

# Korean Mask Dance Dramas as a Window into the Past and as a Protected Cultural Heritage

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The Republic of Korea, a country still relatively unknown in comparison with neighboring China and Japan, is home to rich cultural traditions. Even for those already familiar with Korean history and society, the Korean traditional arts may seem overwhelming. Here I will use heritage protection efforts as a structure to bring the practices for protecting intangible cultural heritage into focus.

In the wake of the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910–1945), the division of the peninsula into two Cold War states, and the devastating failed attempt at reunification known as the Korean War (1950–1953), the Korean traditional arts had taken a beating. Many arts had fallen out of practice or been forgotten. As the Republic of Korea carried out reconstruction efforts, then-president Rhee Syngman<sup>1</sup> grew interested in seeing which arts were still in practice. He instituted what became an annual National Folk Arts Contest in 1958. It was president Park Chunghee who took serious administrative action to protect the traditional arts, by enacting the Cultural Property Protection Law in 1962. This law, based in large part on Japanese concepts for the classification of art and art forms imposed on Korea during the Japanese occupation (1910–1935) (Pai 2001, Yang 2003), positioned Korea as a world leader in the policy-level protection of traditional culture.

President Park, a general who had become president in a coup d'état, created policies for protection of traditional culture partially to increase his own political legitimacy. Policies that honored folk arts served to associate his government with respect for traditions and to brand himself as one of the common people, rather than the elites. The Cultural Property Protection Law (hereafter CPPL) protected tangible cultural items (such as statues, ceramics, and paintings), historic, natural and scenic sites, folklore materials, and intangible cultural heritage (hereafter ICH). The CPPL protects these items on a national level; similar laws at the administrative level of a city or province create metropolitan and provincial lists of additional protected cultural items.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have followed Korean practice of writing Korean names beginning with the family name.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of intangible cultural heritage, artists strongly prefer designation at a national level due to the differential level of prestige, but purely in terms of preserving culture, a designation at a national or local level has much the same impact.

## Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage

The idealized process for listing an ICH “property” for protection begins with a nomination. Any person or group can nominate an art form they deem worthy of protection.<sup>3</sup> Following nomination, an investigative team (generally a professor and assistants) prepares a report. The Cultural Properties Committee (*munhwajae wiwonhoe*), a group made up of noted (academic) experts in Korean traditional arts examines the research, deliberates and makes a decision to list the item for protection. As can be expected, this process is not without controversy, including objections about impartiality and even the fitness of the Cultural Properties Committee members. The continued prioritization of academic knowledge over artistic experience also causes problems as the artistic practitioners today often gain both practical skill-based knowledge and advanced university degrees. Furthermore, due to the turmoil on the Korean peninsula for the first half of the twentieth century, many arts had to be reconstructed or resurrected before they could be listed. Unavoidably these practices transformed the arts even as they brought them back to life.<sup>4</sup> At the time that the Republic of Korea first listed arts for protection the prevailing view was that the important patrimony of the country would be lost without strong and assertive action. It is inarguable that some of the arts only exist today because they were protected and supported by this system.

In the Republic of Korea the protected arts are broadly divided into two types of intangible cultural properties (*muhyeong munhwajae*): performed arts called *yeneung munhwajae* (artistic cultural property) and the crafted arts, or *gineung munhwajae* (functional cultural property). In recent years some artists have objected to the terminology *yeneung* and *gineung* as they find the art and function divide artificial at best. A similar debate has long swirled in the West around the term arts and crafts.

## Practitioners of the Arts

The most important point of the protection of intangible cultural heritage is that it must be carried out by individuals—what is protected is actually the skill that they possess. Therefore the entire protection schema revolves around two points: (1) continually performing / creating the protected art and, (2) transmission of the skills involved to the next generation. Every item of intangible cultural heritage must have multiple individuals at different stages of mastery. The most expert is designated as the National Human Treasure of the art.<sup>5</sup> Under these National Human Treasures are the individuals who in training. Image 1, below, shows the various skill levels; the arrows within the image demonstrate the pathway taken by participants, start from the bottom of the image. Ranks on the left side are common and theoretically present in each art.<sup>6</sup> Ranks on the right side are less common.

