From Traditional Opera to Modern Music Theatre?

Recent Experiments in *Ch’anggŭk*

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**Introduction**

*Ch’anggŭk* is a staged version of the traditional Korean art of storytelling *p’ansori* and has been open to experiments since its earliest days.[[1]](#footnote-1) Born in the early 20th century out of the encounter between traditionally trained *p’ansori* singers and modern influences from Japan, the West and, possibly, China, up until today this hybrid genre suffers the fate of other “traditionesque” arts in post-colonial societies. On the one hand, *ch’anggŭk* is not traditional enough to become a proper “icon of identity” (like *p’ansori*).[[2]](#footnote-2) On the other hand, *ch’anggŭk* appears old-fashioned enough to fail in reaching wider audiences eager for—mostly Western—genres that promise modern state-of-the-art entertainment (such as musicals) or are considered to carry more cultural capital (such as opera or spoken theatre).[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Ch’anggŭk* enjoyed popular and commercial success until well into the 1950s, today the majority of performances are stately-sponsored. When *ch’anggŭk* began to lose audiences to the rising film industry, the young Park Chung-hee regime saw a chance to polish up its image as a cultural patron. Eager to establish—and if necessary, to invent—a distinctively Korean genre of traditional music theatre able to compete with those of other Asian countries, the government supported the foundation of a resident *ch’anggŭk* ensemble at the National Theater and thus institutionalized the genre. In 1962, the National Changgeuk Company (NCCK, Kungnip *Ch’anggŭk*tan) officially set off for what Killick calls the “search for Korean traditional opera”. Since then, the NCCK has staged over hundred productions and, more than any other ensemble, continues to dominate the way *ch’anggŭk* is produced and perceived.

Under different directors and cultural policies, the NCCK conducted various experiments in content and style. Killick describes these ongoing attempts of finding an adequate format for the “national” genre as an oscillation between two directions deemed incompatible: traditionality and popularity.[[4]](#footnote-4) On the one hand, attempts to bring *ch’anggŭk* closer to its “parent art” *p’ansori* stress the genre’s traditional roots; on the other hand, a different use of the theatrical means available, including modern technology and stage machinery, help to bridge the gap to more popular performing arts.

Since the 1990s directors from a variety of backgrounds turned more and more away from the traditional roots of *ch’anggŭk* and made experimentation and innovation their driving force. At the same time, the distinction between “traditional” (*chŏnt’ong*) and “newly-created” (*ch’angjak*) *ch’anggŭk* gained in importance.[[5]](#footnote-5) In an essay published in 1998, *p’ansori* scholar Yu Yŏng-dae[[6]](#footnote-6) proposes a reform of *ch’anggŭk* productions methods in order for the genre to regain its former popularity and to finally find its identity. Besides the acceptance of *ch’anggŭk*’s inherent difference from *p’ansori*, more productive collaborations, and a simplification of dramatic language for better understanding, he suggests the establishment of “a fixed, repeatedly performed repertory” for *ch’anggŭk*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

During his term as artistic director of the NCCK from 2006 until 2011, Yu could realize some of his proposals. Concerning repertory-building, his strategy is twofold, focusing on large-scale *chŏnt’ong* *ch’anggŭk* based on classical *p’ansori* pieces on the one hand, while at the same time staging smaller, more experimental *ch’angjak* pieces on the other.[[8]](#footnote-8) One of the biggest successes of this era was *Cheong*, a technically sophisticated version of the well-known *p’ansori* piece *Simch’ŏng-ga*, featuring dozens of musicians, dancers, and singers.[[9]](#footnote-9) In contrast, the “Young Ch’anggŭk”-series (Chŏlmŭn Ch’anggŭk) consisted of more modern adaptations, including *ch’anggŭk* versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Sanbul*, a 1962 play about the Korean War.[[10]](#footnote-10) These pieces were usually shown in smaller venues that allow for a more intimate and direct experience of the performance.

