

***The Advent of the First Indoor Stage in Korean Theatre:
Impacts, Consequences and Implications***

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

It is widely agreed that the modern Korean theatre began with the opening of the Hyeopyulsa, the first western-style theatre building, in December 1902. The reason for calling this theatre ‘modern’ is multifold, but the primary stress should be put on the fact that it introduced indoor stage, which was the first case in the history of Korean theatre. Outdoor performance in found places was one of the paradigmatic elements in traditional Korean performance and play forms, including *Pansori* (one-man singing-drama) and *Talchum* (mask dance). In this respect, the establishment of the indoor stage in the Hyeopyulsa was a sea change, predicting a shift in paradigm and environment that would divide Korean theatre thereafter from the previous. This modern stage needed a new play form to present, which resulted in the appearance of *Changgeuk*, well known as Korean opera to the West. This new play form is often regarded as ‘new theatre movement’ in that it attempted to extend the theatricality immanent in *Pansori* in positive way. At the same time, the modern gadgets of stage and play form foreshadowed a series of infringements on Korean theatre tradition. Revisiting the historical moment in the beginning of the twentieth century, this paper examines the impacts, consequences, and implications the advent of the modern stage had on Korean theatre.

Keywords: Korean theatre, Hyeopyulsa, modernity, Westernized stage, *Changgeuk*, *Pansori*

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Introduction

It is widely agreed that the modern Korean theatre began with the opening of the first indoor-stage theatre, Hyeopyulsa(協律社), in December 1902. Hyeopyulsa was a brick building with cylindrical exterior and cone-shaped roof. Inside, there was a raised platform stage and the auditorium seats over 2,000 people were looking into the stage. The stage and the auditorium were separated by a veil of the forth wall. The upstage wall was covered with a backdrop of white canvas fabric, and some of the props were also displayed. Auditorium was divided into different classes, and the price of tickets changed accordingly. According to a newspaper advertisement in *Hwang Seong Shinmun* dated 4 December 1902, three types of tickets with difference colors and prices were issued for the opening performance at Hyeopyulsa.

This ‘modern’ firmament playhouse was built by the support of the royal family of the Korean Empire.¹ It was intended to entertain foreign diplomatic envoys and short-lived until closing in April 1906 (Yoo Min-Young 1996: 33).² The reason to call this theatre building ‘modern’ is multifold, but the primary stress should be put on the fact that it was the ‘first indoor’ theatre. Korean theatre typically took the form of outdoor performance, and all the genres of traditional Korean theatrical forms—including *Pansori* (one-man singing-drama), *Talchum* (mask dance), *Inhyeong-geuk* (puppet theatre), *Geurimja-geuk* (shadow theatre), etc.—followed this nature. Besides, virtually no stage existed in Korean traditional theatre. Korean theatricalities happened at outdoor yard called *madang*. All the found places in every corner of a village became a *madang* for performance as long as people gathered. In other words, wherever theatricality happened, that was the *madang*. It was not an exact counterpart to the stage in the Western theatre, spatially separated from the audience’s seats. On the contrary, the *madang* was a kind of ‘open space’ where the areas to see and to be seen freely interact and communicate each other (Sa Jin-Shil 1997: 281-303), without the segregation by ‘the forth wall’. Therefore, the mentioned raised indoor platform stage and other gadgets such as props, backdrop, classes in the seats, and the division of stage and auditorium were all unprecedented in Korean theatre paradigm.

From *Pansori* to *Changgeuk*

As the western stage was ‘suddenly’ appeared, theatrical contents to fill this new vessel were also needed in urgent fashion. Hyeopyulsa committed itself to the duty, recruiting traditional theatricalities at hand, including street entertainers such as *changwu* (professional singer-actor), *mudong* (boy dancer), *kisaeng* (female entertainers)³, comic storytellers, tightrope walkers, hosting them within the enclosed

¹ The Korean Empire (大韓帝國; *Daehan Jeguk*; literally “Great Korean Empire”) was proclaimed in October 1897, after the Joseon dynasty officially exited the Imperial Chinese tributary system. It lasted until the annexation of Korea by Japan in August 1910.

² In 1907 it opened with a new name *Gwanin Gurakbu*, and in 1908 it became a private playhouse with a new name called *Wongaksa*.