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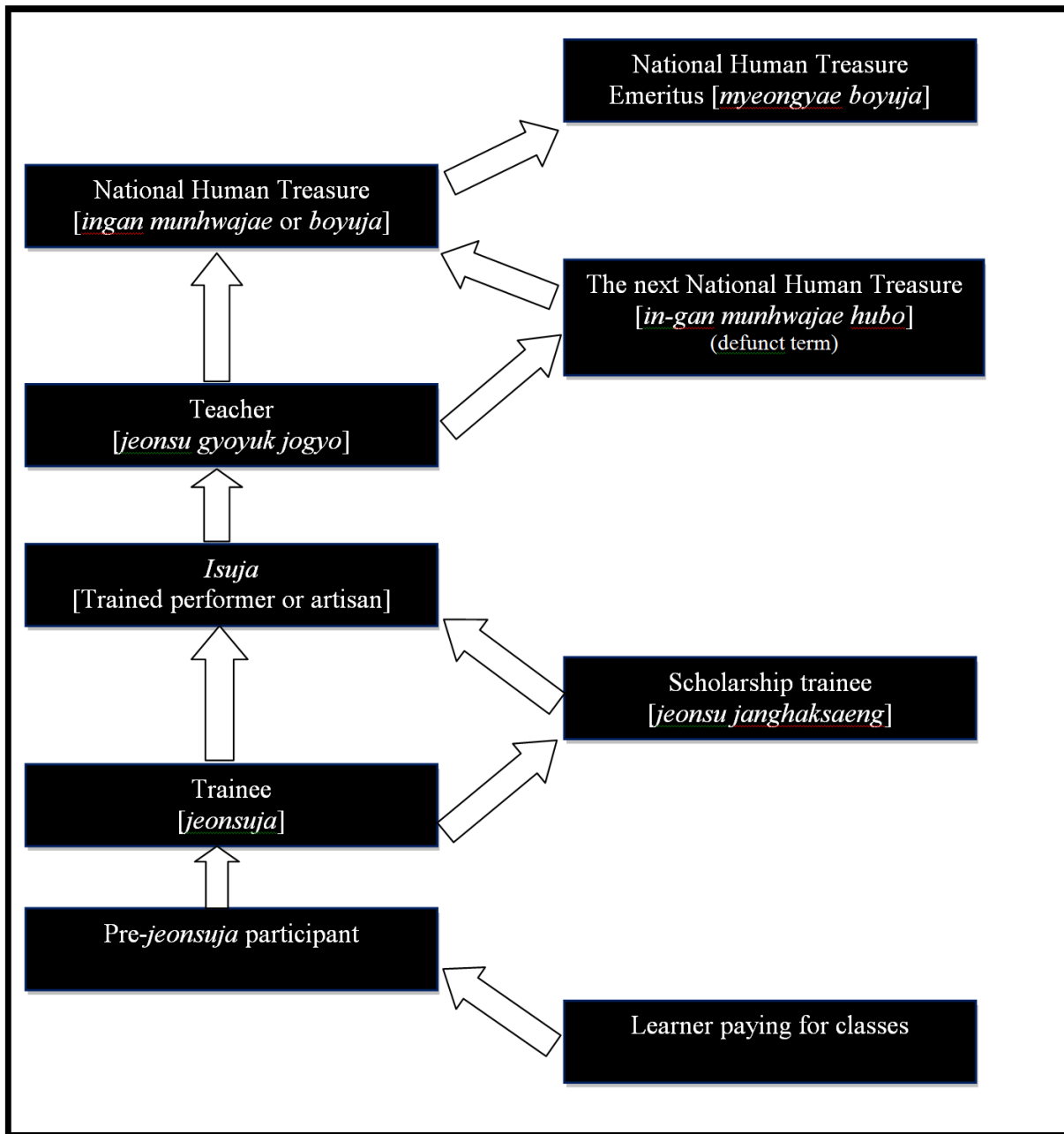
<sup>3</sup> Naturally arts (or sites) can be nominated based on a desire to create a distinctive emblem of a region, particularly if this may also attract tourism.

<sup>4</sup> One of the best retellings of this process was recently translated into English by the author of this article (Yi HS 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Following UNESCO terminology I call these individuals National Human Treasures, but there are two terms used in Korean. The first is the official term, *boyuja*, or holder. The second term, *ingan munhwajae* (human + cultural property), is more colloquial and descriptive and is used commonly.

<sup>6</sup> The making of one type of traditional alcohol is being preserved by a group of people who are not participating in this ranking system—they insist that all members are important.

**Image 1: Ranks and the Path of Advancement within the CPPL System**



Most participants begin participating in the craft or performance form on a casual basis through classes, clubs, community center activities, or personal lessons. After some time period of learning on a casual basis either their teacher will ask them if they plan to continue, or they can broach the subject to their teacher. If their commitment to learning is clear, their name and other information will be added to the official roster and forwarded to the National Heritage Administration, making them an official trainee, or *jeonsuja*. Trainees remain trainees for a period of three to ten years or more, depending on the intensity with which they participate. The scholarship trainee designation only occurs in a very few unpopular arts which have requested additional help from the government and are then able to offer small scholarships to learners. The

rank of *isuja* is the rank for the bulk of artisans and performers. These individuals are good but judged to be still learning the art. The *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo*, however, handle the lion's share of teaching activities, produce the lion's share of craft items, and may be well-known performers. Finally, there is the rank of National Human Treasure.

Becoming an *isuja* requires a public performance or exhibition evaluated by three members of the Cultural Properties Committee. A limited number of artists can advance to this rank in any given year, but there is only a backlog of applicants in a few popular arts—in these arts there are sometimes accusations that politics play a part in rank advancement. Various organizations get around accusations of favoritism through instituting rules—such as participating in 70% of all performances for a period of three consecutive years before nomination for the *isuja* exam. Moving from *isuja* to *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* is much more difficult—there are a limited number of *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* positions available—this has generally been established by precedent, and two people per art is common, although in group arts such as mask dance dramas there are often five.<sup>7</sup> No matter how many years an artist spends as an *isuja* and no matter how talented he or she may be, he or she cannot advance in rank until there is an opening. Most arts have one or two National Human Treasures, and there will be more *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* if there is only one National Human Treasure. Becoming a National Human Treasure is to some degree a waiting game—except for in the case of the most physically demanding arts, a young National Human Treasure is sixty at the time of designation.<sup>8</sup> Due to precedent and cultural norms in Korea, leap-frogging past people who have been involved longer, regardless of talent, is relatively rare.<sup>9</sup> Finally, although many people die as National Human Treasures, there are a few who become very infirm and can no longer participate in transmission activities, and they may become Human Treasure Emeriti. In practice, however, few people become Human Treasure Emeriti for two reasons: the government does not notice their inactivity immediately, and other artists in the group express their thanks and respect by not pushing for a designation change from Treasure to Emeritus. In fact, nearly all cases I have confirmed of this designation are cases of conscious retirement by an elderly individual who is still mentally proficient enough to realize they will never be physically able to participate in activities again, who then graciously makes room for a successor.

