Young Musical Love of the 1930s

Min-Jung Son (Department of Music and Art, Daejeon University)

As Korea adopted a Western modern life-style and social values during the colonial period, Koreans began to develop a unique urban art and culture. Among others, popular music, called *yuhaengga* (lit., music in fashion), was one of the crucial cultural productions young urban bourgeoisie were enthusiastically involved in. Unlike rhythm-oriented Korean folk music, *yuhaengga* absorbed Western orchestration and melody-centered musical idioms. Female performers preserved traditional singing styles, such as heavy vocal inflections and nasal sounds, whereas male singers produced their voices with operatic vocalization to emulate Western art singing performance practices. While *yuhaengga* was a newly invented cultural production of modern Koreans, it also provided a cultural space in which Koreans re-articulated their traditional cultural identity reflecting on modern values.

Here we focus on three questions: (1) how did Koreans appropriate foreign musical idioms for their local demands? (2) how were *yuhaenggas* produced in these specific circumstances? (3) how was *yuhaengga* related to Japanese *enka*? This essay will firstly deal with how this particular modern music became a national expression where Korean aesthetics, emotions, and ethos were embodied through the analysis of several hit songs of those times, including Ko Pok-Su’s 1934 hit song, “Living Away (T’ahyangsari)” and Lee Nan-Young’s 1935 hit, “Tears of Mokp’o (Mokp’oui Nunmul).”

In doing so, this essay will also interrogate the music business system of the major recording companies in the 1930s. The companies signed exclusive and hierarchical contracts with lyricists, composers, and star singers. Examining the social backgrounds of those who were involved in this business, we can find out several interesting issues to be mentioned. Each recording company had a booking manager, called *munye pujang*, who was usually a famous lyricist. The lyricists were mostly intellectuals who received higher education in the cities, while singers, particularly female singers, did not. The gender difference in terms of their social status will be examined in connection with the sonic characteristics and performance practices.

Lastly, this essay will entangle the political debates over the national identity of *yuhaengga*, which asserted that it originated from Japanese *enka*. Enka, however, was not even coined as a term up until about 1973, Nippon Columbia, a major enka-producing company, categorized what are now considered enka as *ryūkōka* (syn., *yuhaengga*) (Yano, 2002:210). Strictly speaking, *yuhaengga* might have closely been related to *ryūkōka*, not *enka*, a strategically invented national music. Furthermore, the relations between *yuhaengga* and *ryūkōka* were not unilateral: Koga Masao (1903-1978), the father of *ryūkōka*, spent his early life in Korea, and was deeply influenced by traditional Korean music; Korean *ch’angga* (lit., song), the early version of *yuhaengga*, originated from the Japanese *shōka* (syn., *ch’angga*). In other words, each region produced its own locally negotiated music, expressing local people’s words, emotions, ethos, and performance practices, even though the sonic elements were not clearly differentiated.

Min-Jung Son currently teaches Music and Art at Daejeon University in Korea. She earned music degrees from Seoul National University, and a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology from the University of Texas at Austin in May 2004. She subsequently was appointed as a Post-Doctoral Research/Teaching Associate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her publication includes World Star Musics (Eumaksekye, 2009) and The Politics of Tūrot’ū (Eumaksekye, 2009). Her forthcoming book, Female Experience in Music-Theater during the Modern Period, sponsored by Korean National Research Foundation, is scheduled to be published in 2012.