



Reviving the Times of Namsadang, Korea's Traditional Folk Performance Troupe, through Children's Stories

(Author/ Lim Jeong-jin) Republic of Korea

1. The Crisis of Korea's Traditional Folk Performance

Through the generations Koreans have joyfully lived their lives with singing and dancing.

While the royal court and the intellectual class considered the liberal arts such as writing poems, playing instruments and drawing pictures important, they also enjoyed the performances of professional folkentertainers as well. Commoners also enjoyed coming together to sing and dance while working and also during the season's holidays.

Passing on cultural assets that reflects a country's native history to descendants is a very important duty. It is important to preserve and protect tangible cultural assets such as architectural works from damage. However, because traditional performing arts can only be preserved if it

is taught, practiced and performed in front of people, so it can be difficult to protect.

The legacy of the traditional performing arts was nearly cut off as Korea entered the 20th century and was colonized by Japan for 36 years and afterwards Korea was heavily influenced by Western civilization

After overcoming these difficulties Korean traditional folk performances are being continued precariously only through professional folk performers. It is now difficult to see images of a joyous community in which everyone in the neighborhood comes together singing and dancing with the sounds of drums.

Korean children's literature authors are putting all their effort into reviving Korea's various traditional folk cultures through books. Thus, on October 2012 the author announced a children's book titled, "*Baudeogi*" based on the experiences of wandering troupe made up of all males, travelling entertainers that specialize in folk performances.

2. Korea's Traditional Folk Performance's Features

1) An Open Stage

In Korea's traditional folk performance, the professional's performance and the public's performance are both done without stages. There were no theaters in Korea's traditional architectural buildings. Even the king didn't build a theater. Considering that Japan and China, both of which always had cultural exchange with Korea, had theaters. This is a very strange phenomenon. Korea's first theater opened in 1909 and was made for performing Western plays.

Most of Korea's traditional folk performances were held in the village's empty lot. In the case of the royal family and the rich who had large houses, professional folk entertainers were invited and the performances were held in the house's wide floors.

Holding a performance at a vacant lot or at a market place signifies that anyone can come and see the performance for free. As there is no need to go to a theater and pay for a ticket to see a performance even the children of poor farmers could joyfully watch the performance. However, these were harsh conditions for folk performers. Performance could be made difficult by the weather and there was no way to know how much money the audience would give them. Also onlookers could disrupt the performance's mood. The performance was also disrupted by heckler's noise as well. It was only the performers who could truly bring joy to the audience that receives the audience's voluntary payment.

2) Communion with the Audience

In Korea's traditional folk performances the performer and the audience could absorb each other's energy. As the stage isn't separated and up high it was a situation in which the performer and the audience could see each other eye to eye. Therefore, the audience could feel just how much effort a performer was making. Also, the audience participated in the performance not only by clapping and cheering but also by yelling words of encouragement or criticism. Thus, the performers would respond properly. Even in *Pansori*, a traditional Korean folk song performance, was considered a failure if the audience was quiet and unresponsive

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In comparison, when Western performances are held on stage the audience had to stay quiet and could only clap during the appropriate at time.

3) Impromptu Jokes

In Korea's traditional folk performance jokes are a very important element in the performance. Jokes are made while spinning dishes and even while performing tightrope dancing. Before performing acrobatic stunts jokes were done to make the audience laugh. Although pre-arranged jokes between the entertainers form the main part of the performance, if impromptu jokes come from the audience, the entertainers will properly react to it. Jokes could be made from the day's weather or the movement of the audience. Although an entertainer's professional skill is important they will only be considered a professional if they are able to make the audience laugh through jokes.

Even in puppet shows where there is much dialogue impromptu jokes are allowed.

3. A Special Traditional Folk Performance Troupe –*Namsadang*

I'd like to introduce the *Namsadang* (wayfaring male entertainers) who area part of Korea's traditional folk performance troupe. There are no records as to exactly when the wayfaring male entertainers were first assembled and active. There were wandering male-only performance troupes as far back during the 8th century unified Silla dynasty. However, it was not until the 1900s that records showed the term '*Namsadang*' being used. Even before the records it is believed that *Namsadang* were assembled and active.

The *Namsadang*' are a gypsy-like wandering troupe that travels from one place to another. All around Korea several *Namsadang* troupes wandered from place to place holding performances. All of the members were male and each had their own specialty like a circus troupe. They rested during the winter as it was too cold to hold outdoor performances and travelled around during the spring, summer and fall holding performances to receive money and food. There were many time when they had to conduct performances since their host fed and sheltered them. There were about 30 to 45 entertainers travelled together and they had clear social structure with subordinates and superiors. Rules and regulations were very strict and in each of the fields the experts trained their younger members.