Many of the performing arts done by groups (such as mask dance dramas) are managed by preservation associations, or *bojonhoe*. The members of each preservation association include all of the artists involved in that particular art, and the association is generally run by one of the highest ranked members in consultation with the National Human Treasure. Table 2 and Table 3, below, outline the types of arts and numbers of artists and various ranks certified within the CPPL system.

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<sup>7</sup> A mask dance drama often has around five *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo*, roughly one expert in each of the most difficult starring roles in the drama. In arts where all participants learn roughly the same skills there are usually less *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* positions available.

<sup>8</sup> This was once a formal rule (see Howard 2002, Maliangkay 2004).

<sup>9</sup> The reader may rightly infer that this can be detrimental to the quality of artistic performance/production.

**Table 2: Types of Arts Certified within the CPPL**

		Arts					Crafts		Total
		Music	Dance	Drama <sup>10</sup>	Games and Rites	Martial arts	Crafts	Food	
Registered arts	Number of registered arts	17	7	14	29	1	51	2	121
	Arts including subdivisions	24	7	14	32	1	51	4	133
Preservation Associations or <i>bojonhoe</i>		14	4	13	31	1	-	1	64
Artists and Artisans	National Human Treasure	40	8	22	33	1	68	4	176
	<i>Jeonsu Gyoyuk Jogyo</i> (teacher)	91	20 (1)	65	66	2	49	1	294 (1)
	<i>Isuja</i> (performer / artist)	2,583	876	537	782	71	574	24	5,420
	Scholarship Students	18	-	4	1	-	59	-	82
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,732</b>	<b>904 (1)</b>	<b>628</b>	<b>882</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>723</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>5,972 (1)</b>
	Human Treasure Emeritus	4	2	6	8	-	8	-	28

Source: Figures from the Cultural Heritage Administration as of 8/31/2015.

**Table 3: Artists and Artisans within the CPPL system**

		Arts ( <i>yeneung munhwajae</i> )			Crafts ( <i>gineung munhwajae</i> )			Total
		Individual	Group	subtotal	Individual	Group	subtotal	
Registered arts	Number of registered arts	15	53	68	52	1*	53	121
	Arts including subdivisions	15	63	78	54	1	55	133
Artists and Artisans	National Human Treasure	29	75	104	72	-	72	176
	<i>Jeonsu Gyoyuk Jogyo</i>	45 (1) <sup>11</sup>	199	244 (1)	50	-	50	294 (1)
	<i>Isuja</i>	2,044	2,805	4,849	568	3	571	5,420
	Scholarship Students	23	-	23	59	-	59	82
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,141 (1)</b>	<b>3,079</b>	<b>5,220 (1)</b>	<b>749</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>752</b>	<b>5,972 (1)</b>
		Human Treasure Emeritus	3	17	20	8	-	8

Source: Figures from the Cultural Heritage Administration as of 8/31/2015.

\* One type of traditional alcohol is made by a cooperative group; this group has also (so far) eschewed the idea of having any National Human Treasure.

<sup>10</sup> Here drama means mask dance drama. In Korean the term *yeon-geuk* is used.

<sup>11</sup> Here the number (1) represents the fact that one member is listed twice—a single performer is rising in the rankings in two different dance arts. Because these two dances share many movement characteristics, in fact almost all dancers who do one also do the other. Until August of 2015 there was a National Human Treasure (Yi Maebang) who held that rank for both *seungmu* and *salpuri* and the double-listed *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* is one of Yi's former students.

The various intangible cultural properties were designated between 1964 and the present day, although roughly half were finalized in the 1960s and 1970s. As shown in Table 3, items are considered either group arts (drumming, rituals, mask dance dramas) or individual arts (solo instrumental, song, and dance forms). Almost all of the crafts are considered solo arts—one person, alone, can effectively create a musical instrument, a horse hair hat, or a wooden sculpture. In table 2 there are sixty-four preservation associations, and in Table 3 these are broken down into sixty-three group performing arts and one group craft art. In the case of certain arts, such as the popular drumming and dancing art *nongak* (or *pungmul*), there is one designation for all different types of *nongak* and within that designation there are six subdivisions that correspond to various protected regional *nongak* styles. Therefore, there are a total of 133 protected arts, and they identify themselves as, for example, “Intangible Cultural Property #80, Jasujang” (embroidery). When the registration for an art is rescinded the number is not re-assigned, so the lower numbers indicate earlier registration, and some numbers no longer exist.

### **The Question of Money**

The government funds the Korean intangible cultural properties through the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), which is administered by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. They provide opportunities for performance and exhibition through various performance series,<sup>12</sup> festivals, performance halls,<sup>13</sup> and galleries.<sup>14</sup> The CHA also funds practice centers, workshops, and offices. There is a large nine-story complex in southern Seoul called the Intangible Cultural Property Transmission Center (*Muhyeong munhwajae jeonsu hoegwan*) with nine stories above ground, four gallery and exhibition halls, offices for various visual and performing arts, practice rooms with some sound-proofing, and the Pungryu Theatre. There is no fee for the groups and arts assigned to this building to use the space for offices, workshops, and rehearsal. This transmission center hosts frequent government-funded exhibitions and performance series, and the performers and exhibitors are within the CPPL system. Artists and groups from other regions can receive funding assistance in establishing their own facilities.<sup>15</sup>

Doing the art form is another way for the performers to earn funds. Appearance fees are also distributed through the various performances, but usually the fees given are the same for groups and for individual performers, who split the money with just one drummer. For the craft artists, the government sometimes buys traditionally crafted items to give as diplomatic gifts, or to donate to foreign museums. Considering that the cost of a traditional horsehair hat made by a highly ranked artist sells for about \$10,000 (US) in the gallery at the transmission center in Seoul and considering that horsehair hats are no longer worn outside traditional performances, many traditional crafts cannot find a wide consumer market.

