



The Popularization of *Gugak*: A Case Study of the MIJI Project, a *Gugak* Girl Group

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Abstract

As an aspect of cultural policy, the Korean government has made efforts to popularize Korean traditional music, *gugak* (“national music”). One way of doing so has been to offer financial support for *gugak* groups. MIJI, a *gugak* girl group, is one of the beneficiaries of this support. On the basis of the government funding, in 2008 the LOEN Entertainment Company began to manage the group in 2008. However, in 2010, the group was considered unsuccessful in achieving its original goal of providing a successful model of a *gugak* band by the scheduled year, 2011. In 2012, the group nevertheless became active again. An analysis of the project and its processes reveals the present situation of *gugak* in Korea and the problems involved in its popularization. Furthermore, through this process we are able to gain insights into the role of the Korean government in the promotion of *gugak*, through the long-term measures the government can take to popularize *gugak*; for example, by developing projects to connect performing music artists with the pop industry in a sustainable way, by increasing *gugak* programming in mass media and by strengthening *gugak* education in school.

KEYWORDS: *gugak*, government, Korea, popular music, MIJI

Introduction

Korean traditional music, or *gugak* (“national music”), is not popular among the general public in Korea. The main reasons for this are related to the country’s recent music history of colonization and modernization. With the introduction of

Western music in the 19th century, Western music came to dominate the preferences of the upper classes and even became regarded as the only meaningful form of music, while indigenous music was regarded as the music of the lower classes. Throughout the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953), the majority of Korean popular music demonstrated strong Japanese and Western influences.

After the Japanese occupation of Korea ended, mid-twentieth century, Korean governments made several attempts at reviving and preserving *gugak* as a way to re-establish Korea's national identity. Previous governments,¹ from the first republic of 1948 till present, promoted traditional performing arts in their cultural policy. There was increased interaction between the government and the people related to *gugak*, such as musicians and producers, in order to emphasize the cultural value of *gugak* as one of the fundamental traditions of grass roots Korean culture. In 1962, the government established the Intangible Cultural Property System for the preservation of cultural heritage, such as *gugak*. Also, in response to the demand from *gugak* practitioners, the government gradually increased coverage of *gugak* songs in primary school music textbooks, all of which are designated by the government. This accounted for a total of 40% of the content of the music textbooks for first and second year classes in 1997 (So 2008: 912).

In response to increasing globalization during the 1980s, a process that accelerated musical exchange across national borders, the Korean government expanded its cultural policy to include all forms of popular culture to its already extensive programs in the preservation of traditional culture (Yim 2002: 47). The government began to pay more attention to the economic value of culture and arts, especially when the popularity of Korean popular cultural products started to surge in Asia during the late 1990s. Korean popular music (called K-pop in Western countries), together with Korean drama and movies, was one of the main elements of *hallyu* ("the Korean Wave").

In 2006, seeking to expand *hallyu* in a sustainable way, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism supported the development of the HanStyle² in six fields: Korean language, food, clothing, paper, housing, and music (*gugak*), which were regarded as essential to traditional culture. These fields were found lacking in self-dependency and, thus, in need of strategic support (Um 2008: 474-475). The Korean government started to promote *gugak* as one of the six fields, with a focus on traditional forms of music and more contemporary versions (Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2008: 175). It provided lavish funding for festivals of fusion *gugak* in which *gugak* is often blended with Western classical and popular music, to keep traditional music alive and to create cultural products for commerce (Sutton 2011: 17). Gugak FM, a radio station promoted by the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, was established in 2001 in order to spread *gugak*. The station played not only traditional *gugak* but also fusion *gugak* with the primary aim of popularizing *gugak*. These projects, which attempt to globalize and commodify *gugak* as a product, manufactured for both domestic and international consumption, have become part of the government's agenda.

One example of these projects aimed at popularizing *gugak* among younger generations was the MIJI project wherein the government provided support for a *gugak* girl group, called MIJI. The members had previously been trying to join the ranks of K-pop; LOEN Entertainment, a company that was also involved in K-pop,

took on management of the group in 2008 (Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism 2009: 28). However, the MIJI project ended in 2010 when the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism decided to stop supporting the group and the management company dropped them. It seemed that the group was doomed. However, in 2012, after a long break, the group came to be managed by a new entertainment company and became active again with a variety of performances including an appearance on a popular music TV show on MBC, one of Korea's main TV networks. By 2014, MIJI appeared on Star Avenue, one of the most popular entertainment programs of CCTV (China Central Television; Lee 2014).

