

A Yang for Every Yin

Dramatizations of Korean Classics

By John Holstein

Preface and Introduction

Preface

This book got its start in two Korean universities. The students needed a play in English, the teacher was interested in Korean culture—and the rest is history. So to speak.

From their inception, though, the plays developed in different ways. The writer of Chun Hyang Song started off in a big way. He wrote the script and the music of the full two-act musical for a full-scale production. At popular demand it soon encored to an even larger audience off campus. A few years later it was performed again at another major university. It was most recently selected for the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul as the play that would show Korea's best-loved story to the world, and was produced with a bigger budget and to wider acclaim. The writer of the other plays produced the script for the one-act play Harelip for a small theater, with an even smaller budget, and asked a musically-talented friend to write "a couple songs." After its first production it grew into a three-act play, with more songs, and was performed on bigger stages at two more universities. The other plays here developed in basically the same way. And now, since the plays' stories have been Korean favorites for hundreds of years, we think it's about time we put these plays into a book so that the world outside Korea can enjoy them.

I saw William Cleary's Chun Hyang Song back around 1984, when our English Department students at Sungkyunkwan University performed it, and I have been humming its tunes ever since. When students told me a few years after that performance that they needed a one-act play, the memory of this totally enjoyable piece of theatre inspired my first attempt, Harelip. After all my efforts, Cleary's Chun Hyang remains the benchmark, and in this book I have therefore served it like the finest wine, as a climax, at the end.

The title of our book presents the message that each of our stories delivers. It comes from a song in Harelip: "Though it's quite a fix you're in, / there's a thick for every thin, / there's a yang for every yin." The Chinese developed the system of yin and yang (eum-yang in Korean) almost 5,000 years ago, and it eventually became a basic principle in Taoism, Confucianism, Shamanism and Buddhism. This system represents the way the world and life work. Yin and yang separately stand for opposites; yin denotes dark, north, cold, female, earth and similar qualities, and yang

signifies light, south, warmth, male, heaven and the like. As important as their opposition, though, is their complementary and interactive nature — one opposite element or quality balances the other. Our stories reflect this principle: when there's too much of one human quality, things go wrong, and it takes the reverse quality to set things right again. In Harelip, for example, as the song says, the yang side of the Dragon King's personality got his liver into trouble, and he needed the yin nature of the Hare's liver to put things back in balance.

An ancient Chinese parable illustrates another aspect of yin and yang. In "The Old Frontier Man's Horse,"¹ Ong's horse ran away one day and ended up in the hands of a warlike tribe across the border. When the villagers expressed their sympathy, Ong told them with great equanimity, "There's a good turn for every misfortune." When his horse returned one fine day together with a marvelous steed and the villagers congratulated Ong on his good fortune, he told them, "There's misfortune for every fortune." And when Ong's son became a cripple when he fell from the new steed, Ong replied to his commiserating neighbors, "There's a fortune for every misfortune." Shortly after, when all the village's young men except Ong's son were killed trying to repulse a barbarian raiding party, Ong couldn't help feeling lucky. But shortly he mumbled to himself, "There is, however, misfortune for every fortune." He could just as well have said, "There's a yin for every yang."

While the plays in this book are intended for a combined readership of young adults and grownups, the introduction to the book and the afterwords to the plays may seem oriented more toward grownups. This reflects the nature of the plays: the stories themselves are interesting to readers of all ages, and they are interesting on more than one level and from more than one perspective.

The plays' songs are provided in MP3 files at www.seoulselection.com/books. Playbooks with full musical scores are available from the publisher, Seoul Selection. At the end of this book you can find an Appendix with a Glossary and a section that provides illustrations of properties in the plays.

Pronunciation of Korean words

The system used here for romanizing Korean words is the "Revised Romanization of Korean," promulgated by South Korea's Ministry of Tourism and Culture in 2000. The pronunciation of Korean vowels roughly reflects that of Latin vowels, except for the unrounded *o* in bought and *u* in book, which the Ministry's system romanizes as *eo* and *eu*. Consonants generally correspond to English consonants, except for the plosives. The Ministry's romanization system is not used for the names of certain characters in the plays. For the pronunciation of these exceptions, notes are provided on the "Characters" page of each play. The names of real people are spelled in accordance with the individual's preferred spelling.

Introduction

The plays in this book are dramatizations of stories that were popular in Korea's Chosun dynasty (1392 – 1910) and are still popular today. All of these stories were set down on paper in the nineteenth century, and thus give us an informative view of the society that existed before this “hermit kingdom” opened to the rest of the world. We can see the relationships between the classes, between age groups and between the genders; we learn about their values and we are given a picture of the way they lived their daily lives.