Artists from the two highest ranks—National Human Treasures and *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo*—also receive a monthly stipend, as do the scholarship students. The monthly stipend, however, is not large and most artists assert that they had to wait so long to start receiving those funds that they had to find other income sources long ago. The funds are commonly dismissed as “bus money” or “transportation money,” indicating the money is not enough to cover essential

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<sup>12</sup> For example there are summer concerts at Deoksu Palace.

<sup>13</sup> Government subsidized theatres include those at the National Gugak Center, Pungryu Theatre, and Korea House.

<sup>14</sup> One gallery is located at Incheon International Airport.

<sup>15</sup> Often municipalities outside the capital will assist an art in securing a training center and exhibition space.

expenses. For a National Human Treasure the stipend, as of 2017, was approximately \$1,500 (US) per month, with the next rank receiving half that amount and scholarship students just \$150 per month, even though Korea is known for a high cost of living.

### Mask Dance Dramas

The types of registered arts vary widely, demonstrating the Republic of Korea’s rich cultural heritage. As shown in Table 3, above, there are several basic categories of arts protected under the CPPL. Next, I will focus on the Korean mask dance dramas, I will explain some basic ideas about the dramas, and then use the dramas to illustrate how the cultural protection system works.

There are a large number of mask dance dramas in the Republic of Korea: there are different classifications that can be applied to them. The most common is to divide them into village-ritual based dramas and dramas descended from the Sandae dramas of the late Goryeo and early Joseon Dynasties.

**Table 4: Types of Dramas**

Village-ritual based dramas:	Sandae dramas:
Hahoe Byeolsin'gut Talnoli Gangneung Gwanno Gamyeon'geuk	Goseong Ogwangdae Tongyeong Ogwangdae Gasan Ogwangdae Dongnae Yayu Suyeong Yayu Bukcheong Saja Noleum Bongsan Talchum Gangnyeong Talchum Eunyul Talchum Songpa Sandae Noli Yangju Byeolsandae Namsadang Noli's Deotbwigi

The mask dance dramas were oral narratives performed by traveling troupes or local villagers, and as such the content was always shifting in various ways. The acts in the mask dance dramas were (except in Gangneung Gwanno Gamyeon’geuk) considered separate stories, and they could be performed in almost any order as long as scenes ritually opening the performance came first, and the scene with a funeral came last. In the modern world when most performance slots are 45 minutes or 1 hour, if the full performance is longer, groups will perform just a few scenes that match the audience and available performers. These days performers have adopted an order of scenes that tends to be considered optimal, but looking at records from the 1980s and 1970s we can see that the customary order was often different then.

To illustrate, I will use the example of Goseong Ogwangdae. The drama is relatively short, as are all the south coast dramas, and a usual performance of one hour can include all five scenes, unlike more northern plays that can only perform part of their drama in a one-hour time slot. The first scene in Goseong Ogwangdae shows a piteous leper who, hearing the music, wants to dance with a small drum.<sup>16</sup> In the next scene five upper class gentlemen, or *yangban*, enter the stage, as

<sup>16</sup> Leprosy was relatively well known in pre-modern Korea and small islands, usually on the south coast, were

does their servant. The servant and his masters exchange words, and the servant demonstrates their failures quite cleverly. The third scene features Bibi, a mystical creature who has descended from heaven and wants to eat *yangban*. In the fourth scene, like the first entirely devoid of dialogue, an old monk dances as he tries to attract two young women. In the final scene a *yangban* who has a pretty young concubine is re-united with his old wife. The concubine gives birth to a son and everything goes well until the concubine decides to assert her right to her child. In the struggle the baby dies and the enraged concubine attacks and kills the old wife. At the end of the mask dance drama the players carry the old woman's body to the hillside to be buried, singing a mourning song.

**Image 5: The Old Grandmother from Goseong Ogwangdae**



Before her death the old grandmother spins some wool and sings a song. Photo by the author.

**Image 6: The Funeral Process for the Old Grandmother**



The players sing and carry the bier of the old grandmother to the mountain to be buried. Photo by the author.

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sometimes designated leper colonies.



