yŏngjo Isudaeyŏp, of kagok han pat’ang. To sing a long phrase within one breath, singers required special training in breath control.

During the breath management of singing, a singer should keep a physical equilibrium. “To be skillful, a voice user must learn to maintain equilibrium between the mechanics of airflow regulation and vocal-fold resistance to the air in order to accomplish precise coordination between the two.”12 In kagok singing, this physical equilibrium should accompany the emotional equilibrium, which is one of the important goals of kagok singing. Emotional equilibrium is also the aim of music learning in Confucianism, which is the cultivation of human virtue. Yi Sŏng-ch’ŏn described equilibrium as one of the aesthetical characteristics of Korean traditional, classical music.13

In the Chosŏn dynasty, women, especially, required enormous patience, which was one of the essential ethics. They had to keep ‘the rules of conduct for women.’ In order to keep these rules and to follow the traditional idea of seven evils ‘Ch’ilgŏjıyak’, women were prohibited from disobeying parents-in-law, bearing no son, committing adultery, jealousy, carrying a hereditary disease or garrulousness, otherwise they would be expelled from the home. They were not allowed remarriage for their life span, although, upper class Korean men maintained several wives, and it was possible for an ordinary man to remarry.14 Women were not allowed to be jealous of their husband’s concubine but should suppress it. Emotional equilibrium is the result of patience and refinement from anger,

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sorrow and joy. Kagok's long breath control requires enormous patience as well, which led to emotional equilibrium.

5. THE PERFORMANCE POSITION (CHASE)

During the Chosŏn dynasty, the overall image of the woman was ‘natural,’ ‘soft’ and ‘light.’ The ideal, beautiful, Korean woman had very thin, light eyebrows, a small mouth and slim and narrow shoulders. As can be seen in [Plate 1], during the Chosŏn dynasty, the beautiful woman was neither active nor smiling. In the picture, her face is bent slightly down and her eyes are also downcast. This appearance corresponds to a kagok singer on the stage whose eyes are downcast with the head slightly bowed.

[Plate 1: Huwon yeowon (After Garden Party) in the eighteenth century. female kagok singing accompanied by komungo]15

The performance position, chase, is considered to be an important aspect in kagok singing. Hong Won-ki emphasized: “To be skillful in singing, kagok singers should sit on a floor with the right posture and peaceful face, tightening the lower abdomen area. Even if a singer is very talented and has a good voice, he/she cannot make a good sound without kagok’s authentic posture.” The performance position of kagok follows the Korean traditional living style, that is, to sit on the floor without a chair. The actual sitting position between male and female singers is again different. Male singers traditionally sit in a fixed cross-legged position with hands on their thighs. Female singers sit with their right knee bent up in front of the chest and the left leg folded under the right. The hands are folded over each other on the raised knee. This was the typical sitting position for women even in everyday life in the Chosŏn dynasty, and it is sometimes carried through to the present day. The following photo of Cho Soon-ja and her teacher Yi Chu-hwan at a recital in Japan, in 1964, shows this performing position.

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The above woman’s posture seems tense, introverted and passive, but the male’s position seems more relaxed and positive than the woman’s one. Passive social customs of women in the Chosŏn dynasty affected every manner of women’s lives including their clothes and sitting postures.

Today, however, Cho Soon-ja rejects the traditional woman’s performance position for two reasons. Firstly, the women’s performance position makes singers’ breath control difficult because the body shape is too tight to breathe. Secondly, today there is no reason for women to have such passive manners. The human rights situation between men and women in today’s Korea is one of equality.

6. KAGOK TEXT

Vocal music can more closely express social attitudes and the cultural and individual experiences of its creators, than instrumental music because of the texts (noraetmal). Kagok also reflects the social attitudes and customs of the Chosŏn dynasty through its texts. Today, kagok’s texts have been researched under the Korean traditional poetic genre ‘sijo.’

Ethnomusicologists such as Alan Merriam, Bruno Nettl and John Blacking emphasized the importance of studying the text of songs. “One of the most obvious sources for the understanding of human behavior in connection with music is the song text. Texts, of course, are language behavior rather than music sound, but they are an integral part of music and there is clear-cut evidence that the language used in connection with music differs from that of ordinary discourse.”

