A blend of traditional and popular musical forms: The issue of nationalism and commercialism in Korea

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ABSTRACT
The development of hybrid styles by artists of traditional music began to bloom around the mid-1980s in Korea. The so-called fusion gugak [kugak] (“national music”) has pursued contemporaneity and popularity, escaping from the old and conservative images of Korean traditional music. The Korean government has supported the fusion gugak groups with an intention to spread Korean music to young generations and keep traditional music alive. While some are concerned that in fusion gugak the musical grammar and aesthetic order of traditional music are chosen superficially to suit Westernized public taste under the name of fusion, distorting and losing the essence of traditional musicality, there is also an opinion that fusion gugak has contributed to the popularization of gugak as we imagine a Korean popular culture of the future. However, there exists a continuous dilemma of the limited commerciality of fusion gugak, which is caused by the conflict between nationalism and commercialism. The case of MJII, a Korean fusion group, reflects how the two “isms” interact with each other in Korea, where the government promotes a sense of competitiveness within cultural industries in a global society.

KEYWORDS: traditional; fusion; gugak; nationalism; commercialism; Korea.
**Fusion gugak: Blending Traditional and Popular Musical Forms**

In Korea, the development of hybrid styles by artists of traditional music began to bloom around the mid-1980s in a social flow of globalization. According to the music critic Lee So-young (2003, pp. 193-194), fusion gugak is distinguished from other new compositions using instruments and techniques from traditional music, known as changjak gugak (“creative national music”) by nature of (1) the popular, rather than academic, appeal of fusion and (2) the (re)uniting of composer and performer (normally separate in changjak gugak).

Fusion gugak is played mainly by young artists of traditional music who enjoy experimenting with the mixture between Korean traditional music and other music with different origins (mainly Western). Fusion gugak has a variety of musical styles. To identify the wide range of the fusion gugak genre, Sutton (2011), who has been conducting research since 2001 on fusion gugak, tried to classify fusion gugak according to the players’ main musical practice or styles: arrangement of Western classical or widely known popular music, mixing of rock and gugak, combining gugak or gugak instruments with various styles of jazz, and avant-garde fusion.

One of the latest styles is fusion gugak that strongly pursues popularity and shares its musical style with popular music, or K-pop. In this style, composer and performer are mostly separate, which is different from the nature (2) of fusion gugak identified by Lee So-young, as quoted above. The groups representing this kind of fusion gugak play popular style music mainly on Korean traditional musical instruments. According to my interview with MJII, one of those groups, they even want to become like hallyu (“Korean wave”) star groups, which have been a part of the global pop market since the mid-1990s.

**The Popularity of Fusion Gugak and the Korean Government’s Support**

Since Western music was first imported into Korea, it has come to occupy the centre of refined social circles and has been designated as “THE music”, while indigenous music was relegated to the position of “gugak” (“national music”). Korean musical society came to be divided into traditional music, Western classical music and popular music. Korean people didn’t have much chance to listen to their own music and they could not develop a taste for their traditional music. Today, young people enjoy popular music in various styles such as ballads, rock and hip-hop, to which they are often exposed through the mass media. This situation makes gugak unpopular among the general public.

Compared to traditional gugak, fusion gugak is relatively popular. Among around 200 fusion gugak groups, there is Sookmyung Gayagum [Gayageum] Orchestra whose main repertory is arrangements of Beatles’ tunes and Western classical music for a new version of gayageum which has twenty-five strings, bigger than the traditional gayageum with twelve strings. Formed in 1999, the orchestra made headlines with its first joint performance with Korean hip-hop break-dancers b-boy Last For One. CDs by the orchestra have been the best seller in the category of gugak in recent years.
Inhwa: A blend of traditional and popular musical forms

Geared toward promoting “a sense of competitiveness within cultural industries in a global society” (Yim 2000), the Korean government started to engage in promotion with lavish funding for fusion music festivals such as 21C Korean Music Project and the Miriade Wave Festival. As Sutton (2003, p. 228) points out, though the academic discourse on the arts tends to favour the forms of “traditional music” before Western music had an influence, it seems that the government now supports the fusion gugak groups no less than traditional musicians and groups in order to spread gugak to young generations and keep the traditional music alive. In 2008, as a part of a project named Creating Digital Contents of Korean Traditional Arts, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism started to sponsor a fusion music group with eight female members called MIJI with the aim of popularizing gugak to the “masses”.

