Choi In-Suh and the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a

ALAN C. HEYMAN

The Tae-Ch’wi-t’a (“Great Winds and Percussion”), also known as Mury- ong-ji-kok (“Military-style Processional Music”) was played for royal processions when the king left the palace gates, and also for other high- ranking officials. This traditional military-style processional music, which was valorous in nature, fell into disuse after the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910 when it was replaced by a western-style military band. With this displacement, the number of traditional musicians continued to dwindle, and the musical tradition was almost lost and forgotten. However, after the liberation from Japan in 1945, the then National Classical Music Institute of Korea, (presently the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Cen-ter) undertook a revival of this music and its musical organization, and so it is that it survives to this day due largely to the efforts of the late Choi In-suh (1892-1978), the last remaining conical oboe (taepyong-so) player, the sole survivor of the traditional processional music band who devoted himself to instructing the musicians of the National Classical Music Institute (NCMI) in the performance of this work.

Though he was born in Pochon, Kyonggi Province, Choi In-suh later took up residence in Seoul. And though, from the age of eight, he was sent to study in a Chinese letter school, a practice which was common at the time, his emotions were greatly stirred upon hearing the sound of the conical oboe, a sound which he deeply loved, thereby portending his fate as one whose destiny lay in the performing arts. So it was that, at the age of 16, he sought out the famous conical oboe player Pak Soon-o in the East Gate area of Seoul at the end of the year 1908. By often lighting his long bamboo tobacco pipe and frequently treating him to wine and food, Choi was able to win Pak over as a devoted teacher, who taught him the de- [page 92] tailed technique of performing the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a and other works on the conical oboe.

With the decline and fall of the Choson―or Yi―dynasty, Pak Soon- o, who had once been a royal processional musician affiliated with the palace and royal military installations, in order to maintain his livelihood, barely eked out a living by occasionally playing the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a on the radio, less frequently playing on SP recordings, sometimes at ceremonies held in Buddhist temples, and, along with Choi In-suh and other displaced musicians, parading along the streets of Seoul to advertise current theatrical programs. In this way the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a did not fall entirely into oblivion. However, it never was able to regain the glory and magnificence it had once known.

The English language press in Korea announced at the end of November 2004 that Seoul would hold a reenactment of the changing of the royal guard ceremony at the front gate of Toksu palace starting in December of 2004 with 30 performers dressed in Choson-era military- style costumes and yellow-garbed musicians playing royal processional military-type music, now commonly referred to as Ku Kunak (“Old Military Music”), on traditional musical instruments.

But actually the history of this music dates back to long before the days of the Choson dynasty. It is recorded that Koch’wi-ak (“Drum and Wind Music”) (Chinese: Ku Chui), a generic form for either ceremonial or military-type music of the Later Han dynasty of China, was introduced into the Korean royal court from the northern part of Han China (c. 25- 200 AD) along with such musical instruments as the conical oboe and a type of aulos or horn, both of which were played at banquets and similar festivities held at court by a celebrated group of musicians known as the Hwangmun Koch’wi (the “Yellow-Wind and Percussion Ensemble”), probably called such because their costumes were yellow in color, a practice that continued to be followed by processional musicians down through Korea’s long history right up to the present day.

Similar instruments, such as drums and horns, were used in the Paekje Kingdom (c. 18 BC-600 AD). The earliest recorded use of the term Koch’wi is a statement saying that it was played at sacrifices to heaven and earth in Paekje in the year 238 AD, but no further details as to the nature of the music are given. It is also known from murals in a 4th century[page 93] tomb in northwestern Korea that the type of music known as Koch’wi in Han Dynasty China was practiced in the Han colony centered around Lolang (present-day Pyongyang). It is therefore safe to assume that Koch’wi music and instruments were used during the Three Kingdoms period of Shilla, Paekje, and Koguryo, and perhaps even earlier, and continued to be in use down through the Unified Shilla period (c. 713- 935) and beyond.

It is recorded that musicians of the Shilla court were sent to Tang dy-nasty China to study Koch’wi music, and the fact that this imposing and magnificent music was employed in court ceremonials and military processionals of the succeeding Koryo Dynasty is revealed in the music section of the “History of Korya” This music was also employed by royal monarchs in ceremonies honoring the deities of heaven and earth and fa-mous mountains and rivers, for the coronation of a king, to accompany the royal palanquin when it entered and left the palace gates, the marriage of a crown prince, the betrothal of a princess, and upon the departure of a gen-eral for the front and other similar military expeditions.

A 12th century Koryo source describes a procession with large atten-dant bands, including foreign ensembles, preceding and following the royal palanquin. Mongol influence during later Koryo is suggested by the fact that military band musicians were known as chorachi, a Mongol word meaning ‘draftee.” Additional foreign influence is also revealed in the fact that musicians performed music and dances imported from such Central Asian areas as Bokara and Samarkand, and from India as well.

During the succeeding Choson period, it is recorded that, for the first time, during the 37th year of King Sukjong (c. 1711), these musicians accompanied a diplomatic mission to Japan, the number of persons in the retinue totaling 494, the processional of which can be found in a screen painting in the possession of the National History Compilation Committee.

