

The Misfortune of Pansori and a Story

I was born in Gimje at the western coast of Jeollabuk Province. At the time society was still very traditional. The place was 216 kilometres away from the train station, so the local culture remained rather untouched. I didn't see a train until I was an adult. There were no cars that would come into town. Only airplanes flew overhead sometimes. All the people were farmers. There were no machines, so they worked manually all year round. From time to time they sang songs and played music for various occasions and seasons. When there was a festival they called performers and asked them to perform pansori. I grew up witnessing shaman rituals to exorcise the ghost when someone had died drowning.

In the past there was no recording practice of folk culture in Korea. The scholars were mostly Confucian who chronicled historical facts related to Confucianism or Confucian personalities, but they did not write down much about pansori. That is why we have to search for the facts by visiting the historical sites.

Shamans practiced their trade in different regions. In the eastern coastal areas fishermen often held ceremonies to attain large hauls. Shamanic music was very unique. For my research I visited Busan and all the eastern coastal areas because at the time shamans still existed along the coastal areas. I went to Tongyoung and Jindo for several times. In the past shamans lived even in the Buan region, which is close to our village and I interviewed them repeatedly.

Today however, everyone has died already, there is no one left. In Chungcheong Province there used to be three, Sookmos and Lee Yeon Ryeo lived until recently. I investigated shamanism in that region but after she had died there was nobody else left. Lee Youngho lived in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, he came from a family of three Sookmos. He was also a famous leading performer, which gave me the opportunity to learn how performers used to act in the past. However, after Lee Youngho died there was no one left to give a firsthand account.

I travelled a lot in order to explore folk songs. Until then I had thought that arirangs were all alike but during my research in the Gangwon Province area I found out that originally arirang was used as a working song and disseminated orally, while in other regions arirangs are just sung as popular folk songs.

In the beginning pansori used to be part of larger open-air performances that also included acrobatics and dance. Many ordinary people came to watch them. Later on however, during the Joseon Dynasty, pansori became more artistic. It was performed on a stage independently from other show elements. Its content and accompanying music changed to please upper class society. As a consequence, seven of the twelve original episodes disappeared. The last one to disappear was the story of Heungbo-ga. More than any other pansori Heungbo-ga portrays the lives and feelings of ordinary people, including their humour and jokes in a rather realistic fashion. In fact, there was a lot of abusive language in the original Heungbo-ga, much closer to the way ordinary people talk than the version known today. Nowadays, as pansori is performed in the theatre most of the swear words have been removed. During open-

air performances however, some of it gets used. The Heungbo-ga pansori is based on a folk tale widely known in the eastern region. It recounts that good people will prosper while the bad ones will perish. It tells the story of someone who helps an animal and in return is rewarded with fortune by that animal. And it features things that emerge from a gourd.

The singers who use curses and slang expressions are called aniri performers. Their counterparts are the voice performers who in the late Joseon Dynasty were socially acknowledged while aniri performers were dismissed.

As mentioned earlier, Heungbo-ga targeted ordinary people, while a more educated audience in Joseon society would not have appreciated it. Thus, it was not performed for the upper classes. Popular pansori in the last years of the Joseon period were the Jeokbyeok-ga and the Chunghyang-ga, both stories set in upper class society. Also accepted by those circles was the Simcheong-ga, a story about a filial daughter.

However, as society got modernized and social boundaries became permeable Heungbo-ga revived. While there are other pansori that include abusive language, certain characteristics of Heungbo-ga are unique. [...]

Do you feel like telling the story?

I am not a pansori singer.

[...]

After the villain Nolbo got introduced the story begins with him chasing away his good brother Heungbo. The way in which the song portrays Nolbo's behaviour does not suit upper class etiquette. Nolbo's ill nature is exaggerated to show the audience how mean evil people really can be. You would not find that in other pansori. Heungbo-ga highlights Nolbo's role as the villain through his vicious behaviour, contrasting it with that of Heungbo who has the opposite character and becomes prosperous in the end. Actually, there are no details given about Heungbo's good deeds. It is only mentioned that he cured the broken leg of a swallow.

As the story goes, Heungbo comes to a village of poor people who accommodate him. A range of comical episodes describes the lives of ordinary people. Originally the parts about the hard times Heungbo has to live through included a lot of coarse language that was later removed. There is one story about him getting whipped, which reflects Heungbo's low social status.

Then the tone of the story changes radically. A monk arrives in the village and a house is being built. With the appearance of the monk lyrics and bright songs replace the crude jokes. The scene is completely different from the earlier ones. After that, not much abusive language is used anymore.

In the following a swallow appears and lays an egg from which a fledgling hatches. The baby swallow drops from the nest, its leg is broken. Heungbo cures it and the recovered swallow leaves for Gangnam [Jiang Nan]. A sad song follows. It is

mournful because Heungbo is deeply saddened about the parting of bird he had grown familiar with. So he sings a somber farewell song.