The story of the government-initiated MIJI project shows the current state of *gugak*, which, while not commercially of high value or an easily distributable commodity, remains "an agent of state hegemony" (Howard 2008: 361). This project also shows the dilemma faced by young *gugak* musicians in transculturation as Korea grapples with "the tension between past and present" (Bhabha 1994: 175). For the purpose of this discussion, I follow Kartomi's approach to musical transculturation, which refers to a process of musical transformation by intercultural contacts (Kartomi 1995: 233). A dilemma is presented in the current state of Korean traditional music and its ongoing process of musical transformation caused by intercultural contact with the West, because in the process of musical transformation, *gugak* receives official support as a symbol of national identity within a post-colonial capitalist state dominated by Western culture and in the shadow of colonialism.

This article will analyze the government-supported project that connects *gugak* musicians with the popular music industry. It does so through interviews with the directors of MIJI, an MBC TV producer and MIJI band members, as well as other relevant musicians and officials. In addition, through a focus on the MIJI project, it is possible to address the problems involved in the popularization of *gugak*. Finally, the project is evaluated as a short-term measure to support popularization of *gugak*. On the basis of this analysis, several long-term solutions are suggested in the context of further governmental support.

The formation and activity of MIJI: *Gugak* girl group

Park Seung-won was the mastermind behind the formation of the MIJI group in 2008. After majoring at university in *piri* (a double reed wind instrument, like an oboe, but made of bamboo) Park started to work for LOEN Entertainment (formerly Seoul Records) in 1994. LOEN is one of the largest record companies in Korea. He was in charge of recording not only *gugak* but also pop music. In my interview with him (2011), Park said that while working at LOEN, he realized how small the *gugak* market was compared to that of pop music. He then decided to promote and sustain *gugak* within the popular music industry. Later, as a director of the *gugak* division, he applied for government funding for the so-called Star project.³ Since no *gugak* performer was widely known through Korea, the Star project aimed at developing a *gugak* star group for the popularization of *gugak*. The Star project came to be also called as the MIJI project, whereby MIJI refers to "being unknown" in Korean. Shin Yong-ho (2010) reports that in September 2008, through a complex auditioning process, seven members were selected. Between

them, the group members played both the traditional 12-stringed *gayageum* (long zither) and a modified 25-stringed *gayageum*, as well as a *piri*, a *daegeum* (large transverse flute), a *sogeum* (short transverse flute), and a *haegeum* (two-stringed fiddle). One year later, in October 2009, a female vocalist, named Kim Bo-seong, joined the band. After joining the team, the members received rigorous musical training to enable them to play Western style popular music on their Korean traditional musical instruments. No Korean traditional percussionist joined the group; instead, to provide stronger rhythmic impact, a Western-style drum set was invited.

The music of MIJI was composed for both Korean traditional and modified musical instruments. However, the group made use of Western tuning rather than traditional tuning. Park Seung-won (2011) believed that use of melodies based on the traditional *gugak* scale would present difficulties in moving listeners emotionally, since they are not yet sufficiently familiar with their own traditional music. His idea was similar to Kartomi's assumption that, in musical transculturation, it is even harder for an intangible musical scale to transcend historical and cultural boundaries than it is for the musical instruments, as tangible objects, to do so (Kartomi 1981: 244).

LOEN Entertainment arranged for popular music composers such as Lee Ji-soo and Jo Young-soo to work with MIJI. Lee was the music director for the TV drama series *Winter Sonata*, which became a great hit and an important factor in the spread of the *hallyu* ("Korean Wave") across Asia, and for successful movies including *Lady Vengeance*, *Old Boy* and *Silmido*. Jo has composed for such *hallyu* stars as SG Wannabe, Shinhwa and Lee Seunggi. By employing composers who had previously successfully composed music for *hallyu* products shows the influence of *hallyu* on MIJI (Sung 2009: 47). This differentiates MIJI from other fusion *gugak* groups such as Gong Myoung⁴ and Sangsang,⁵ whose members often compose their own music (Lee 2003: 193).

In December 2009, MIJI's first album, *The Challenge*, was released with ten tracks of instrumental music, and two ballad-style songs titled "Heunoni" and "Ibyeorae". The music employs a variety of elements, including Western music styles, such as jazz, tango and pop ballads, played on both Korean traditional musical instruments and Western orchestral instruments, which were added during the recording process. The titles of seven of the twelve tracks are in English. They can be grouped into two categories based on the songs' themes. One category is a dynamic and idealised image of Korea evoked through a combination of the unique tone color of Korean traditional instruments, upbeat rhythm of Western percussion, and the sustaining sound of a synthesizer, as in pieces like "K.new", "The Chaser", "Chowoneui Baram" ("Breeze in the Field"), "Vivid Rainbow", and "Silver Sky". The theme of the other category is romantic love and heart-breaking farewells, as in songs such as "Heunoni" ("Longing for Someone"), "Geuriumi Gipeoseo" ("Deep Nostalgia"), "Love Letter", "Ibyeorae" (or "My Farewell Comfort"),⁶ "Romantic Tango", and "Valediction". The final piece, an exception from the pop hybrid style, is an instrumental work with a light melody and rhythm which is an arrangement of the anonymous folk song "Gunbam Taryeong" ("Roasted Chestnuts Song") from the early twentieth century.