These stories were not created in the nineteenth century. Before they were put in written form they were passed down through the centuries from one generation to another. It is practically certain that three of the stories came from pre-Buddhist India. The basic stories in Harelip (*Sugung-ga*), The Money Bug (*Onggojip-jeon*) and The Gourds' Rewards (*Heungbu-ga*) are thought to date back to Hindu stories that provided the basis for Buddhist moral tales (*jataka*) from around the fourth century B.C.¹ They were brought from India to China with Buddhism, then came to Korea through China at some time between the second and fourth centuries A.D. Over several centuries the stories were transmitted as oral literature, then in the eighteenth century, along with *Chunhyang-ga* (Chun Hyang Song), appeared in *pansori* (a story presented by one performer in narrative and song); here they achieved the status of major works of art, with full theme and character development, laced with humor, philosophy and reference to the Chinese Classics. After the heyday of *pansori* the stories appeared in the form of *pansori* novella. Though the basic story in each play is thought to have originated centuries ago, because they were passed down orally they were presented in almost as many different ways and embellished with as many extra details as the number of people who told them. Like many of their genre they borrowed some of their events and characters, major and minor, from other stories already in existence.

The basic elements of folklore are as universal as the human heart. In Harelip's Hare we see Joel Chandler Harris' quick-witted, brazen-faced Bre'r Rabbit, and both Hare and Tortoise in our story resemble the personalities of Aesop's hare and tortoise. The other day on the radio Linda Ronstadt, with her rendition of “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” reminded me how far the ancient original Indian theme has traveled:

The buzzard took the monkey for a ride in the air.

The monkey thought that everything was on the square.

The buzzard tried to throw the monkey off his back.

The monkey grabbed his neck and said, “Now listen, Jack...”²

In Western folklore we have goblins similar to those in The Song Bag, nature intervenes with reward and punishment as it does in The Gourds' Rewards, true love conquers the evil that would thwart it, as it does in Chun Hyang Song, and super-

natural beings like Harelip's Goddess of Godliness and The Money Bug's Taoist immortal appear in the nick of time to save the day.

Confucians wrote the moral lessons into the stories; but loyalty, honesty, modesty and generosity are basics in any system of values. All of us will cluck our tongues at sadistic Byon Satdo in Chun Hyang Song, hypocritical Nolbu in The Gourds' Rewards, the vain hare in Harelip, greedy Grandma Lopside in The Song Bag, and miserly Ong Go-jip in The Money Bug. Our hearts go out to faithful Chun Hyang, generous Hungbu, loyal Tortoise. It would be difficult to find a person anywhere in this world who does not appreciate a good laugh; the hare's "instant concentrated rabbit-liver tablets," the goblins' solution for Grandma Lopside's greed, and Nolbu's ingenious methods for tormenting his younger brother register as favorably with Westerners as they do with Koreans.

Folklore tells us much about the society in which it evolved, and the dramatizations in this book have been written with an eye to presenting an accurate picture of that society. One of the most intriguing features of East Asian society is the intermingling of Confucianism, Shamanism, and religious (as opposed to philosophical) Taoism and Buddhism.³ The 104 guardians painting in a Buddhist temple, on the wall to the right of the Buddha image, is a good example of this blend: in the painting are Taoist deities, and the Big Dipper deity favored in Shamanism is symbolized by Confucian officials wearing garb of the court. In The Money Bug, Ong's instructor is a Buddhist monk who has the powers of a Taoist immortal and uses an amulet that a shaman might provide or that we might see hanging over the door of a Confucian gentleman's compound. And the main theme of every one of our plays is the Confucian "reward good and punish evil" and the Buddhist "avoid evil and follow good."⁴

Roles and ethics of eighteenth-century Korea were imported with neo-Confucianism from China and modified by the Korean monarchy and aristocracy. Neo-Confucianism's five principles governing human relations (*o-ryun*) required the ruler to be just and the subject to obey; the husband and wife to live in complementary harmony; the elder to provide for and guide the younger, and the younger to submit to the elder; and friends to be loyal to each other. In neo-Confucian society, however, these five relationships were often exploited by the stronger to strengthen their dominance over the weaker. Commoners and an even lower class were ruled by an aristocracy of absolute monarch and *yangban* families (*yangban* were aristocrats, similar to the mandarin of imperial China). The arrogant behavior of Byon Satdo, Nolbu and Ong Go-jip show us that aspect of these *yangban*.