Although traditionally in Korea it was considered fanciful for the aristocracy to write poems and sing, choosing entertainer as a job was the subject of much scorn. The class in which read books, studied, wrote poems and passed the national civil service exam was the class that received the most respect. The class below that were those who farmed and below that were those who created tools and crafts. Also, merchants and sellers were below that. Shamans and entertainers, butchers, servants and others were considered the lowest class and could not marry ordinary people.

The lowest class of people had no educational opportunities and thus most could not read. Also, since the entertainers were constantly wayfaring even if they were literate they did not have the time to record their activities. The aristocratic class had no reason to record the lives

of the lowest class of people. Therefore, it wasn't until now that the *Namsadang* could be recorded, observed and studied.

Like other traditional arts the *Namsadang* was expelled by Japan during the Japanese occupation period. Also with the Korean War, the existence of wayfaring male entertainers was threatened. After the Korean War, the popularity of wayfaring male entertainers was also decreased due to the influence of surging Western culture (especially American culture) in Korea.

With the influence of films, Western style plays, television programs, video and others audiences gradually lost interest in the traditional arts.

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Fortunately, during the 1980s as income and education levels improved the Korean people began to gradually evaluate the traditional arts as valuable. Unlike the past, those who practice the traditional arts have received traditional arts education in universities.

Currently, the *Namsadang*'s folk performance has been selected as intangible cultural asset by UNESCO and is especially being preserved and studied in Anseong-city. At Anseong city, there is wayfaring male entertainer's hall and every Saturday and Sunday performances are held. The then *Namsadang* members have a stable income and life much like a civil servant, practicing performances as well. Now, the wayfaring male entertainers do not travel around as they used to. Every time the wayfaring male entertainers were used as subject for movie and plays, their popularity has been consistently improving.

4. The 6 Elements of the *Namsadang*

The *Namsadang* performance can be largely divided into 6 parts.

Pung-mul (traditional Korean music played by farmers), *beo-na* (bowl spinning), *sal-pan* (tumbling), *eo-reum* (tight rope walking), *deot-boe-gi* (mask dance) and *deol-mi* (puppet show).

During the *pungmul* stage all of the members participate and playing music. This time they had a parade to attract and gather guests. They walked in a line while hitting a drum as they walked drawing a circle in the shape of whirl wing, as if they were walking through a checkered pattern cloth. They wore conical hats with long strings. They would spin the strings as they went. With exciting music they prepared the mood for the performance.



Doing the pungmul the whole villagers would hear the sound of the music and would gather.

Beona was a performance which involved spinning wide plates. They would also spin trays made from leather and also large bowls as well. Sticks and tobacco pipes would also be used to spin with acrobatic movement all the while the entertainer was making jokes.

Ttangjaeju is a tumbling performance that could be done without tools. Although a straw mat would be placed on the floor there was a real risk of injury. As the tumbling was done with acrobatic skill one of the entertainers would act like, and another would performed skills that seemed foolish.

Tightrope dancing is one of the most popular events. The width of the rope was only three centimeters with a length of ten meters. The rope was suspended at a height of three meters. There is absolutely no safety equipment below the rope. Before the tightrope dancing the tightrope dancer would offer a simple sacrifice and would hold a short ritual **Gosa** for good luck.

The musicians would play music during the tightrope dancing. A clown called the *Mae-ho-ssi* would help the tightrope dancer with making their jokes. There are over 15 different routines. When the tightrope dancer would use the elasticity of the rope to jump high, then the audience would clap loudly.



The mask dance and puppet show are two performances where satire is clearly observed. Through the performance they would criticize the ruling class and parody life's irrationalities. There is no script and the performance is passed on and the dialogue is memorized. The story comes with music, dance and jokes.

The wayfaring male entertainer's folk performance is a popular performance that expressed the commoner's dreams and lamentations. As the performance contains up and coming contents it could be liked by anyone.

5. Baudeogi: Anseong Namsadang's First and Only Female Leader

The author has focused on Anseong *namsadang*'s legendary figure of Baudeogi.

Baudeogi is known to have been born in 1848. She joined the *namsadang* troupe at the age of five. There is no way to know the exact reason how the young girl entered the all male *namsadang* troupe. The most likely possibility is that the girl was either an orphan or given to the troupe due to hardship in the family.