The illustrations of the literati and kagok singers’ main interests and the attitudes of the Chosŏn dynasty in the text are obvious. Through the texts, kagok became especially the vehicle of female emotional expression, because other ways of emotional expression were very limited under Confucian society. Outside the palace, the literati and kisaeng both enjoyed not only the beauty of nature but also extra liberties. These arts were regarded as the literati’s p’ungnyu which symbolized nature and freedom. The following

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table shows an analysis of such typical subjects in one suite for both male and female kagok songs in Kagokpo (The kagok notation book) by Yi Chu-hwan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sadness of waiting</th>
<th>Enjoyment of life</th>
<th>Chinese tale</th>
<th>Appreciation of nature</th>
<th>Prosperity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 songs (53.3 %)</td>
<td>3 songs (20 %)</td>
<td>2 songs (13.3 %)</td>
<td>1 song (6.6 %)</td>
<td>1 song (6.6 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Table 1: The analysis of the subjects of female kagok]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patriotism</th>
<th>Bravery</th>
<th>Enjoyment of life</th>
<th>Chinese tale</th>
<th>Appreciation of nature</th>
<th>Prosperity</th>
<th>Diligence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 songs (30.7 %)</td>
<td>3 songs (11.5 %)</td>
<td>9 songs (34.6 %)</td>
<td>2 songs (7.6 %)</td>
<td>2 songs (7.6 %)</td>
<td>1 song (3.8 %)</td>
<td>1 song (3.8 %)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Table 2: The analysis of the subjects of male kagok]

The table above shows that the themes of texts are strongly related to their personal emotions, full of intimate feelings (usually in relation to love, to nature, to self-pity) rather than social or political propaganda. The most popular subject of female kagok songs was ‘the sadness of waiting for their lovers.’ This subject occupies eight of the fifteen songs (53%). This fact reflects kisaeng’s miserable life style. They longed for their lovers, who visited them only occasionally and then left without warning. This circumstance were often observed in Korean poetry in classical Chinese (Han’guk hansi) and kagok anthologies. One Korean literature scholar thoroughly analyzed kisaeng’s identity and receptive femininity through the Korean poetry in classical Chinese, which were written by kisaeng and their lovers. Composing poems and singing kagok were the vehicles of expression of their insight and concerns. In Kogûm kagok, their sorrows of separation were dealt with three different levels.

In contrast, male kagok songs convey ‘enjoyment of life’ (34.6%), ‘patriotism’ (30.7%) and ‘bravery’ (11.5%) instead of ‘sadness of waiting’. Patriotism towards the King was the first priority of a male’s life, but the expression of their love towards females, as elegant literati, was almost forbidden in the Chosôn dynasty.

7. THE PERFORMANCE ORDER (YÔNJU SUNSÔ)

Kagok songs are collected together in han pat’ang and sung in a predetermined order like a ‘suite’. The fifteen female kagok songs which make up kagok han pat’ang can be divided into three major groups (songs 1-4, 6-9, 10-14) with a bridging song (song 5) and a final song (song 15). The first group of four, the original kagok songs, (1.Isudaeyŏp, 2 Chunggŏ, 3. P’yŏnggŏ, 4. Tugŏ) are sung in p’yŏngjo mode. The second group of four, also original kagok songs, is in kyemyŏnjo mode and these have the same titles as songs 1 to 4. The third group consists of more recent songs which have longer texts than the original songs. The tempo is faster than the original songs, except for the final song (song

18 Park Yong-mun 2003: 26
20 Kawamura, Minato 2002: 100.
This is in a slow tempo and has a tranquil mood. These fifteen songs are sung without a break.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Isudaeyŏp</td>
<td>One beat = 20</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Chunggŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 25</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. P'yŏnggŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 30</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tugŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 45</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Panyŏp</td>
<td>One beat = 80</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo + Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Isudaeyŏp</td>
<td>One beat = 20</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Chunggŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 25</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. P'yŏnggŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 30</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Tugŏ</td>
<td>One beat = 45</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. P'yŏngnong</td>
<td>One beat = 50</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo + P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Urak</td>
<td>One beat = 55</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Hwan'gyerak</td>
<td>One beat = 55</td>
<td>P'yŏngjo + Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Kyerak</td>
<td>One beat = 60</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 P'yŏnsudaeyŏp</td>
<td>One beat = 75</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. T'aep'yŏngga</td>
<td>One beat = 45</td>
<td>Kyemyŏnjo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Table 3: Order of female kagok han pat’ang]