³ *Kisaeng* (妓生) were female entertainers who were highly trained accomplished in the fine arts, poetry, and prose writing as well as singing and dancing. First appearing in the Goryeo period (918-1392) the *kisaeng* system continued to flourish during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). Having low social standing, they mostly worked for the

indoor stage, and showcased their talents to the audience (Lee Du-Hyun 1999: 27; Park Hwang 1976: 16-17). All these types of theatricalities including singing, acting, dancing, storytelling and acrobatics were combined together into a set program and presented in a 'variety show' format or burlesque type in western sense (Kim Kee-Hyung 2008: 16).

What is worth noting is that *Pansori* was also performed as a part of the set program. *Pansori* is a vocal music theatre performed by a soloist singing-actor and a percussionist who beats a *buk*, traditional Korean drum. First of all, a singing-actor plays a role as a narrator to deliver the whole story. The singing-actor also impersonates multiple characters appearing in the story told. Although delivered through the mouth and body of a single actor, the content is composed of dialogues between multiple characters. *Pansori*, in which singing characters perform a dramatic work, creates a kind of 'one-man folk opera' (Erven 1992: 108). The single actor's gestures embody the various characters, swiftly shifting from one to another. Thus, *Pansori*, composed of multiple characters, narratives and conversations among them, has the nature of drama and theatre in the Western sense, and seemed to be the most suitable for the Western theatre concept and stage convention. Consequently, *Pansori* became a first and easy pick to fill the newly introduced Westernized theatre space.

Once selected to fill the stage, *Pansori* went through the process of adapting itself to the newly installed indoor stage. The direction was to extract and visualize the essence of drama out of *Pansori*. To make *Pansori* a drama text suitable for the western stage, it was needed to reinforce the elements of action and dialogue, consequently reconstructing them in a sequence of actions and dialogues. First of all, multiple characters played by a single singing-actor had to be 'literally' divided. Accordingly, the roles and lines were distributed among multiple singing-actors. In other words, many actors play the part of the main characters and spoke the individual lines, which had an effect to visually intensify the conflict and 'drama' between characters.

The result was the birth of a new theatrical form called *Changgeuk*(唱劇) or 'Pansori opera' in which multiple singing-actors and musicians perform a dramatic work in traditional folk song style of *Pansori*. It was not the 'one-man opera' any more as *Pansori* was. Instead *Changgeuk* was the 'multi-men opera' include 20-30 actors and 30-50 orchestra musicians, which produced a spectacular extravaganza. *Changgeuk* has been recognized as the outcome of an attempt to extend the theatricality of *Pansori* in a positive way. *Changgeuk* is often regarded as the new theatre movement (Seo Yeon-Ho 1999: 249) and, therefore, is called '*Shingeuk*' (New Theatre). Accordingly, *Changgeuk* is recognized as the first modern play form in Korea (Yoo Min-Young 1987: 10).

As the first modern play form in Korea, *Changgeuk* began to develop in the following years. Along with the development of *Changgeuk*, on July 26, 1908, two years after

upper class people such as the royals, elites, officers, and rich patrons. In 1650s, all *kisaeng* were made slaves to the government. The Gabo Reform of 1894 officially abolished the class system of Joseon, and *kisaeng* became nominally free from slavery. During the subsequent decade, many of freed *kisaeng* spread throughout the country, continuing to work as entertainers in private sectors.

the close of Hyeopyulsa, the private playhouse Wongaksa(圓覺社) opened at the same site of Hyeopyulsa. Credited as the first private permanent theatre building in Korea, Wongaksa was established by a novelist Lee In-Jik with an intention to start a new theatre introduced from Japan (Kim Woo-Tak 1986: 13), and showed an effort to reconstruct popular *Pansori* pieces and adapt new-style novels called *Shinsoseol*(新小說) in the form of *Chnaggeuk*, aiming at the box-office success. For example, Lee In-Jik dramatized his own *shinsoseol* called *Eun-se-kye*(銀世界: *The Silver World*), trained the *Pansori* actors and finally presented for the first time on stage on November 13, 1908 (Lee Du-Hyun 1966: 27-28).