When we witness the trouble that Nolbu's abusive behavior gets him into we discover that commoners in the eighteenth century didn't always regard their "betters" as better. This is where pansori comes in. All of the plays in this book, except the Song Bag, were performed as pansori. Its performances, in addition to providing entertainment and edification, often criticized the hypocrisy of the neo-Confucian *yangban* and their exploitation of the people. This performance art is...

a long form of vocal music (*sori*) in which [a *kwangdae*] sings a work of narrative literature with appropriate dramatic gesture... Accompanied by only a drummer...the *kwangdae* alternates between sung and spoken presentation. He performs within the area of a large mat (*pan*), where he stands, kneels, sits or moves as his story requires. His only props are his clothing, a fan, and, for some *kwangdae*, a handkerchief. At one moment, he is the narrator; at another, he becomes an actor playing the roles of his characters, with the voice and gestures appropriate to each.”⁵

A complete pansori performance in the past lasted up to six or seven hours (these days they are usually abridged and last between one and two hours), which provides us an indication of the stories’ intricate plot and character development.⁶

Pansori began centuries ago as simple entertainment but, by the eighteenth century, three factors were working together to turn it into a major, sophisticated form of art. One factor was the evolution of a market economy and bourgeois class; commoners began to acquire wealth, which supported development of those arts not patronized by the aristocracy. This increasing wealth of the commoners produced another factor: they feared the aristocracy less and hesitated less in showing their resentment. One of pansori’s major roles, after all, was to express satire. And a third factor — a government weakened by corruption and factionalism — also emboldened the bourgeois supporters of pansori.⁷

Pansori became an established performance art in the nineteenth century; it lost popularity in the first half of the twentieth century, when Korea became preoccupied with modernizing, but has been in a state of revival since the 1960s. There is a conscious attempt on the part of modern Koreans to understand and appreciate their traditional culture, and pansori’s current popularity has much to do with scholarship and nostalgia. While pansori itself seems to be more of an object of intellectual and nostalgic interest than entertainment, the stories that it performed are still very popular in themselves. In third-millennium Seoul we often see these stories in major film, television and theatrical productions.

Pansori, like the Koreans who created and sang it, reflected Korea’s four systems of belief: Shamanism, Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. Pansori has its origins in Shamanism. This animistic system of belief, Korea’s indigenous way of understanding the world and coping with it, was being practiced for centuries before the other systems arrived. “The roots of pansori are intertwined with those of the narrative shaman song.”⁸ The *kwangdae*, who sang it, were members of shaman families; the shaman was a woman of the family and often her assistant (usually her husband) became a pansori singer. But Shamanism wasn’t pansori’s only influence. Shamanism adopted the pantheon of Taoist deities, and its personalities and symbols, so it is natural that these Taoist elements often appear in pansori. Buddhism also enriched pansori, by contributing tales originally created centuries before for proselytizing.⁹ The close relationship between Buddha and animistic gods, and Buddhist nuns and shamans existed ever since Shilla times, to the extent that it was of-

ten difficult to distinguish Buddhist and shaman rituals and beliefs. The influence of this milieu in stories like *Nolbu-ga* (our The Gourds' Rewards), *Sugung-ga* (Harelip) and *Onggojip-jeon* (The Money Bug) is particularly striking. The *kwangdae* came from a close relationship between Shamanism and Buddhism—they trained for several years in temples, where they learned Buddhist songs. In addition to the Shaman, Taoist and Buddhist features, *pansori* in its later years also shows the influence of Confucianism. Both performers and researchers recognize in the five major *pansori* the five Confucian principles that govern human relationships: “wifely fidelity in the Song of Chun Hyang...; filial piety in the Song of Shim Cheong...; sibling order in the Song of Hungbu...; loyalty in the Song of the Underwater Palace...; and chivalry in the Song of the Red Cliff...”¹⁰

The plays in this book present another noteworthy aspect of Chosun dynasty Korean society. In those days women, who had in the previous dynasties enjoyed relatively equal status with men, were completely subjugated to men. At the end of the nineteenth century the American missionary Gale described the status of Korean women:

[The Korean male] has a profound contempt for woman, speaking of her generally as *kejip* or female. He takes for wife the one his father bargains for, raising no question as to her looks, health or avoirdupois. She is a subject altogether beneath the consideration of a member of the male sex... He...never loses an opportunity of showing how little is the place she occupies in his extensive operations... If the truth were told, however, we would know that the little woman within that enclosure is by no means the cipher he pretends her to be; but that she is really mate and skipper of the entire institution, and that no man was ever more thoroughly under petticoat government than this same Korean gentleman.¹¹

These stories depict woman's lack of identity in public life: in our plays, wives have no name of their own, except for Chun Hyang, and are scripted simply as some man's wife. Women's anonymity, however, did not reflect the influence that they exercised over men and events, as you will see in *Chun Hyang Song*, *The Gourds' Rewards* and *The Song Bag*.