FIGURE 1: A photo of MIJI for press release (Kang Young-ho 2009).



Im Jin-mo, a popular music critic (LOEN 2010: 21), holds a positive opinion of the MIJI album as a new *hallyu* brand. He focused particularly on three pieces from this CD. One was “The Chaser”, in which the sound of Korean instruments was prominent in spite of being accompanied by the Western orchestral sound of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra; another was “Geuriumi Gipeoseo”, which he described as “deeply sad which is typically Korean”. And the third was “Heunoni”, which, like K-pop, is a vocal piece. Im believes that today people need to recognize not only the musicians of traditional *gugak* but also those of new or pop *gugak* (Gugak FM 2012). It should not be a matter of either traditional *gugak* or new *gugak* as both are needed for the diversity of *gugak*. According to Im, new *gugak* can be interpreted as an enrichment of traditional *gugak* preservation; as Bruno Nettl (1983: 346) states, new music of the world is constantly undergoing change through international interaction.

By contrast, Hahn Dong-yun, a popular music critic and selection committee member for the Korean Pop Music Awards, has criticized MIJI for not bringing more traditional music into their playing and for limiting themselves to mostly Western-influenced Korean popular songs. In his blog, he complains that MIJI is not concerned about artistic achievement and primarily seeks popularity and commerciality:

The MIJI songs were created with the aim of better communication with the masses. They do sound familiar, however, they irritate since they resemble popular songs too much. [...] Bent solely upon popularity, they seem to have lost their identity. It is like they sold their spirit to the devil, blind with gaining popularity. [...] In the MIJI album *The Challenge* there is no intention to

compete with the contemporary popular music; but their purpose is in fact to join them. (Hahn 2010)

He continues that, “in the MIJI album *The Challenge*, there is no ambition to popularize traditional *gugak* but only a sales gimmick to make the group known” (ibid). According to him, fusing *gugak* with Korean popular songs is not a challenging job but is rather an easy way for the musicians to join the arena of popular music. To him, the first priority of fusion *gugak* should be creativity based on authentic *gugak*. Fusion *gugak* should keep the identity of *gugak* as different from popular music and should have artistic value as an art piece as well.

Hahn’s criticism of the music of MIJI represents the narratives in Korea on traditional *gugak* as one of several pure or authentic indigenous forms and as an invaluable asset to be preserved from foreign influence (Sutton 2011: 5). Sutton points out that in Korea, fusion *gugak* tends to be considered a problematic product that greys out cultural purity. In this type of discourse, the musicians of fusion *gugak* are not expected to follow or copy commercially oriented popular songs. Instead, they are expected to have an artistic and even national duty not only to spread an appreciation of *gugak* but also to creatively move beyond traditional *gugak* (Sutton 2009: 40). Park Seung-won (2011) ignored criticism of those like Hahn Dong-yun, leading MIJI to join the popular music industry. First, he categorized MIJI’s first album *The Challenge* as *gayo* (“popular song”), not as *gugak*. It sold about 3,000 CDs in the first six months, while the Sookmyung Gayageum Orchestra, which dominated *gugak* bestselling charts, sold less than 300 for the same period in their debut back in 1994, according to Park, who worked for production and distribution of both. Additionally, in March 2011 MIJI released a music video of their digital single *Unbelievable*, a combination of Korean pop song and R&B featuring a guest appearance of the *hallyu* star Kim Jin Ho from K-pop group SG Wannabe.

The MIJI group used the mass media to promote their work. The TV programs in which MIJI appeared include *Nollaun Daehoe! Star King* (“Star King”, 6 February 2009) of SBS; *Gayo Daejejeon* (“Great Show of Pop Music”, 31 December 2009); *Show! Eumak Jungsim* (“Show! Music Center”, 30 January 2010) of MBC; *Music Bank* (29 January 2010) of KBS; and *The M* (24 and 27 January 2010) of MTV. MIJI appeared on music programs and talk shows just like Girls’ Generation,⁷ a popular female K-pop group, had done. Though MIJI could have used Gugak FM (a radio station sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism dedicated to the broadcast of *gugak*) the group preferred network TV over both cable TV and radio⁸ because network TV has higher viewer ratings. People seeking to make themselves widely known often place priority on TV over radio as MIJI did.