The “National Repertory Season” (Kungnip Rep’ŏtori Sijŭn), inaugurated by newly appointed director of the National Theater An Ho-sang in 2012, breaks with this twofold concept by putting new pieces on the centre stage. Only one of the five main productions of the first season is based on a canonical *p’ansori* work (*Sugung-ga*). Another one is a recreation of a non-canonical “lost” *p’ansori* piece (*Paebijang-jŏn*). The sources of the other three productions include a traditional folk tale unrelated to *p’ansori* (*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*), a novel from the 1970s that was turned into a hit-movie in 1993 (*Sŏp’yŏnje*), and a Greek Tragedy (*Medea*).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Based on my own viewing experiences, video recordings from the archive of the National Theater, and promotional material of the productions, the following discussion will focus on three aspects of these new pieces: Their stories and themes, the music and songs employed, and the role of the narrator. What can *ch’anggŭk* talk about today and in which ways? What do the five productions of the first National Repertory Season 2012–13 offer their audiences? By trying to answer these questions, I hope to further pinpoint the aesthetic and social location of the genre in contemporary Korean society and to find out in which direction *ch’anggŭk* is heading.

**Stories and Themes**

Apart from occasional adaptations of other traditional material or historical sources, the majority of *ch’anggŭk* productions have been based on one of the five canonical pieces of *p’ansori*, the “five *madang*”, with the most famous piece *Ch’unhyang-ga* leading the count. In his analysis, Killick identifies the general theme of most classical *ch’anggŭk* stories, in particular *Ch’unhyang-ga*, as “resistance to penetration”, a reaction to national fears rooted in the colonial experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) What kind of works are staged and what themes do they deal with? Does the trend towards new pieces coincide with different underlying themes – or is recent *ch’anggŭk*, so to speak, old wine in new bottles?

German director Achim Freyer, who is introduced in the pamphlet as “Brecht’s last student”, certainly lives up to this title – his adaptation of the classical *p’ansori* piece *Sugung-ga* (“Song of the Underwater Palace”) looks strikingly different from everything that has been shown as *ch’anggŭk* before.[[13]](#footnote-13) Freyer uses large masks and a colorful stage design to create a playground for a critical re-interpretation of the traditional plot. Although most of the existing lyrics remain unchanged, Freyer turns the adventures of a loyal turtle, a cunning rabbit, and a dragon king who suffers from a strange disease and depends on the rabbit’s liver as a cure, into a modern allegory of class struggle between “the ruling class” represented by the underwater world and “individuals fighting alone” on the mainland.[[14]](#footnote-14)

For *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, the second production that premiered in November 2012, dramatist Chŏng Pok-kŭn and theatre director Han T’ae-suk modernized the well-known folk tale about two girls whose spirits haunt a village. Set in a suburban residential area, the ghost story becomes a “thriller *ch’anggŭk*” (thus the tagline) about a middle-class family torn apart while the police force tries to unravel the dark secrets of the neighborhood. Strong lighting with spotlights isolating single characters on stage, as well as the occasional use of shock effects such as a sudden lightning blast evoke a nerve-wrecking trip in the human subconsciousness. Although taking a different direction, this production evokes in many scenes the successful horror movie *The Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) that is based on the same story.

Staged in December 2012, *Paebijang-jŏn* might be considered the most “conservative” production of the National Repertory Season. Although not part of the remaining “five madang”, the original *p’ansori* piece *Paebijang-t’aryŏng* was performed frequently until the canon of *p’ansori* was reduced to its current form in the 19th Century[[15]](#footnote-15). In reconstructed form, *Paebijang-jŏn* has been staged as *ch’anggŭk* several times and a leaflet advertises this production as a “return after sixteen years”. *Paebijang-jŏn* tells the story of Chief Aide Pae who is sent on a mission to Jejudo, an island off the southern shore of Korea. Despite his vows to remain faithful to his wife during the trip, he soon falls for the charms of the local women, gets seduced and, eventually, ridiculed. Staged as a light-hearted comedy with a slight erotic touch, the piece ends, in a very traditional way, with a party where all entanglements dissolve into laughter.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Sŏp’yŏnje*, shown in March 2013, is based on a collection of short novels from the 1970s by Yi Ch’ŏng-jun. Yi tells a nostalgic story about a patchwork family of itinerant *p’ansori* singers who try to make a living in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–53). More famous than the novel is Im Kwŏn-t’aek’s cinematic adaptation from 1993, a surprising box office hit that rekindled popular interest in traditional music and culture. The *ch’anggŭk* version by acclaimed musical director Yun Ho-jin draws on both sources but, in contrast to the flashback-driven narrative of the book and the movie, follows a linear structure: In the first act, the two young half-siblings learn *p’ansori* from their (step-)father but get separated when they begin to develop romantic feelings for each other. The second act is set decades later and focuses on the brother’s search for his sister and – ultimately – his country’s lost tradition. Although the *ch’anggŭk* adaptation *Sŏp’yŏnje* puts the emphasis on the emotional relations of the patchwork family, it is also a celebration of *p’ansori*, a tale about artistic passion and excess.

