

Korean *p'ansori* Narrative

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What is oral tradition?

Oral tradition is a living community. Distanced from the languages, tales, and populates of today, oral tradition is habitually dissociated from the narrative behaviors of the present. Oral tradition may seem fixed and encased in the past, but it too evolves with time. From a strawmat birth to a national treasure, *p'ansori*, a Korean storysinging tradition, has continually crossed regions, styles, schools, languages, genders, genres, social classes, modes of transmission and presentation, and performance contexts. Emerging from regional shaman ritual chant, *p'ansori* narrative became injected with Confucian ethics and literary calibers in the nineteenth century, designated as an Intangible Cultural Treasure in the twentieth century, and continues to inform the Korean narrative past.

The text of oral tradition is the voice that sings. Compared with second-language pedagogy targeting languages existing today, oral tradition focuses on sociolinguistic life long obsolete but essential to interpreting epic's inner dimensions less visible to a modern eye. In *p'ansori*, the voice that narrates is more than a message-bearer. It is the very text of the tradition that takes total commitment from the learner. Perpetuating a quaint story-singing tradition against the tide of modernity is challenging to say the least, and *p'ansori* thrives much less on improvisation or new composition than on the confirmation of its past. Still, its performance is a reconstruction of not merely the past, but the continuing past. In the process of unquestioning emulation emerges an individual voice expressive simultaneously of the tradition and of the performer's own interpretive aesthetics. In sum, *p'ansori* as an oral tradition is the entire process of its tradition-making, tradition-bearing, and tradition-reenacting: emergence, proliferation, preservation, valorization, pedagogy, acquisition, adaptation, and performance here and now.

Future directions

Today, audiovisual technology helps preserve *p'ansori* for future reference, while *p'ansori* discourses themselves habitually deviate from their oral existence as researchers ignore or invalidate indigenous voices in favor of scientifically situated secondary voices. The ultimate challenge is conceptualizing the acoustic depths of orality. Due to the experiential nature of the understanding of performance, the true shape and size of the oral tradition may not be fully fathomed, even if graced with the most reliable testimonies by insiders, unless seen from inside the tradition. In order to understand the nature of oral tradition, one must first enter its performative world as a humble student. Outside the *p'ansori* designated as “archetypes,” efforts to tune its narrative structure to the stories of the present need to be amplified. From another angle, actual performances of oral traditions have yet to cross cultural and linguistic barriers. Due to its nonverbal modes of communication, dance or instrumental art freely crosses regional and national boundaries, but it is difficult for oral tradition to do so on account of its language-dependency, as well as the necessity for communication between the performer and the audience. Insofar as oral tradition is a narrative event, its study should rightfully include discovery or invention of cross-cultural or cross-linguistic narrativity beyond the customary use of subtitles or adaptation.

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