To attract TV viewers, the MIJI members were encouraged to present a “classy” and “sexy look”, similar to the popular stars that viewers are used to, and for a period things went well for MIJI: Jo Young-soo’s composition “Heunoni”, a song from their first album, was ranked within the Top Ten for a week on the MelOn website (2011). MIJI was selected to perform the music for the documentary *A Journey in Search of Korea’s Beauty* (2011) produced by Bae Yong Joon, who had played the lead in *Winter Sonata*. MIJI was also chosen to play the music for the original sound track of *Sin Gisaengjeon* (“New Tales of Female Entertainers”), a

TV drama with a viewer rating of 28.3 percent (Naver 2011). Park Seung-won attributes the MIJI's success in working with popular programs on mass broadcast media to the fact that the group had appeared in many network TV shows with high viewer ratings.

MIJI was labeled the "Korean Equivalent to 12-Girls Band", which refers to a Chinese pop-traditional fusion instrumental music ensemble, in one of Korea's major journals (Shin 2010). Park Seung-won (2011) says that, "when he launched the MIJI project, he benchmarked the Chinese 12-Girls Band". He turned MIJI into an act that was different from the Chinese music group, whose members are all instrumentalists, by adding a singer to the group, allowing the group to perform songs similar to other *hallyu* music groups. KBS World (2010) explicitly linked MIJI and other similar *gugak* fusion groups to pop music girl groups, saying that "amid the renaissance of girl groups in the K-pop scene, they have transformed their image as the Girls' Generation, a K-pop female idol group, of the traditional music genre".

The project intended to turn MIJI into a successful model for popular *gugak* bands by 2011. However, in April 2011, before the band achieved this goal, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism decided to stop sponsoring MIJI. According to the Ministry's representative, Park Jeong-gyeong (2011), the Ministry evaluated the group's musical ability as being insufficient for continued support. Park Seung-won (2011) told me during our interview that he did not agree with the Ministry's decision; he insisted that "you should not judge the new *gugak* pop group members by the same standards that you use for the holders of Intangible Cultural Assets or venerable traditional *gugak* musicians". Park added to this that hardly any group succeeds with their first album.

MIJI earned no small fee for their work "as a *gugak* group"; however, it was not enough for each of the seven members and even less for the company. The group's income was not up to the standard of the pop music industry in Korea. Without the government's support, the company would not have started the project of managing the band. The LOEN company subsequently closed the division of *gugak* in December 2011. Park Seung-won quit the company and has since worked as a freelancer. According to him (2012), LOEN had a sixty percent national market share of *gugak* CDs in Korea before the closure of the *gugak* division. LOEN's departure from the *gugak* market with its large share signaled that even fewer *gugak* CDs would be available to the public.

In August 2011, MIJI was transferred to another company, Mask Entertainment, and the number of members was reduced to five; vocalist Kim Bo-seong left, having been scouted by a company named C3 Entertainment. The CEO of Mask Entertainment, Jeon Hye-joon, quit the company and established a new company, First Entertainment, in July 2012, which began to manage MIJI among others. During interview, Jeon (2013) explained that, "though the group was not profitable, I decided to manage the group because I believe that a popularly-styled *gugak* group should exist". Under the management of First Entertainment, MIJI entered the scene once again with an appearance on TV. In September 2012, MBC, one of Korea's major network TV channels, arranged a regular slot in a pop music show entitled *Show! Eumak Jungsim* ("Show! Music Center") for a *gugak* fusion group to play in collaboration with a popular music group.

MIJI's appearance in *Show! Eumak Jungsim* was arranged by an MBC producer, Pang Seong-keun. Pang (2013) says that he had produced, out of sympathy for its lack of popularity, a few *gugak* programs in 1995 and 1996 with a patriotic motivation and an artistic interest in *gugak*. Those program series lasted only roughly one year due to low viewer ratings.⁹ Around twenty years later, when he came to hold a position as executive managing director of the entertainment division at MBC (controlling programming for the music shows), he ordered a young producer in charge of *Show! Eumak Jungsim* to arrange a regular slot for a *gugak* fusion group to play in collaboration with a popular music group. The *Show! Eumak Jungsim* is a long-running show, broadcast weekly since 2005. Pang found MIJI suitable for the program. The slot for MIJI lasted four months, during which popular music was rearranged for *gugak* instruments. However, Pang was not satisfied with the result, critically commenting that when MIJI played in collaboration with pop music groups, the MIJI members did not stand out; in short, they were unable to attract the audience with their own uniqueness.

Nevertheless, according to Jeon Hye-joon (2013), the current MIJI manager, the performances in the show made a positive effect on the group:

Through their collaboration work with popular musicians, the MIJI members familiarized themselves with popular music more than before. They came to enjoy themselves more when they were on the stage. However, it is still not easy to maintain the group because it is not profitable.