Baudeogi learned various skills in the *namsadang*. She was especially skilled at tightrope dancing. Because Baudeogi was the *namsadang*'s only female she was easily able to attract the audience's attention with her skilled singing, dancing, tightrope dancing. When she was fifteen she became the first woman to ever elected *kkok-du-soe*, the head of a *namsadang* troupe. The members of the troupe unanimously picked Baudeogi to be a new leader of troupe. She led the Anseong *namsadang* troupe all over the country successfully holding performances.

In 1865, Heungseon Daewongun(the regent) called for the *namsadang* troupe and ordered them to cheer the laborers who were exhausted from the re-construction of the Gyeongbokgung Palace. The Baudeogi led *namsadang* troupe and greatly succeeded in the performance and Baudeogi was bestowed the jade headband button. It was a gift given only to the highest ranking officials. However, just a few years due to the stress of constant wandering Baudeogi caught and died of tuberculosis at the age of 23 in 1870.

In Korea at that time women's social status were very low. Not only that, the *namsadang* troupe was an all male performance team that had constantly wandering life. Just the fact that a woman was a part of that troupe and performed in it was unheard of. Baudeogi did not have a family that she could rely both financially and psychologically and also she did not have the opportunity to be educated.

However, what did it mean that all of the members of the troupe elected Baudeogi as their leader? It possibly wasn't only because she was popular with the audiences through her skills. It probably meant that *namsadang* troupe members recognized that Baudeogi had the ability to manage the troupe.

What kind of social responsibilities will 15 year olds in today's world have? Of course, teenagers married at that age in Korean society. Still, it is very surprising that a 15 year old teenage girl could become the head of a troupe made up of adults. Having become the head of a performance troupe Baudeogi successfully carried out her duties for several years. If she was only a figurehead leader for promotional purposes she wouldn't have been able to endure the several years as a puppet.

While she led the *namsadang* troupe, the *Anseong namsadang* troupe was called *Baudeogi namsadang* troupe and that name was well known all over the country all the way to Manchuria(of China).

Baudeogi's story will become a huge lesson for children today who are soft and always whining to their parents to get what they want.

6. The Effort to Revive Baudeogi through a Children's Book

Namsadang's performance became a performance that could be seen every weekend. Every September, at Baudeogi's hometown of Anseong city, **Baudeogi** Festival opens.

However, Korean children still prefer watching k-pop idol's fanciful performances to folk performances.

Knowing the culture of the past and making a new on top of that will make the future stronger and brighter. Children understand that for Psy to attain fame through Gangnam Style, he had to go through many hardships and make a continuous effort. I feel that Korean children also need to hear Baudeogi's great story. To do so, Baudeogi has to be recreated as a real life figure.

Just as I began to write the story of Baudeogi, many difficulties stood in my way. Although there are many studies conducted on Korea's traditional culture there are almost no studies on the lives of the lowest class. Although there is much reference concerning the lives of the royal family and aristocracy it is difficult to learn what the lowest class ate and what they wore. There was no way I could just write about Baudeogi's story I used all of my imagination to recreate the daily lives of the wandering *namsadang* troupe.

During that time, I made every possible effort to learn about the Korea's traditional culture. I attended traditional music concerts as much as possible and I was also a master of ceremony for performances of amateur traditional musicians. However, listening was not enough to me and I learned performance of **hae-geum** (Korean traditional 2 strings

fiddle) myself and also folk songs as well. I also learned how to play traditional Korean drums called *jang-gu* and visited a workshop that made *ga-ya-gum* (12 strings Korean musical instrument). I learned how to do Korean patchwork and went along on trips to old Korean architecture. In order to better understand Korea's traditional Buddhist culture I went to a silent temple stay program at Haeinsa Temple for five days. At folk museum school I listened to lectures concerning the history costume and as Korea's history of painting and others. Of course, I also watched a *namsadang* performance and visited Baudeogi's grave. I also learned folk painting and gave my art work to friends as a gift. I also attended play workshops also served voluntary for the traditional musical performance evaluation committee. I also attended that traditional carpentry school for four months and studied carpentry there. I made a window and a small dining tables.





All of this research was done for Baudeogi.

As the text went through many drafts Baudeogi came to life little by little. Hopefully a day will come when Baudeogi will become more famous than Psy.

Through Baudeogi I hope that children will understand and enjoy the greatness of Korea's traditional arts. Also I hope that they will gain Baudeogi courage, tenacity and confidence as well.

Thank you.

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