MIJI: A FUSION MUSIC GROUP WITH THE AIM TO APPEAL TO THE MASSES

MIJI was formed in 2008, first with seven female members playing a traditional gayageum with twelve strings and a modified gayageum with twenty-five strings, piri (oboe), daegeum (large transverse flute), sogeum (short transverse flute), and haegeum (two-stringed fiddle). In 2010, one vocal member, also female, was added. There is no member to play Korean traditional percussion, since players of Western percussion are invited to provide a strong rhythmic impact. In 2010 the first album The challenge (LOEN 2009) was released with ten tracks of pop-style instrumental music and two tracks of ballad-style songs.

One special thing about MIJI is that the group was managed by LOEN Entertainment, which is one of the largest record companies in Korea. LOEN Entertainment arranged for popular music composers such as Lee Ji-soo and Jo Young-soo to work with them. Lee is the music director for the drama Winter sonata, which became a great hit and cornerstone in the hallyu (“Korean wave”) in Asia, and for films including Lady Vengeance, Old Boy and Silmido. Jo has composed for SG Wannabe, Shinhwa, Lee Seung-chul and Lee Seunggi, who are also hallyu stars.

The eight-member all-female ensemble MIJI became known as the Girls’ Generation of traditional Korean music (Kbs World 2010). Girls’ Generation (Sonyeo Sidae in Korean, 少女時代 in Chinese, Shōjo Jidai in Japanese) is a K-pop female idol group, also referred to as SoShi or SNSD. Formed by SM Entertainment in 2007, the group began a foray into the Japanese music scene in late 2010 under Nayutawave Records as a part of Universal Music with the Japanese remakes of their 2009 Korean hits “Tell me your wish (genie)” and “Gee”.

MIJI started to go on music programs and talk shows as Girls’ Generation did. MIJI released the music video for their digital single in March 2011, “Unbelievable” (LOEN 2011), which features Kim Jin Ho, a member of SG Wannabe who is one of the hallyu stars. SG Wannabe is a Korean popular ballad trio that became very popular with its first song “Timeless” in 2004. MIJI was labelled with a headline “Korean equivalent to 12-Girls Band” in one of Korea’s major journals (Shin 2010). 12-Girls Band is a Chinese fusion group which was officially established in 2001.
and cooperated with a Japanese company to debut their first album on July 24, 2003, which had already sold 1.8 million copies (Chinaculture 2009).

MIJI’s first album The challenge (LOEN 2010) was categorized as gayo (“popular song”), not as gugak, and sold more than the CDs of Sookmyung Gayagum Orchestra for six months after its release on 14th of January 2010. However, in April 2011 the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism decided to stop sponsoring MIJI. Also, the management company, LOEN Entertainment, chose to drop them. According to researcher Park Jeong-gyeong, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism evaluated the musical ability of MIJI members as not good enough for support. As for LOEN Entertainment, it claimed that MIJI was not profitable enough.

Figure 1. MIJI, one of the photos for press release (2009).

**Nationalism and Commercialism in Fusion Gugak in the Global Market**

Asian countries each have their own traditional music that is quite different from the others. On the other hand, Asian pop culture such as C-pop of China, J-pop of Japan and K-pop of Korea has grown into a large industry and tends to become transnational, though its national identity is often questioned. In the case of Korea, culture and the culture industry were seen to earn money and boost the national image around the globe.
The fusion gugak groups sell more CDs than traditional music but very much less than popular music. According to Park Seung-won of LOEN, the sales of CDs of gugak represent 0.5% compared to those of popular music (that is, for every CD of gugak sold, there are 200 CDs of popular music sold). This is excluding other music such as Western classical music. Therefore, companies that pursue profit are hesitating to invest money in the fusion gugak groups.

For commercial reasons, the MIJI members were managed to present a sophisticated and sexy look like popular stars. However, most artists of traditional music are different from those in popular music in their way of thinking and approaching the market. They tend to be less aggressive and more conservative in their nature, which makes their success in popular music circles slow or difficult. Also, some critics such as Hahn Dong-yun (2010) complain that the MIJI members are not concerned about artistic achievement but seek popularity and follow commerciality only. Ironically, however, they are not commercial enough for the entertainment companies. That is why there remains this dilemma. It reflects not just a conflict between nationalism and commercialism but a course of interaction between the two, in Korea, where the course of popular music is influenced primarily by the market (Manuel 1987, p. 161) and where the government joins in the discourse, negotiating and compromising with market forces.

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ENDNOTES
1. There are some important factors to be discussed about the MIJI case such as public taste and gugak musicians. I intend to explore these issues in future research.

REFERENCES