In February 2013 MIJI released their single entitled *Oriental Blue* with three songs by famous composers, including Yu Hae-jun, the composer of the main theme music for *Winter Sonata*. Then, as recently as August 2014, the group appeared in one of Asia's most popular entertainment programs, *Star Avenue* of CCTV (China Central Television), where such K-pop idol groups as Exo and Kara appeared. This gave them their chance to become known in China. As the first Korean *gugak* group appearing on *Star Avenue*, MIJI played music in collaboration with a Chinese female fusion group called Amethyst Band (NEWSis 2014). This might have been a chance for them to get one step closer to the individual members' dreams of joining K-pop.

The process involved in development of the MIJI project points out the existence of cultural producers, such as the band managers Park Seung-won and Jeon Hye-joon, and the radio producer Pang Seong-keun, each who have both a patriotic and artistic motivation in their efforts to popularize *gugak*. It is different from the image that tradition purists have of people in the pop music industry as people motivated by commercial greed (Edensor 2002: 22). While the commercially oriented management company stopped managing the team, Jeon Hye-joon (2013) said that he would not leave MIJI, which still has a long way in its struggle for popularization of *gugak*.

A dilemma in popularization of *gugak*

Although largely ignored by the general public since the beginning of Korea's Westernization and industrialization, *gugak* is slowly increasing in popularity.

With efforts by some cultural producers and government officials to incorporate *gugak* into the mainstream, a *gugak* department in the college of music in Seoul National University was established in 1959. Being part of the curriculum of the most renowned academic institute in Korea improved *gugak*'s image.

In the 1990s, with the Korean economy strengthening and with society diversifying, to people searching for something new, *gugak*, along with Korean traditional breathing or meditation, became an alternative to the contemporary culture, which was largely Western. In 1993, the film *Seopyeonje* depicted a family of *pansori* (epic narrative song) musicians. The movie became a historical landmark when it set a new record at the box office. It was seen by more than one million people within six months of its opening (Willoughby 2003: 119). The following year, 1994, was designated by the Korean government as the "Year of *gugak*". The "Year of *gugak*" campaign succeeded in sparking people's consciousness of *gugak* by increasing its exposure. For example, four times more *gugak* performances were held this year than in the previous year. However, these projects, such as those using *gugak* in national ceremonies and in school activities, failed to bring *gugak* into everyday life and to sustain or even increase people's interest in *gugak*, which was the whole point of the campaign (Kim 1994).

Gugak was gaining more attention from an increased number of people, but still not sufficiently from the general public. The different types of *gugak*, from court music to folk, came to be regarded as high culture, under the protection of the government, rather than as the low culture of the majority; ironically, before the introduction of Western music to Korea, *gugak* was the only music (Edensor 2002: 5). None of the forms of *gugak* are yet commercially viable. According to Jung Chang-kwan's *gugak* website (gugakcd.kr 2012), about 230 *gugak* CDs were released in 2011 in Korea, but sales were much weaker than globally styled pop music CDs. Park Seung-won (2011) says that "for every *gugak* CD sold, 200 CDs of popular music are sold. This ratio excludes other types of music, such as Western classical". Statistics show that the gap between CD sales of *gugak* and that of popular music is even bigger than the ratio Park had mentioned; in 2010, sales of the top one hundred *gugak* CDs amounted to 27,430, while sales of the top ten popular music CD reached 1,373,419 (Korea Creative Content Agency 2012; the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2011: 29).

Fusion *gugak*, with its elements of Western classical and popular music, sells better than traditional *gugak*. According to a survey by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (2008: 63), the bestselling album from 2008 through 2010 was not a CD of traditional *gugak* but of fusion *gugak*. It was *For YOU: Best Collection 2006* by the Sookmyung Gayageum Orchestra. The CD contains arrangements of well-known popular and folk tunes for modified 25-stringed *gayageum*.¹⁰

The next important issue is: who are the players of fusion *gugak*? They are mostly graduates from *gugak* schools most of whom focused on traditional *gugak*. Many of them choose to play fusion *gugak*, crossing the boundaries of the repertoire of the traditional music, out of musical interest, so that their instrument does not remain as something for the museum only but for everyday life. Still, others pick it up as a second choice. According to Kim Su-jin (2011), a survey by Busan National University carried out in 2011 showed that 81 out of 112 students

were considering becoming fusion *gugak* musicians based on economic considerations since one can hardly make a living by playing “traditional” (non-fusion) *gugak* unless one belongs to a government-funded public or private *gugak* orchestra. Approximately 1,000 musicians graduate universities majoring in *gugak* every year in Korea and there are about 180 active *gugak* fusion groups.