Folklore is a living thing. Like any form of life it maintains its basic nature even as it adapts and develops. Our stories have changed from era to era and locale to locale. The characters in Harelip's Indian progenitor, for example, were a monkey and a crocodile who was trying to get the monkey's heart for his ailing mate. China, whose culture has the monkey but not the crocodile, retained the monkey and replaced the crocodile couple with a turtle couple. Korea, which does not have the monkey but does have the hare and knows the dragon, in its earliest version of the story replaced the Chinese monkey with a hare and the turtle's sickly mate with the daughter of the Dragon King of the East Sea. By the eighteenth century the one whom the tortoise (or turtle, depending on the version) is trying to help is not the

Dragon King's daughter but the King himself. Harelip's original Indian story evolved over two thousand years from a simple fable in the sutras into orally transmitted versions, to pansori (Song of the Sea Palace), to the pansori novella (Tale of the Hare), to stage productions with several players (*changgeuk*¹²), to movies, and, with this book, into a play in English. The stories in *The Money Bug* and *The Gourds' Rewards* developed in basically the same way, from pre-Christian era beginnings to popular productions in the third millennium. (The stories in *Chun Hyang Song* and *The Song Bag* are thought to have originated in the Christian era.)

The dramatizations in this book can be considered composites of the many versions that came before them. Each of these plays had several "original" versions; there were four pansori versions of Harelip, for example, and several more pansori novellas. The pansori and pansori novella versions of Harelip's story have at least ten different endings. In previous versions of all of these plays there are already nearly as many different endings as there are versions. For the plays in this book, elements that Western readers are expected to appreciate the most have been selected from the many varieties available. Minor characters have been promoted or demoted, devices have been modified, events added. To illustrate, the hare in Harelip has been given gender, the character of Hungbu's wife (in *The Gourds' Rewards*) has been strengthened, a scene has been added to *The Money Bug* to account for Ong's year of exile. Major characters and events in these plays, however, are true to one or another of the several Korean versions of each story, and great care has been exercised to prevent any of the content from conflicting with the basic plot and spirit of the tales and the reality of Korean culture.

Notes

The Preface

1. Sae-ong-ji-ma in Korean. The same characters are sae4-weng1-zhi1-ma3 in Chinese, "but the Chinese don't say it that way. They [use a different third character and] say...sae4 weng1 shi1 ma3." (Personal communication from Gary Rector, musical director for this book, April 1, 2004.)

The Introduction

1. Read a brief explanation about the jataka tales in "Jataka Tales" in the Khan Web site (see References). Don't let the children's music mislead you into thinking that the content is not accurate.

2. *Words and Music* by Nat King Cole and Irving Mills (1944 Mills Music Inc.). From the CD *'round Midnight*, by Linda Ronstadt, 1986.

3. Though Christianity may seem at first glance to have declined participation, according to some researchers and believers a good number of individual adherents employ practices of the non-Christian beliefs. "In Asian countries of great affluence,

such as South Korea, ‘Prosperity Theology’ has long been taught from the pulpits. At its core is this reasoning: The more you give to God, the more he will bless. Forget him, and hard times are bound to come. In South Korea, such thinking reflects a strong shamanistic influence.” Ro.

4. The Confucian term is *gweon-seon-jing-beol* and the Buddhist term is *je-ak-mo-jak jung-seon-bong-haeng*. In, 1995, p. 17.

5. Pihl, p. 4. In this book Pihl presented his translation of The Story of Shim Cheong, one of the major five pansori. For a visual and audio experience of pansori, try the English-language site <http://madang.ajou.ac.kr/~moon/pansori.htm>. For many more audio samples, find “Music from Korea – Korean Traditional Music” in Google, click on “Cached,” and scroll down to “Oh, JongSook Pansori 5 Madang.” If these sites are not available, just type “pansori” in your favorite Internet search service.

6. The movie *Seopyonje* (or *Sopyonje*; directed by Im Kwon-taek, available with English subtitles) is an excellent introduction to pansori music and to the lives of twentieth-century kwangdae. Reviews and a short clip are available on the Internet.

7. Park, p. 27.

8. Pihl, p. 8.

9. In, Gweon-hwan, 1995, pp. 166-169.

10. Park, p. 6.

11. Gale, p. 189.

12. The first changgeuk was produced in 1908. The main difference between changgeuk and the stage play is that the dialog in changgeuk is songs that are based on the songs in pansori; lines are not spoken. Except for *The Song Bag*, which is not based on pansori, all of the stories in this book have been performed as changgeuk.