*Medea* is the first *ch’anggŭk* adaptation of a Greek tragedy and one of the few productions of the genre based on non-Korean sources. In earlier cases, “Koreanization” of the content was a common means to make a foreign piece fit the format.[[17]](#footnote-17) Medea, however, remains Medea from Colchis, the Barbarian princess who follows her fiancé Jason to his home of Iolcus only to find out that he intends to wed another woman. Plotwise, the adaptation follows Euripides’ drama closely, up until Medea’s murder of her own children and her subsequent escape. In the production notes, playwright Han Arŭm explains that her feminist interpretation of the piece targets the strict social demands of women, in particular mothers, and asks: “Aren’t you attributing a husband’s faults to his wife, that of children to their mother or that of your son to your daughter-in-law?”[[18]](#footnote-18) Director Sŏ Chae-hyŏng draws a connection between Medea’s rage over her husband’s infidelity and the “Korean” emotion of *han*.[[19]](#footnote-19) The expression of this ambivalent state of mind, often a form of suffering from inescapable injustice, is strongly associated with the rough, “painful” voice of *p’ansori*, making *Medea* a plausible object of re-interpretation in the style of *ch’anggŭk*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Most of the new *ch’anggŭk* pieces deal, at the surface, with universal themes. Class struggle (*Sugung-ga*), collective repression (*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*), and the restrictions imposed on women (*Medea*) are, first and foremost, phenomena related to the human existence rather than to the peculiar historical, geographical, and political situation of Korea. Nevertheless, these issues have specific local implications – especially when brought up in a society that struggles in particular with competitiveness, gender discrimination, and an unresolved past. Still, the obsession with national fears visible in earlier productions of traditional pieces seems to have given room to a focus on social problems. *Paebijang-jŏn* and *Sŏp’yŏnje*, too, while dealing with ostentatively Korean themes, stress comedy and personal drama over underlying traumata. Although the National Repertory Season does not abandon *ch’anggŭk*’s close relation with Korean issues, the aspiration for universality – maybe another form of national trauma? – is clearly visible.

**Music and Song**

While the musical accompaniment in early *ch’anggŭk* was modeled on the minimalism of *p’ansori*, its scope and diversity soon expanded. Most recent productions feature a large orchestra of traditional musicians which makes fixed scores and a conductor necessary. With regard to its musical material, *ch’anggŭk* is highly eclectic and presents a wide variety of traditional Korean music (*kugak*), amounting to “a fairly comprehensive anthology of *kugak* styles and techniques”.[[21]](#footnote-21) *Ch’anggŭk*’s eclecticism also includes the songs. Although the characteristic singing style of *p’ansori* is the main means of expression, other vocal genres such as sung literati poetry or folk songs are often used in fitting situations, particularly in the form of diegetic performances within the fictional frame. Presenting the large variety of *kugak* – and *kugak* only – all wrapped up in one piece stresses the unity and independence of Korean traditional music and, as Killick argues, in extension constructs the Korean nation as a unified and independent entity.[[22]](#footnote-22) What kinds of music and songs are employed in the National Repertory Season and how do they relate to the larger discourses of the genre?

The music of *Sugung-ga* is fairly eclectic, fitting the plot – for instance, the dragon king’s palace calls for court music –, and in this sense conventional. The most striking feature are the masks worn by all singers except for the narrator. Although the use of microphones renders the songs clearly audible, hearing the electronically amplified voices of masked singers makes a rather peculiar experience. Most vocalization techniques of *p’ansori* highlight the physical production of the sounds, sometimes even the painfulness of this process. In *Sugung-ga*, however, the act of singing remains invisible and makes the performance at times appear like that of an automatical singing device that moves without human influence. While this effect might be interpreted as a comment on the anonymous mechanisms of social power structures, it proves difficult to relate to the singers and the characters they embody. When the singers remove their masks at the end for the curtain call, a collective gasp of relief seemed to spread through the auditorium, in recognition of the hardships the “disembodied” singers suffered behind their masks.