One would expect such artists to have the same attitude about their career in music as popular musicians do, but, as mentioned previously, *gugak* musicians, including those in MIJI, tend to be more patriotically motivated than commercially oriented. Kim Bo-seong (2011), the former vocalist of MIJI, stated during our interview that

some people might think that I earned money from the *gugak* activities in the popular culture industry. In reality, I am paid only a small amount of money. I do not do this for money. My motivation is the popularization and promotion of *gugak*.

As can be seen in the comment of Kim Bo-seong, who had originally dreamt of joining a K-pop group, there are echoes of nationalism contradictory to the goals of commercially oriented music. In the mind of young fusion *gugak* musicians, *gugak* is not something that can be turned into a commercial advantage, bought and sold (Taylor 2007: 281).

In terms of feelings for the traditional music of their country, young *gugak* musicians are different from the average youth of Korea, the main consumers and performers of pop culture here. Jim Dator and Yongseok Seo (2004: 39) described the average youth as

cynical about nationalistic perspectives of the older cohorts regarding pop culture and Hanryu [*hallyu*] and their peers make up the majority of the performers. [...] For them nationality and the origin of a cultural product are not important as long as they are satisfied with the sensitivities and emotions, and there is no such thing as a cultural periphery inferiority complex.

Park Seung-won (2011) criticized MIJI members and *gugak* musicians in general, not for their musical abilities but for their passive attitudes to popular music.

Most *gugak* artists differ from those in popular music as they tend to be treated as “artists” in contrast to pop singers who admit that their life as pop stars depends on popularity with the masses, and to pursue this end they will do whatever necessary to gain popular following, even changing themselves again and again to meet the demands of the populace. *Gugak* musicians pander less than pop musicians in pursuing this goal of being popular, which weakens their competitiveness in the world of popular music in Korea.

Similarly, Pang Seong-keun (2013), the MBC producer, criticized that, “*gugak* musicians tend to be self-content with their own music which they stick to conservatively”. What makes *gugak* musicians patriotic, conservative and less aggressive in pursuing their goal? Yang Hyo-sook, a member-musician of the National Namwon Gugak Center, comments in my interview with her (2011):

Most *gugak* musicians have a tendency to be spoiled like children who grow up over-protected. *Gugak* musicians of the older generation tend to teach young ones to be proud of being artists of high culture, whereas in the past they were looked down upon and found it difficult to feel proud of themselves. By promoting pride in the younger generation, they are able to compensate for their past inferiority complexes. One effect on the young *gugak* musicians is that they become too proud of being “national artists” to have a healthy sense of modesty.

Yang notes that the protection of the government works like a green house where young *gugak* musicians grow away from the real world; their growing process as the present national artists is deeply influenced by their masters, each who had inferiority complexes about the past. So the young apprentice *gugak* musicians have a tendency to combine with *gugak* the memory of the poverty or hunger of the old *gugak* master, while the average young music consumer, with no such memory of poverty or hunger, explores the new world of pop culture beyond limits (Dator and Seo 2004: 32-33).

In this environment where young *gugak* musicians do not have a chance to be exposed to the real life of the music industry and its market, they are ignorant about the rather complex nature of popular music. Contrasting Blacking’s opinion that “popular music is nothing but music that is admired by people in general” (Blacking 1981: 13), popular music is a fluid mix of Western and Japanese influences, one that *gugak* students have not been introduced to in the university *gugak* departments (Yun 2008). Kim Dae-jin (2012), director of the project division at the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Foundation who worked on the MIJI project with LOEN and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, adds that

It will not be easy for young *gugak* musicians to succeed in the popular music industry since they have lived in the small world of *gugak* like plants in a green house. They do not have experience enough to prepare them for living in the tough world of music industry and market.

According to Yang, Yun, and Kim, the influences on *gugak* musicians’ attitudes are rather complex and sophisticated. Whereas the musicians of popular music focus purely on the artists and the entertainment aspect of music, *gugak* musicians additionally consider social elements. They bear in mind the unique historical and social issues of *gugak*, which in colonial period was lower than that of the currently dominant Western style of music. Further, they are conscious of the fact that *gugak* has come to be protected and promoted by the government as a symbol of national identity in the post-colonial period.

There is an opinion that *gugak* musicians need to be more creative and imaginative, and to overcome the problems caused by the elitist circle of the *gugak* community by breaking down the wall between *gugak* and popular music. Park Seung-won (2011) advises that, “*gugak* musicians, in order to be successful, need to consider the demands and needs of the masses with their varying tastes” (Lang and Engel Lang 2009: 1017).

This brings forth the issue of the various roles of the government in the popularization of *gugak*, including the Star project connecting *gugak* and popular music industry, education, and mass media.