## Leveling of Society: Lamprooning the Yangban

For most Koreans, the most important content in the mask dance dramas is the cutting down to size of the upper-class *yangban*. During the Joseon Dynasty the highest social class was royalty, followed by the ruling gentry known as *yangban*, and below them, the commoners known as either *sangmin* or *yangmin*. At the top of the *sangmin* class were the *jungin*, usually the illegitimate children of *yangban* or their descendants. The *jungin* were generally educated and worked in fields such as medicine and translation. Many other *sangmin* were farmers, and most performers of village mask dance dramas came from this class. Below the *sangmin* were *cheonmin*, including shamans, Buddhist monks, butchers, and slaves. Itinerant troupe performers fit into this lowest category, as did those who performed Gangneung Gwanno Gamyeon'geuk.<sup>17</sup>

These classes were hereditary on the mother's side, so that the children of concubines were never *yangban*.<sup>18</sup> This kept the population of *yangban* from expanding rapidly via inheritance. In fact, even a good bloodline was not enough to ensure *yangban* status: if a family wanted to continue to be *yangban*, it had to produce sons who could pass the *gwageo*, a Confucian civil-service exam. In other words, to be a *yangban* meant to be well born and well educated and to produce a civil servant at least every few generations.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, being a *yangban* in the Neo-Confucian ideology of the time meant avoiding any kind of physical work or direct engagement in favor of intellectual pursuits, personal development, and educated leisure: reading, practicing calligraphy, and pondering the beauty of nature. Yet the *yangban* also ran the government.

At one time, the dramas served the important carnivalesque function of upending the normal power relations in society, allowing those at the low end of the traditional hierarchy to vent their frustrations in sanctioned ways (Bakhtin 1984). The festivals gave commoners an “opportunity to release their frustration and conflicts which had long been suppressed in everyday life. Then they returned back to their normal daily routines when the mask drama was over. This means they could recover their instinct of harmony through the entertainment” (Jeon KW 2015: 198). Some studies focus on the extraordinary nature of the festivals and the at times grotesque nature of their content (Jeon SH 2007). However, many scholars (cf. Heo YH 2002: 305-6) subscribe to a revisionist historical interpretation, rooted in the scholarship of the pro-democraticization movement, that paints mask dance dramas as proof of the desire for democracy in the Korean past. According to scholars who adhere to the nationalistic revisionist history, without Japanese colonization, Korea would have become a democracy because the lower classes were striving for equality. These scholars are critical of Confucianism, idealize Korean shamanism as exhibiting the true roots of Korean society, and rely on a particular reading of the Donghak Uprising in 1894.<sup>20</sup> In the mask dance dramas, they see a reflection of the “common folk's attitude,” and specifically their propensity to “ridicule the phony power and status of scholars” (Van Leest 1991: 101). Scholars such as Hyung-a Kim Van Leest see the mask dance dramas as calling attention to the lack of qualifications and questionable superiority of the *yangban*. However, such

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<sup>17</sup> The *gwanno* from the title Gangneung Gwanno Gamyeon'geuk actually means government slave.

<sup>18</sup> The exception to status following that of the mother were the children of the king—there are several instances of kings who were born of a royal concubine rather than the queen.

<sup>19</sup> *Yangban* without positions, or those who had eschewed public service, were called *seonbi*, there are *seonbi* characters in some of the mask dance dramas.

<sup>20</sup> Donghak was an indigenous religion that became a protest movement of primarily commoners seeking to reject foreign, especially Japanese, influences on Korea.

critiques from the lower classes appeared only within the liminal space of festivals, where they were expressed and then put to sleep until the next festival. Although Van Leest asserts that the plays introduce hope for a better society and “implicitly [concede] victory to the common folk” (ibid., 104), in the conclusion she agrees that the plays are “satire for its own sake” and acknowledges they “reinforce the social order” (ibid.).

The *yangban* were often perceived by the ordinary people as lazy, corrupt, and even inbred—and this shows clearly in their depiction within mask dance dramas. Since they ran the government, the problems with regulations, taxation, the military and more could be also laid at their feet. In mask dance dramas, the *yangban* character is often shown to be incapable, foolish, uneducated, and concerned with things other than learning and proper governance, and in general is the butt of the jokes. The hero of such scenes, who often explicitly criticizes the *yangban*, is generally the *yangban*'s servant, usually called Malduggi. Malduggi is strong and clever, voicing criticism on everyone's behalf as a sort of trickster. To illustrate this setup, I will give several excerpts from the scenes lampooning *yangban* in a variety of dramas. In Gasan Ogwangdae, the clever servant Malddugi<sup>21</sup> and the chief of the *yangban* are talking:

Malduggi: In order to find you, I went to Muju Gucheondong, where I met a barmaid in full make-up and a colorful dress. I bought a drink and watched her closely. And what do you know, to my surprise, she looked exactly like your mother.<sup>22</sup>

All the *yangban*: U-hoo-hoo. You wretch Malddugi, what the hell did you say?

Malddugi: Damn you *yangban*, stray dogs, stop barking. Hey master, in order to find you, I went to your home. Your mistress greeted me and brought me a drink from the wall cabinet. I drank the rice wine, realized the mistress' intentions and rode her belly. *Dul-gu-dang, dug-gu-dang*. [All the players dance.<sup>23</sup>]

Chief Yangban: Ara... siiiii... [music and dance stops]. You damn wretch, since you a mere plebian, slander us, the noble *yangban*, you're going to pay for it after tomorrow morning's trial. [All *yangban* scold Malddugi].

Malddugi: Master

Chief Yangban: Yes

Malddugi: You misunderstood me. Your mistress despises you. You're a bastard and born in a taxi cab during the day. No offense meant, however.

Chief Yangban: U-hoo-hoo-hoo. What the hell are you talking about? You listen to me, [dialogue continues].

The bold and clever servant manages to repeatedly insult the *yangban*, to the amusement of the listeners. Because the mask dance dramas are a series of unrelated scenes, the drama moves on to another scene and we are left guessing what will happen to the servant as a result of his harsh words. We see another crude and entertaining insult by a *yangban*'s servant in a scene in *Hahoe Byeolsin'gut Talnoli*. The scene opens with five characters on stage. Bune is a beautiful young

<sup>21</sup> In some plays Malduggi is the illegitimate son of a *yangban* in others he is the son or grandson of a *yangban* who was exiled after angering the throne.