*Sŏp’yŏnje* and *Medea* likewise employ a fairly conventional *kugak* ensemble for accompaniment that remains hidden within the orchestra pit. *Sŏp’yŏnje* is rather unusual, however, in its use of *p’ansori* singing, which is, unlike in most *ch’anggŭk* productions, not the main means to transmit the dialogues. The majority of plot-relevant lines are rather spoken than sung and the orchestral music is mostly limited to the overture and transmission pieces. However, throughout the performance the actors present many famous excerpts from different *p’ansori* pieces (*nundaemok*) as diegetic music, accompanying themselves on the drum. The fact that *Sŏp’yŏnje*, rather than being based on a traditional *p’ansori* piece, is a story *about p’ansori* with characters who practice, rehearse, and perform on various occasions, makes this “jukebox *ch’anggŭk*” possible.

The music in *Medea* is, as the pamphlet notes, “through-sung” or rather “through-composed”, as there are in fact several spoken scenes. *Ch’anggŭk* productions usually follow the episodic structure of the *p’ansori* pieces they are based upon, resulting in a series of short numbers connected by spoken dialogue or narrative parts that drive the plot forward. In *Medea*, in contrast, the different scenes are connected by the music, resulting in a continuous soundscape that leaves hardly room for scene applause. This notable feature is linked to another first in the history of *ch’anggŭk*. Composer Hwang Ho-jun is responsible both for instrumental composition (*chakkok*) and vocal composition (*chakch’ang*), tasks that are usually divided between two persons: a composer and, in most cases, an experienced *p’ansori* singer who re-arranges existing melodies to fit the respective lyrics.[[23]](#footnote-23) By abandoning this division of labor, *Medea* attains a musical unity that is likewise reflected in the box-like stage that separates the performers even more from the auditorium than the regular proscenium stage.

Instead of a full orchestra, *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* employs a small ensemble of five musicians, members of the fusion *kugak* group AUX (*han’gŭl* spelling: Ŏksŭ). Using only a few traditional instruments as well as keyboards, an electric bass, various kinds of percussion, and pre-recorded sounds, they produce atmospheric background music for the thriller plot. Right from the start, the overture sets the scene with a series of slightly disharmonic string-sounds, squawking woodwind vibratos, electronic sounds reminiscent of the score from Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, and the rhythm of bongo drums. This chaotic soundscape slowly rises in volume and tempo and suddenly turns into the recorded sound of a siren. Then a spotlight reveals an actress in police uniform who starts to report an incident about a missing person, switching from formal speech to *p’ansori* singing in mid-sentence. Other characters add small parts to the unfolding plot in a similar way, changing between different forms of speaking (casual talk, stage-acting pronunciation, choral speech) or singing, respectively. A few trot-like songs interrupt this manifold collage of voices and evoke a nostalgic atmosphere, particularly in the last scene, when the older sister, now definitely heading to the realms of death, leaves the stage while singing “Another day goes by…”

In *Paebijang-jŏn*, the music is provided by a handful of musicians who are sitting on stage, right next to the action. The music seems, in contrast to the other productions that tend to use pre-composed scores, mostly improvised. Some scenes of diegetic music – a sailor song during the boat trip, banquet songs at the party, or folk songs performed throughout the piece by the chorus – do not stand out, but are naturally accompanied the “on-stage” ensemble. Among the productions of the National Repertory Season, *Paebijang-jŏn* comes closest to the “historical informed performance” that Killick witnessed at the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts.[[24]](#footnote-24) Besides the minimalist stage design and music, the production also stresses improvisation and comedic scenes, features associated with *p’ansori*, and is consequently promoted as “traditional *ch’anggŭk*”.[[25]](#footnote-25)

While some of the new productions follow the established *kugak*-eclecticism (*Sugung-ga*, *Paebijang-jŏn*), there seems to be a trend towards music more custom-tailored to the specific piece, instead of re-arranging or sampling existing material. Most obviously, in *Medea* the through-composed soundtrack is the expression of a single artistic vision. In *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, too, the instrumental music is clearly subordinate to the plot, at some points bordering on functional “effect” music. The various means of vocal expression are likewise used as a dramatic means to tell the story from multiple angles. Between tradition and innovation, the “jukebox *ch’anggŭk*” *Sŏp’yŏnje* is a special case: The songs that are performed on stage throughout the piece are required by the plot but effectively constitute an “anthology”, albeit limited for the most part to *p’ansori*.

These different uses of music, instead of catering to the integrity of *kugak*, serve the unity of the piece, its independence as an individual work of art. The fusion *kugak* ensemble in *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* also might suggest a reorientation from an implicit postcolonial claim of national autonomy towards flexibility, a common trend in *kugak* in general.