It was about the year 1844 that a long narrative song (kasa) came into being called “The Song of Seoul,” which included the following lines:

“After the military musicians are led in a royal procession outside the Great South Gate by the civil authorities in charge, they are given the order to commence playing the Tae-ch’wi-t’a (“Great Winds and Percussion”). [page 94]

Observe these musicians with their straw hats

Into which peacock feathers have been inserted,

And notice their bright yellow uniforms

With a deep blue sash tied ‘round their waists;

They do the cymbals clash thrice and the large drum beat three times,

Whereupon the military music doth commence.

Hear the stern and mighty voice of the clarion,

And the mournful cry of the conical oboe;

See the banners floating so buoyantly in the air,

And listen to the stately sound of the large gong.

In the midst of all,

Gaze upon the musicians whose hands be covered

by long white sleeves;

And hear them as they, in unison,

Beat upon the parade drum.

Ah, is the sound not magnificent,

And be not the spectacle stern and mighty?”

In addition to processionals, these musicians were also, according to the “Illustrations of Court Banquets,” compiled in 1901 during the reign of King Kojong, required to be in attendance at court banquets when the “Boating Dance” and the Hangjang-mu, a type of sword dance, were performed, the accompanying music which they played, once again, being that of Tae-ch’wi-t’’a.

However, with the demise of the Choson Dynasty and the resultant loss of the nation’s sovereignty, the great and magnificent royal processions slowly came to an end and, as a result the royal processional musicians and music were eventually replaced by a Western-style military band attached to the royal palace under the lead of a German bandmaster. The processional musicians of old thereafter became a relic of the past, jobless musicians eking out a marginal existence by engaging in such activities as advertising various types of theatrical show―circuses, magic shows, musicals, mask and puppet dramas, and other forms of outdoor folk art performances―marching to and fro along the streets with banners at the front and rear, playing their instruments as loudly as they could in hopes of attracting as many people as possible to the theater. [page 95]

Following the establishment of the Korean government in 1948, attention was gradually given over to the preservation of significant tradi-tional cultural items, eventually including that of the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a. As a result, a 52-man Tae-Ch’wi-t’a performing group under the guidance and instruction of Choi In-suh was organized at the National Classical Music Institue (NCMI). On October 1, 1961, in commemoration of Armed Forces Day, this group performed the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a in a military parade in a manner that was both stately and dignified. Being so moved by the majesty of this music, the need was felt by the Korean Army for the formation of a military band in the style of the old tradition. In 1968 a traditional-style military processional band consequently was formed, almost 70 years after the old-style band was replaced by one from the West in the 1900s. In 1971 the Tae-ch’wi-t’a was designated “Important Intangible Cultural Property No. 46” by the Korean government and Choi, as a master performer of this work, was designated a “Human Cultural Treasure.”

Even though the reed of the conical oboe is comparatively small, it produces quite a loud sound, but the performance of this instrument re-quires a strong breathing capacity. Even when Choi In-suh was in his 80s, however, he still could effortlessly produce a sound that was both superb and exquisite in nature, a talent that drew the wonder, amazement, and awe of young musicians, a magnificent feat which he was able to maintain until the end of his days. He also continued despite his advanced age to perform at Buddhist temple ceremonies and instruct the younger generation of performers with both joy and ardent devotion. The conical oboe he played throughout his long life is preserved intact as a treasured antique in the exhibition hall of famous musicians in the NCMI museum. Surely his artistic passion and spirit can be reclaimed in the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a of today, which he acknowledges with a deep gratifying smile when he gazes down from the great beyond.

Despite the fact that Choi was the teacher of the musicians of the NCMI and others, including Yi Kun-hee of the Hansori Korean Music Institute, some differences between his original version and their interpretation exist to this day. For example, Choi’s version opens with a 2-measure introduction that is no longer played and has been lost, along with an abridged version and a variation in 12/8 that also no longer ex- [page 96]ist. In addition, Choi used a 6-finger playing technique, whereas the NCMI and Yi use a five-finger playing technique. Along with this, the NCMI and Yi have written a 5-line staff notation of the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a that begins on c, but should be c-flat. Here, however, Yi’s notation is correct, but in the next to last measure, c-flat should be a-natural, and in the final measure, a-natural should be a-flat. Also, in the next to last measure of the NCMI, b-flat should be a-natural, and in the final measure, a-natural should be a-flat. Both the NCMI and Yi additionally use a key signature with three flats. However, it is felt that no key signature should be used because such accidentals as c-flat and f-flat occur frequently. In addition, the NCMI uses an alla breve (2/2) time signature, which is questionable. Here, it is felt that a time signature of 6/4 is more appropriate. Added to this, the drum rhythm is incorrectly notated, and, what is more, Yi’s version has no time signature indicated at all.

Alan C. Heyman, a researcher of traditional Korean music, dance, and drama, studied the Tae-Ch’wi-t’a and the conical oboe with Choi In-suh for many years and performed with him at Buddhist temple ceremonies.