<sup>22</sup> This translation is from Lee Meewon (1983: 325-6).

<sup>23</sup> For comparison, Cho Ohkon translates this same passage as follows: “Hello, sir. To find you, I went into your house. There I happened to see your wife. She quickly opened the closet door and took out a wine bottle. Then she poured it into a bowl. So I sipped it. Your wife began to act impetuously. Knowing what she meant, I put her on my stomach. Dudungkkaeng, Deodeolgongsil” (1984: 48).

woman. Yangban and Seonbi are two upper-class gentlemen, each with a servant—Choraengi (servant of Yangban) and Imae (servant of Seonbi).

Choraengi: [To Yangban] Master, why don't you introduce yourself to him?  
Yangban: [Looking at Seonbi] How about exchanging names of [sic] each other?  
Seonbi: Yes, that's a good idea.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, the two upper class gentlemen make a full bow to each other, kneeling on the ground, but Choraengi steps between them and kneels, too. His buttocks rest almost upon Yangban's head as he receives Seonbi's bow and shows disrespect to his master. Even for contemporary audience members, who rarely perform full bows with the head touching the ground, this is an enormously funny moment.

Later in the scene, there is a famous exchange between Seonbi and Yangban in which they try to prove they are superior to each other:

Yangban: Well, do you mean your lineage is as noble as mine? Of course, mine is superior to yours.  
Seonbi: Which one is superior? Tell me.<sup>25</sup>  
Yangban: I am a descendant of a *sa-daebu*.<sup>26</sup>  
Seonbi: What is *sa-daebu*? I am a descendant of a *pal-daebu*.<sup>27</sup>  
Yangban: My grandfather was a *mun-ha si-jung*.<sup>28</sup>  
Seonbi: Bah, *mun-ha si-jung*? Is that all? My father is a *mun-sang si-dae*.<sup>29</sup>  
Yangban: *Mun-sang si-dae*? What the hell is that again?  
Seonbi: *Mun-sang* is higher than *mun-ha* and *si-dae* is bigger than *si-jung*.  
Yangban: That is the funniest thing I have ever heard of.  
Seonbi: Do you think the noble lineage is the best thing in the world?  
Yangban: What can be more important?  
Seonbi: Nothing can beat a man of learning. I've read all of the *sa-seo sam-gyeong*.<sup>30</sup>  
Yangban: What, *sa-seo sam-gyeong*? Who would bother with that kind of thing? I have read the *pal-seo yuk-gyeong*.<sup>31</sup>  
Seonbi: What the hell is the *pal-seo yuk-gyeong*? What on earth is *yuk-gyeong*?  
Choraengi: Even I know the *yuk-gyeong*. How come you don't know that? I'm telling you. They are: the eighty-thousand volumes of the Buddhist sutras, the cymbals of the monks, the eyeglasses of the blind, the medicinal rampion blossoms, the menstruation of the virgin, and the annual pay of the farm hand.<sup>32</sup>  
Imae: That's right, you're correct.

<sup>24</sup> This dialogue translation has been copied from the doctoral dissertation of Kim Deuksin (1987: 225).

<sup>25</sup> Here I am using Dr. Kim Deuksin's translation (1987: 227-9).

<sup>26</sup> *Sadaebu* means a man of noble birth, and *sa* is also the same sound as four.

<sup>27</sup> *Pal* is the same sound as eight. In order to prove he is "more" noble, Seonbi is inventing a category that is twice as great as *sadaebu*.

<sup>28</sup> *Munha sijung* means prime minister, but *ha* has the same sound as "low" and *jung* sounds like "medium."

<sup>29</sup> As the reader can guess, *ha* changes to *sang* or high, and *jung* changes to *dae* or "great."

<sup>30</sup> The most important books of Confucian learning are the Four Books and Three Classics, or *sa-seo sam-gyeong*.

<sup>31</sup> Because *sa* sounds like four and *sam* like three, the Yangban doubles everything and claims to have read Eight Books and Six Classics.

<sup>32</sup> In Korean this entire list is rhyming: *daejang-gyeong, bara-gyeong, an-gyeong, jil-gyeong, wol-gyeong, and swae-gyeong*.

Yangban: Even these two know about the *yuk-gyeong*. You, so-called scholar, don't know that?

The dialogue is crafted so that the audience first laughs at Seonbi for his desire to be as nobly born as Yangban, and then at Yangban for his demonstrated ignorance. The crowning satirical moment comes when Yangban's servant Choraengi delivers the list, which is entirely rhyming. The ignorant Yangban, desperate to be the equal of the Seonbi although he is obviously less intelligent than his servant, is fooled. The high-born pair are both so desperate to seem learned and deserving that they are revealed to be pathetic and ignorant.

Bongsan Talchum also has a scene in which the servant Malduggi openly insults the *yangban*, first disparaging them and then pretending they have misheard him:

Malddugi: Sweeeeee! [The music and dancing stop]. The *yangban* are coming. I call them *yangban*. But you shouldn't mistake them for the retired members of the Noron and Soron parties, or the retired members of the Revenue Board, the War Board, and the Letter Board or the Chief of the Six Boards of the Government. What I mean for *yangban* is *yang* for the dog and *ban* for the small table with the dog-foot-shaped legs. These are the two words which I use for them.<sup>33</sup>

All yangban: Damn you! What did you say?