The overall performance order of kagok shows that there is a gradual tempo increase from one song to the next, until the last song, which is in a slow tempo. This is achieved by the quickening of tempo within each group of songs. The tempo increase is related to the idea of the Korean literati. They considered that a slow-paced life style was elegant and a faster one was vulgar or frivolous. For example, the literati only walked slowly with their hands folded behind their backs because they considered themselves elegant and intelligent people, different from ordinary people.
The first song, ‘Isudaeyŏp’ is in the slowest tempo of kagok (twenty beats in a minute), and represents their dignity and grace. Chun Inpyong also described the aesthetical view of music in the Chosŏn dynasty as follows:

If a person is to be a gentleman (Kunja), music and morality always have to be present in his daily life. Music has to be used for personal mind control and as a vehicle of enlightenment for the citizen . . . Music has to be always in a slow tempo and have peaceful melodies. Music in fast tempo and with loud sounds should be treated as lascivious music."

As the singers become more involved in the kagok performance, they experience more emotional and physical warmth. This results in an increase in tempo and is seen as reflecting the literati’s relaxation of their social and political morals. The tempo of the third group (songs 10-14) is faster than the first and the second group. The fourteenth song can be considered the climax of kagok han pat’ang.

The finale song ‘T’aep’yŏngga’ is sung in a tranquil mood. Its tempo is dramatically reduced. It decreases from seventy-five beats to forty beats per minute. The text is about the prosperity of the nation. The Korean musicologist, Chang Sa-hun depicted p’ungnyubang phenomenon as follows.

Kagok was often enjoyed by the literati during a banquet with alcohol. Initially, in spite of starting to sing, the literati’s attitude is still stiff with tension because of their social position. As the appreciation of songs increases, the party atmosphere loosens and there is an increase in warmth and laughter. As they became more involved in kagok, they became more drunken and more ‘human’ in nature. They forget their social position and begin talking about humorous tales and sexual innuendoes. They enjoy the feeling of freedom as an everyday human being. However, the literati could not return home without dignity and grace, so they must revert to their slow pace of life. This reflects their dignity and courtly manners.22

8. KAGOK SINGERS, KISAENG

Little research has been done on the origin of female kagok and singers (kisaeng,) although a lot of research has been done on male kagok and the music itself. Kisaeng were called talented ladies (kinyŏ, ki means talent and yŏ means female), or artistic talents (yegi, ye means arts and gi means talent), before the Japanese colonization. In spite of kisaeng’s great contribution to kagok as singers, composers and audiences, they were marginalized in Korean traditional music history. In addition, it is extremely hard to find any record of female kagok singers in kagok’s old manuscripts and anthologies.

Kisaeng have been researched by Korean literature scholars through the traditional tales and their literature, rather than by Korean musicologists. Louise McCarthy researched kisaeng in the Koryŏ period in her Ph.D dissertation through the analysis of the traditional poetry book, Tongguk Yi Sanggukchip by Yi Kyu-bo.23 There are few and limited publications in English on the subject. If research focused on kisaeng not only on its association with entertainment, even prostitution, but on the fact that many of the women were important musicians, poets and artists, the education of kisaeng and their works would become critically valuable. Much of the music written at this time was created, performed and appreciated by those members of kisaeng themselves.

21 Chun Inpyong 2000: 120-121.
CONCLUSION

Anthony Seeger stated that singing was “part of the social reproduction.” Kagok, the classical vocal form, is part of the social reproduction of the Chosŏn dynasty. Kagok sound alone is not the most significant aspect. The philosophy and social context in the Chosŏn dynasty were equally important. More than any other genre, kagok, which was the most loved, contained the aesthetic views of the elite social group (literati and kisaeng) of the Chosŏn dynasty focused on Confucianism.

In this paper, kagok’s aesthetics in conjunction with musical sound, vocal quality, musical form, vocalization and timbre have been explained. Unique vocal qualities clearly relate to female roles in the Chosŏn dynasty, and female vocalization is similarly related to the social ethics of Confucianism (such as avoiding loud sounds and therefore using falsetto techniques).

The different aesthetics of Korean traditional music were often only described through abstract theories from old Confucian references, without showing musical examples. Therefore, in this paper an analysis of the above features (vocal quality, musical structure, text, vocalization and performance posture) went some way to rectifying this.

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