Role of the government in the popularization of *gugak* and education

Nettl (1983: 299) argues that governments tend to regard themselves as the owner of the culture's music, a commodity that can be controlled, and the Korean government's attempts to manage *gugak* is not unique. Furthermore, such cultural support and protectionism is not a new phenomenon. For example, throughout the dynasties of China up to the twentieth century, many types of music were state-sponsored and supervised as an ideological issue (Yang and Saffle 2010: 97). In Korea, music has long been managed by national institutes, such as Jangakwon (Royal Music Institute) of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910).

In the twenty-first century the Korean government initiated the Star (or MIJI) project as a way of building upon the Korean wave through the promotion of contemporary traditional culture. This became an issue. The government's support for MIJI was controversial and far from unanimously approved. Researcher Park Jeong-gyeong (2011) says that, "the support for the Star project was viewed as favoring a specific group". The government supported MIJI for three years, from 2008 to 2010. Three years of government support for one group was considered excessive when there were about 630 traditional performing arts groups in Korea, all in need of support (Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2011: 6). Actually, though, the support was too short for MIJI to achieve their ultimate goal. The MIJI project was not about promoting the activities of one existing group; rather, from the very beginning it was about the formation of a new group by involving the training of the inexperienced performers. Considering the fact that the selection of the MIJI members, including the vocalist, was completed only in October 2009 and the first CD was released in December 2009, MIJI's real activity with the support of the government and the management of the LOEN company amounted to only about one year (as opposed to the planned three years) which is too short to guarantee a successful debut in the pop music industry.

It is difficult to predict whether a group will ever acquire star status in popular music or not. Tim Edensor (2002: 14) says that,

[...] rather than a conspiratorial science where producers plot how to conquer markets by persuading the masses to consume their products, making and marketing culture is an inexact science. For instance, record companies are unable to second-guess the tastes of consumers, as is indicated by the numerous failed investments which are made in unsuccessful artists and musical products. The "hit record" remains an elusive prize.

This project, which in its nature was likely to need longevity to reach its goal, was evaluated every year by the government since it received funding. Considering it

is a government funded project, logic would compel evaluation every fiscal year no matter how long it may take to achieve its goal, which, in the case of MIJI, is to reach stardom. In my interview with Kim Dae-jin (2011), he said that, "when the government is involved, the bureaucratic process tends to become an issue". According to him, when things move fast, as in the pop music industry, the delay caused by bureaucratic processes may become a hindrance to the project. Government bureaucracy and the nature of popular music projects tend to be at variance with each other.

Among all the controversy and contradiction, one thing for certain is that the band MIJI still survives and is developing from its foundation as a relatively short government support project under the short but strategic management of LOEN company. There are many other teams in need of the same kind of support. Therefore, as an alternative, Song Hye-jin (2012), the Director of Sookmyung Gayageum Orchestra, suggests that the government should avoid selecting one single group, partner specialist, or company, as in the case of MIJI, and to develop projects connecting *gugak* musicians with pop music industry specialists. In this way, Song suggests that the government will be able to give a number of groups and specialists equal and open chances to meet each other and work in collaboration in the long term.

There is another measure, a long-term measure, which the government could take to popularize *gugak*. This would be the education of a potential audience and consumers of the commodity of *gugak*. Although the government gradually increased *gugak* songs in primary school music textbooks, it turns out that most teachers do not teach the songs since they had not learned those songs when they were young and, thus, do not feel confident about their own performance of *gugak*. Currently, most music teachers have majored in Western classical music in school. They are in the majority, while teachers who have majored in *gugak* are rare. So, though the government has taken many different educational measures to promote *gugak*, these measures have not worked well. According to Lee Inwon, director of the Korean Gugak Education Institute, there are those in the *gugak* community that say that the government should make a rule to hire more people with a background in *gugak* as music teachers (Lee 2008).

The last but not least important long-term measure the government could take is in the area of mass media. According to Blumer (1985: 12), mass media are powerful tools in approaching the populace, particularly those consisting of individuals from a heterogeneous background. The Korean government has used mass media for popularization of *gugak*, for example through its establishment of Gugak FM in 2001. However, according to Chae Chi-seong (2013), CEO of Gugak FM, most producers that work in network TV and radio do not feel any obligation to play *gugak* since it has low viewer ratings. Therefore, Pang Seong-keun (2013) insists that, "to popularize *gugak*, government should require a specific amount of exposure of *gugak* to be broadcast on TV and radio". Then, *gugak* programming on the main channels of TV and radio will give more opportunity to *gugak* musicians to make themselves known to the public, and this, in turn, would help the public to familiarize themselves with *gugak*.