Malduggi: Well, I don't know what you've heard from me. I said after serving as the members of the Noron and Soron Parties, the Revenue Board and the War Board, the three retired ministers are coming. That was exactly what I said.

Here, according to Malddugi's punning, the *yangban* are not members of powerful governmental factions or officials with high posts, but instead are compared to dogs (not highly regarded in traditional Korean society) and to a kind of small table (*soban*), reducing the *yangban* to animal or object status. This wordplay continues throughout the act, and when the *yangban* overhear his insults, he manages to adjust the language to disguise his original meaning just enough that it is no longer offensive to them.

In all of these examples, the criticisms of the *yangban* are clear. It is understandable, then, that some scholars have produced strongly politicized interpretations of these scenes. However, it is important to contextualize these dramas within the sociopolitical circumstances of their documentation. For example, Bongsan Talchum, the earliest mask drama to be documented in writing, was recorded for the first time in 1930, when the Korean peninsula was still under Japanese control. During the Japanese colonial period,<sup>34</sup> many Koreans blamed the *yangban* for Korea's fall to the Japanese, characterizing them as so out of touch with geopolitical realities that they virtually paved the way for colonization.

A number of mask dance dialogues were written down at this time by Korean folklorists. These folklorists were part of the academic resistance to Japanese narratives about Korean society. Such narratives sought to convince Koreans that Japan was a benevolent older brother who knew more and was leading Korea, a long-lost younger brother, with a firm but benevolent hand. While the Japanese were characterizing Koreans as passive, apathetic, and melancholy (full

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<sup>33</sup> This is according to the translation of Cho Oh-Kon (1988: 270).

of *han*—an emotion combining sadness, bitterness, and regret), folklorists were actively searching out Korean traditions to show Koreans in a very different light (cf. Janelli 1986, Atkins 2010). The mask dance dramas were a prime example: humorous and fast-paced, they were practically the opposite of the Japanese stereotype of Korean culture. With these efforts, the folklorists were also seeking to differentiate Korean culture from Japanese culture. One of their strategies was to emphasize the roots of Korean culture in shamanism, drawing on the Dan-gun foundation myth. Both Dan-gun (the founder of ancient Korea, who was a god and lived in a part of Korea that is now Manchuria) and shamanism (which came to Korea through Mongolia) rooted Korea outside a relationship with Japan.

The dialogues that were written down in the post-colonial era were also part of an active recovery of Korean traditions and a continued effort to differentiate the Koreans from the Japanese and disprove Japanese narratives about Korean character. Scholars after liberation were no less critical of the *yangban*. The important point is that in both the colonial and post-colonial periods, when the dialogues were recorded, heavy criticism of the *yangban* was common and acceptable. We have no reliable evidence that the dialogues cited above are accurate transcriptions of nineteenth-century performances, or if they are accurate, that they were actually performed with language this direct or strongly critical of the *yangban* class. If they were performed in exactly this language, it may have happened only during the colonial era, at a time when *yangban* in mask dance dramas could be a thinly veiled stand-in for the colonizers, just as during the pro-democracy movement the *yangban* in the dramas became stand-ins for the Park and Chun governments and major pro-governmental companies and organizations. We must therefore interpret these dialogues as an expression of the minds of Koreans in the *twentieth* century, not the nineteenth.

**Image 7: Malddugi from Gasan Ogwangdae, Dongnae Yayu, and Songpa Sandae Noli**



These are three different Malddugi characters from three different mask dance dramas. In each he has a hat and a whip. Photos by the author.

**Image 8: Hahoe Byeolsin'gut Talnoli's Yangban and Bune**



The Hahoe Byeolsin'gut Talnoli Yangban dances with Bune. Choraengi is in the background. Photo by the author.

**Image 9: Historical Location of Still-Extant Mask Dance Dramas<sup>35</sup>**



<sup>35</sup> The mask dance dramas located in what is now the DPRK on this map are now protected in the ROK under the CPPL. It is unknown how many other mask dance dramas that once existed in the north have been lost.

## **Applying the Cultural Protection Policies in Korea to the Mask Dance Dramas**

Now that I have explained something about mask dance dramas and about the heritage policy—how does this work for a drama? If I return to the example of Goseong Ogwangdae, the drama needs a cast of a little more than twenty performers to stage a show. If there are slightly more the number of drummers can increase and this will mean that players don't need to dance, then drum, then change clothes and dance again. The drama has one National Human Treasure and six *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* – all of whom get monthly stipends from the government. The National Human Treasure is healthy and in his sixties, so he should be able to effectively lead the drama for many more years, without needing to retire from active performance and become a National Human Treasure Emeritus. The number of *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* is slightly larger than normal because it is customary to have two National Human Treasures—one who is newer to the title, and another, who was probably given the rank first, who is not infirm enough to give up leading yet, but some worries exist. In the case of this group, though, the only somewhat unhealthy person would be the logical nominee to be the next National Human Treasure—therefore I predict they will get a new National Human Treasure only when the current National Human Treasure experiences failing health.

With Goseong Ogwangdae one of the *jeonsu gyoyuk jogyo* manages the office and daily tasks for the preservation association of the drama. He also earns a salary for this work. In addition, each time the preservation association performs every member is given a performance fee. In some groups the fee is equal for all members while in other groups it is higher for those of higher rank—the fee never corresponds to the importance of the role that is performed. In addition to the fees that come with high rank and performance, the national government supports the office with an additional lump sum each month. Goseong Ogwangdae, located in the small county of Goseong, also gets support from the local government that sometimes uses the drama as a branding tool and tourist attraction. Dramas from the DPRK do not get such local support, and some regions support local mask dance dramas more generously than others—this is an ongoing point of tension.