Despite the gaining of modernity, however, the formation of *Changgeuk* resulted in the loss as well. In the course of the transition from *Pansori* to *Changgeuk*, unique theatricalities of *Pansori* were subject to damage. *Pansori* depends on the *madang* quality as well as the collective participation of performer and spectator without the border between them. *Changgeuk* demanded for the separation of stage and auditorium by the fourth wall according to the principle of the western stage. To fit in the principle of the western stage, the collective spirit between actors and spectators, the core of the Korean theatrical tradition, should be eliminated from the stage. From then on, such tendency effectively reinforced the fixation of the western stage in the soil of the Korean theatre. In short, *Changgeuk* held its position on the starting line toward the fixation of the western stage in the Korean theatre, and the subsequent dismantlement of the Korean traditional theatricality was the beginning of the Korean modern theatre.

Question to the Modernity in Korean Theatre

Choe Nam-Soen, a prominent Korean historian and literary man of the time, recorded this historic moment, that is, the introduction of stage. He said “various and new types of equipment were hurriedly installed [inside the Hyeopryulsa] in order to entertain the honored guests” (Lee Du-Hyun 1994: 199). According to him, the indoor stage or the ‘equipment’ installed in the royal theatre was ‘new’ and modern to Korean theatre environment. With the introduction of the first indoor stage, the Korean theatre obtained the status of being modern. On the other hand, Choe’s record mentioned above raises a question. His expression “hurriedly installed” gives an impression that the modernization of Korean theatre was not the result of a natural order of time, but the outcome of impulsive and arbitrary decision. Like the indoor stage at Hyeopyulsa, the advent of *Changgeuk* was not the outcome of a natural order in gradual evolution. It was rather a sort of overnight makeshift hurriedly constructed in compliance with temporal and enforced demand. That is to say, Korean theatre produced a modern theatre form *Changgeuk* by forcefully cramming *Pansori* and its ‘*madang*’ (open space) quality into the enclosed space of indoor stage (Lee Du-Hyun 1966: 21). *Changgeuk* was the product of hasty modernization that lacked the consideration about the immanent values of the Korean traditional theatre (Seo Yeon-Ho 1999: 249-50).

Related to the birth of *Chnaggeuk*, the Japanese influence cannot be overlooked. In 1894, eight years before the completion of Hyeopyulsa, the Gabo Reform (1894-1896) took place, which is credited as officially the first modernization effort in

Korean history.⁴ At that time, Japan was enjoying the 30-year-long favor of modernization since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Japan could be a good model at hand for Korean government to take. Actually the Gabo Reform was based on the original reform bill presented by Japanese Ambassador Otori Keisuke, and established new government, military, legal, and financial system.⁵ Also, regarding the Japan's geographical advantage over the contiguity in distance, it must have been more effective for Korea, the late starter of modernization, to contact the western world through Japan rather than to contact directly. Japan could be an effective channel through which the Western theatre as a part of the Western culture and civilization was flowed into Korea.

At the same time, Japan functioned as 'cultural filter' through which the Western culture was received by the Korean society. *Chaggeuk* could be the result of this process. The advent of *Changgeuk* was the product of a hasty modernization lacking the consideration about the immanent artistic value of the Korean traditional theatre. The advent of this new and the first modern theatre form was no other than a thoughtless borrowing of the 'Japanesque' version of westernization and modernization, accommodated and adjusted by the Japanese taste and light of view.

As seen above, the introduction of the western stage in the Korean theatre, which had been credited to transform the Korean theatre into a modern status, was problematic and, furthermore, the nature of modernity in Korean theatre was questionable even from the beginning. As Choe maintains, the indoor stage playhouse was new and unexpectedly sudden and, therefore, strange and awkward enough to Korean theatre environment. Consequently, Hyeopyulsa, the first modern indoor theatre with a raised stage separated from spectators, was predicting a shift in paradigm of Korean theatre tradition and, at the same time, foreshadowing an uncomfortable and grotesque coexistence of the two conflicting paradigms, traditional and modern/western, indigenous and foreign, in the same space.

⁴ The name Gabo (甲午) comes from the name of the year 1894 in the traditional sexagenary cycle.

⁵ Reforms addressed were as following: discrimination based on the Feudal class system, slavery, underage marriage were abolished; administrative districts were reorganized; military and police systems were modernized; judicial systems were changed with new courthouse and judiciary laws; new monetary system allowed the use of Japanese currency; measurement system was changed to that of Japan's; *gwageo* system, the national civil service examinations, was replaced by a Japanese bureaucratic system (Lee Gil-Sang 40-43).

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