Conclusion

The unpopularity of *gugak* among the Korean people is mainly a consequence of the prioritization of Western music in schools and its wide availability in mass media. This is not to say that people and institutions related to *gugak*, including government, schools, and mass media, have ignored *gugak*. On the contrary, the government, in particular, has played an important role in at least the preservation of *gugak* through favorable cultural policies. Nevertheless, its popularity still lags behind that of Western-style pop music. The government realized this and, when it saw that Korea's traditional culture was rediscovered globally, supported the *gugak* group MIJI through its Star project in order to support *gugak* and its musicians more actively.

This case study of the government-initiated MIJI project shows that the present situation of *gugak* musicians is a tug of war between old and new and between traditional and popular music culture. We also see that, among the average youth of contemporary Korea, there is less attachment to their ethnic heritage. Having suffered through the government's increased but still inadequate support and its bureaucratic interference, along with the confounding ways of the pop music industry, MIJI struggles on, under the leadership of just one single cultural producer striving for the popularization of *gugak*.

In the long run, MIJI may or may not become more popular. MIJI is just one of several young *gugak* groups that combine *gugak* with popular music. There are many other active groups currently that have creativity and individuality, and the spectrum of *gugak* groups is widening. However, with *gugak*'s many years of estrangement from the general audience in Korea, it will take more time before the tensions between *gugak* and other agents of our music culture are resolved and a possible "new unity" is achieved (Kartomi 1995: 245). *Gugak* must find a way to deal with its limited commercial viability and with uneven government support to make it viable.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my appreciation to MIJI's former manager, Park Seung-won, and present manager, Jeon Hye-joon, for sharing their knowledge and experience and allowing the use of a publicity photo of MIJI. I am grateful to my interviewees for giving permission to cite identifiable extracts from the interviews that were conducted as part of the research towards this publication. I also thank the MBC producer, Pang Seong-keun, the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Foundation Projects Division Director, Kim Dae-jin, and Professors John Holstein, Roald Maliangkay, and Ruth Mueller for their helpful comments.

Endnotes

¹ The first Republic of Korea (1948-1960), headed by president Rhee Syngman, stressed national culture as an essential element in state policy. In the regime that followed, under president Park Chung Hee (1961-1979), traditional performing arts were specifically included, a policy that continues to this day.

² “HanStyle” was coined by the Korean government, combining “Han” (Korea) and “Style” (manners or rules). The word embraces Korean traditional culture as a source of Korean culture today.

³ The Star project was a part of a larger project of the Korea Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism entitled Creating Digital Contents of Korean Traditional Arts. There was no Star project before MIJL.

⁴ Gong Myoung, meaning “resonance” in English, consists of four men. The band has been playing its own creations, mostly using percussion and wind instruments made of bamboo, since its formation in 1997.

⁵ Sangsang is a soloist ensemble consisting of three string players on *gayageum*, *haegeum*, and *geomungo*, who have played together since 2000. The three high school classmates create their music themselves and improvise while playing.

⁶ The original English title of “Ibyeorae” on the CD is “My Farewell Comfort”. However, “Farewell Hill” would be the correct direct translation of *ibyeorae*.

⁷ Girls’ Generation (Sonyeo Sidae in Korean) was formed by SM Entertainment in 2007. SM Entertainment was launched by Lee Soo-man, who played a major role in the production of K-pop hits worldwide. It was one of the most popular girl groups at the time, not only in Korea but also in other Asian countries, including Japan and Vietnam. In 2012, the act also appeared on American TV talk shows, such as CBS’s *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Live with Kelly*.

⁸ According to Chae Chi-seong, CEO of Gugak FM, the average listening rate for Gugak FM was about 2.0 percent in 2013.

⁹ Pang Seong-keun had produced a program titled *Saemi Gipeun Mul* (“Water in Deep Pond”), which focuses on the harmony of *gugak*, popular music and Western classical music. The program started in September 1995; however, in October 1996, roughly one year later, the program was stopped because it was too hard to sell advertising space due to the limited viewer ratings. In 1996 he produced another show, *Cheongsonyeon Eumakhoe* (“Youth Concert”), which had the same difficulty of low viewer ratings, and the same fatal consequences.

¹⁰ There are thirteen pieces in the album: four Beatles’ songs, such as “Let it Be” and “Hey Jude”; two Russian songs (“The Amur’s Waves” and “Katyusha”); a Cuban popular song (“Quizas Quizas Quizas”); the movement “Winter” from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*; two new arrangements of *gugak* folk songs (“Arirang” and “Doraji”), and one new arrangement of a piece by a North Korean composer, “Chosoeui bom” (“Spring at the Guardpost”). The musical focus of the CD is not on the *gugak* tunes but the popular “old” Western tunes such as “Let it Be”. This CD’s “Let it Be” was selected as a theme tune on KTX (Korea Train Express). It shows that the combination of the familiarity of old non-Korean tunes such as “Let it Be” and the unfamiliarity of the sound of the traditional Korean *gayageum* attracts Korean people.

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