A few years ago, Goseong Ogwangdae was suffering from a lack of members, with few future members visible on the horizon. This was partially due to a strict requirement that members be from or currently living in the Goseong area, which has a low population. Now the drama has expanded its mission and regularly performs in series for education and heritage experience. With more regular performance opportunities the drama recruited some performance professionals already affiliated with the drama to move to Goseong with full-time employment guaranteed. Since performance-related work is often inconsistent and many Korean performers struggle to earn enough this offer was highly attractive. These younger performers are in the office on most days, frequently making trips to local schools, and performing for bus loads of people who want to experience heritage (who have made reservations). Older local performers would have a hard time performing this often as most also have jobs outside performance—as farmers, with a local newspaper, and running their own businesses. The younger full-time performers and older members who had previously worried about the future of their drama are both happy with how things have worked out. Other mask dance drama groups, however, continue to experience difficulties attracting enough young performers.

In most ways we can say that Goseong Ogwangdae is being protected very well—there are frequent performances, younger performers, and a healthy preservation association. The level of

performance is high, even celebrated as one of the best. The heritage art will be here for the future, which is great. Yet there are still a few ways that we can see large changes to the art. First, these days the performances have lost spontaneity compared to the pre-modern era. Each show is almost the same as the previous one, particularly if the same players perform the same roles. Also, because the performers perform more than the once per year common in the past, and also teach, their performances have more finesse. The rough edges, however, were part of the charm of the dances performed by amateur villagers.

Second, younger performers from across the country are moving to Goseong and taking up the art, but their backgrounds are in other arts from other regions. There is an increasing lack of regional specificity that results as the heritage becomes national, representative of Korea as a whole, and not just local for Goseong or the south coast region.

Third, the heritage performances of the mask dance dramas are called for less and less these days—instead much of the funding opportunities are for fusion performances, educational and experiential shows. The more difficult and potentially controversial an aspect of the traditional performance is, the more likely that in these new derivative versions it will be left out.

Fourth, this is because the context (instead of one annual festival, frequent smaller shows and programs), the audience (no longer other villagers, but guests from around the country and the world), and the entire world (the concerns we have, the technology-rich world we live in) are changing. Some of these changes are good—such as allowing for pin microphones inside masks that allow the audience to hear the dialogue—but other changes sanitize what was once male humor into something acceptable for mixed audiences of all ages out of fear of offending someone.

Although overall everyone is pleased that Korean traditions have survived the transition to modernity, it would be naïve to think they are not continually changing, even though the goal of cultural policy is to protect them in their pre-modern form.

### **Expanding the Discussion: Reading Recommendations**

Given the background explanation of the CPPL system presented above, there are a wide variety of readings that illustrate the heritage system's impact on cultural heritage in Korea for anyone who wants to learn more about this issue. Among publications that address policy directly, there is no better book in English than Yang Jongsung's *Cultural Property Protection Policy in Korea: Intangible Cultural Properties and Living National Treasures* (2003), although the music focused, detailed (but more expensive) *Preserving Korean Music: Intangible Cultural Properties as Icons of Identity* by Keith Howard (2006) is just as worthy. Articles and book chapters also address preservation policy issues. Roald Maliangkay wrote a chapter discussing the issue of choosing National Human Treasures within the CPPL system (2004), as well as an article (2002) that details the process through which another type of folksong negotiated the cultural heritage system. Nathan Hesselink has several publications that can expand this discussion, each of which deals with drumming music, specifically one article (1998) and his 2006 and 2012 books. Kwon Hyunseok (2009) tackles the difficult issue of how natural change in the arts is prevented by the CPPL; Park Sangmi (2010) addresses the politics behind cultural policy in Korea, framing an article with the 2008 arson of the historic south gate of Seoul, Sungnyemun. English-language publications that directly address cultural policy and the craft arts are rare, I recommend a book chapter and an article by Laurel Kendall both dealing with the practice of heritage handicraft



(2011, 2014). Laurel Kendall is one of the most established scholars of Korean shamanism, and a great place to begin further examination of the many changes to shamanism as Korea has modernized are a book chapter from 1998 and her newer book from 2010. Ch'oe Kilsong's (1989) article as well as Hyun-Key Kim Hogarth's (2001) article both address the celebration Gangneung Danoje. An article by Park Mi-kyung (2003) provides an excellent critique of the preservation of a ritual from Jindo Island. Yun Kyoim's work on shamanic rituals on Jeju Island looks specifically at the impact of UNESCO heritage listing (2015).

To learn more about mask dance dramas in particular there is not a lot of work written in English; and most of the Korean work is very historically focused. Cho Ohkon (1988), Jeon Kyungwook (2005, 2008, 2015), and several of my own previous publications (2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017) are some of the only publications in English that are not full of inaccuracies.

In addition, the issues of heritage preservation and protection are closely connected to literature on consumption of culture through tourism and tourist activities. Tourism related works abound. For example, Park Hyung Yu's 2009 article about historic Changdeokgung Palace, Timothy Tangherlini's 2008 article about the folk village in Suwon, Robert Oppenheim's 2008 chapter on visiting Gyeongju and Moon Okpyo's 2011 chapter about Confucian heritage in Andong all pose interesting questions about present-day consumption of Korean tradition. I urge any student interested in these issues to begin with these reading recommendations.

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