We know that the swallow originates from warmer regions. However, in the past it was established that it came from Gangnam, south of the Yangtze River in China. It was said that it flies there and returns via China. The song of the swallow's journey describes how the bird carries some gourd seeds through China back to Namwon in Korea.

Musically it is very complicated. The original rhythm was: 1-2-3, 1-2-3; 1-2, 1-2; 1-2-3, 1-2-3; 1-2, 1-2. However, there are many changes. [Singing:] *Looking at the mountain through a vain sky*. The rhythm keeps changing. It later... [Singing:] *The leaving boat* changes to: 1-2-3, 1-2-3. So it's very difficult to sing, since originally it had three different beats, but now there are many parts with two beats only. It is a very famous song, but it's very hard to play the drum to it... [Singing:] *The boat that goes to Eocho Dongnam*: 1-2-3, 1-2, 1-2. It's very difficult to sing because the rhythm keeps changing.

The swallow returns and drops the gourd seeds in front of Heungbo. Heungbo sows the gourd seeds that the swallow had dropped and the growing plant generates three gourds. He uses a saw to open the gourd. The song of *The Sawing Moon* is performed as a working song or folk song, while musically it is very refined and composed elaborately. At first, he saws the gourd slowly like this... [Singing:] *Slowly and by stealth*... When the gourd is open two boxes emerge, one of them contains rice and the other one money.

The song does not simply mention the collection of both money and rice, since that wouldn't be very funny. Instead, the scene is described in a fast rhythm to express how the gourd is being harvested without thinking. Pansori normally cannot go that fast [Singing:] *Heungbo spins with joy*. However, if it is sung that fast people may consider it realistic. Heungbo who was starved and had neither money nor rice suddenly became a rich man. But first he had to eat all that rice. It would be less hilarious, if the song only described that he ate a whole mountain of rice, so the lyrics state that all the rice pots of the village were filled and piled up as high as a mountain. And instead of saying that his family ate the rice, it depicts how they actually climbed into the pots in order to eat. It's not said that they were satisfied after finishing the rice, since that wouldn't be very funny either. To put it another way, after having been hungry for a long time they are incapable of eating a lot of rice all at once.

In the past the audience would laugh at this point. Today however, the scene has been changed. Since Heungbo had enough to eat now, the next a scene is about clothing. While the first gourd produced rice, the second one generates silk. It would be less amusing if it were just said that some silk came out. Instead, the song goes on about various kinds of silk employing lots of different melodies... [Singing:] *Various silks appear*... In the past there used to be so many kinds of silk with different colours and patterns. The songs list a huge range of silk cloth that emerges from the gourd, making the audience feel excited about the joy of such wealth. To make the scene fun it is described at some length. [Singing:] *The loud silk. The world is chaotic and noisy*.

From the third gourd workmen emerge who then build a large, tile-roofed house. The gourd is opened slowly, the workmen come out and in the next scene the house has been built already. First clouds are still covering it but when they clear a palatial building becomes visible. The accompanying song is performed in a high-spirited tone... [Singing:] *Hill sky...* to stress the grandeur of the house. This is where the description of Heungbo's life comes to an end. Then Nolbo reappears. All the scenes featuring Nolbo are comical. He visits Heungbo, receives a Hwachojang chest and sings a Hwachojang ballad. He then returns to his house where he waits for another swallow to drop from its nest. However, since it's early spring no swallow appears, which is why he asks some people to catch one for him. The song in this scene is a hunting song, performed with the tune of a military march... [Singing:] *I go to catch a swallow!* The song is witty and compellingly realistic.

The story goes that Nolbo ends up breaking the leg of a swallow. Upon this a new gourd grows from the seeds the swallow had brought back. However, what emerge from this gourd are disasters. Various groups of people come out of a bag in the gourd such as a travelling theatre company, a group of exorcists dressed in drag for court ceremonies and a band of singing beggars who insist on staying in Nolbo's house, giving unsolicited performances and then ask to be paid, etcetera. Here the bad feelings and resentments of ordinary people toward upper class society and social inequalities are expressed. They are overcome when Nolbo is being punished by the things that emerge from the gourd. Then Jangbi [Zhang Fei] appears on the scene to demand that Nolbo becomes a good person. In the end Heungbo and Nolbo make up with each other. While it is a simple story, if the scenes were performed realistically, it might have helped to dissipate the pent-up resentments of ordinary people at the bottom of the social ladder. This is why ordinary people perceived Heungbo-ga as a very jaunty pansori.

Lee Bo Hyung talking to Che Choe, Olaf Hochherz, Lina Persson and Elke Marhöfer, Seoul, 2009.