**The Role of the Narrator**

The narrator in *ch’anggŭk*, usually a senior singer of the ensemble, is standing apart from the action to relate crucial plot developments that are difficult to depict on stage. In the 1990s, Kang Han-yŏng, then lead performer and librettist of the NCCK, suggested to abandon the narrator altogether, as elaborate stage technology had rendered the separate presentation of narration unnecessary. Although some later productions continued in this vein, using subtitles, projected videos and animations as substitutes, the narrator remains “one optional resource among many”.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the National Repertory Season, all but one production feature a narrator, who often serves quite unconventional functions.

The narrator in *Sugung-ga* – listed as “Madame Pansori” in the pamphlet – is mounted on a lift and elevated several meters up into the air. Far above the stage, waving an oversized fan, her movements are limited to large gestures and communication with the audience is reduced drastically. Stripped off her communicative role as an in-between for the audience to relate to, Madama Pansori mostly serves an allegoric function: The large dress that she is wearing acts as an entrance for the other characters – a symbolic birth of *ch’anggŭk* from the spirit of storytelling.

In *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, likewise, the narrator is literally above things. A bold, ghostly figure, he is looming on a bridge that is spanning across the stage, removed both from the action below and the audience surrounding it. He sings and laughs, roars and howls, exclaims ominous predictions and evokes the dark past that set the tragic family plot in motion. It is only in a few crucial moments that he takes an active role in the plot, for example when throwing a spear down to floor, which, as it turns out, signals the death of a character. However, despite a transformed audience space – in *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* the seats have been installed on the stage in a semi-circle to allow for an “intimate dialogue with the audience”[[27]](#footnote-27) –, the mostly dark stage with spotlights singling out specific actors creates a distance that the narrator is unable to overcome.

*Sŏp’yŏnje* dispenses with the narrator for an uninterrupted, immersive, and at some points almost cinematic atmosphere. One exceptional – and particularly striking – scene in the second act, however, also involves the audience. On his search for his sister, the grown-up brother attends a national *p’ansori* contest, a series of short performances-in-the-performance. Before the first contestant begins to sing, a host introduces the event and also asks the audience to support the singers with calls of encouragement.[[28]](#footnote-28) It remains ambiguous whether the host is talking to the fictional audience of the contest, played by actors on stage, or to the real audience in the auditorium. In the performance of *Sŏp’yŏnje* I attended, both parties responded and during the following minutes several shouts could be heard from the auditorium, too. Nevertheless, this remained an exception to the otherwise rather passive attitude of the audience.

In *Medea*, the role of the narrator is divided among two choruses, a male and a female one. They do not represent a narrative instance outside the stage fiction, but rather two different groups of fictional characters: women who support Medea in her struggle and men who try to cast her out. Although obviously inspired by the chorus of Greek tragedy here the narrator-choruses become acting groups within this confrontation of genders who not only lobby their cause but actively intervene in critical plot developments. In the final scene, after Jason has realized the true dimension of the tragedy, he throws a spear at Medea. While singing a last comment on the situation (“Times haven’t changed... Men commit the sins, women take the punishment.”), the female chorus gathers around Medea, effectively saving her from the attack and allowing her to escape.

Once again, the only production that employs the narrator in an established way is *Paebijang-jŏn*. The narrator appears only occasionally, each time stepping out of the shadow towards the audience. In the small performance space the narrator is standing merely a few feet away from the first row and addresses the audience directly. After the final scene, she once again comes forward and asks the audience for applause, leading to the curtain call.

With the exception of *Paebijang-jŏn*, the narrator has lost his or her unique role as an intermediator between stage and auditorium. From a storyteller, a character standing at the threshold of fiction and reality, the narrator has become an integral part of the story told, whether elevated above the stage (as in *Sugung-ga*, *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*) or integrated as an acting part (*Medea*). Without a dedicated narrator, *Sŏp’yŏnje* relies on the actors to communicate the plot – a task made easier by the popularity of the hit movie and the performances-in-the-performance that directly relate to the audience.

**Conclusion**

The five *ch’anggŭk* productions of the National Repertory Season 2012-13 employ a vast variety of narrative, thematic, and musical strategies. The pursuit of diversity in these five new pieces, that will be repeatedly put on stage for years to come, is not least an attempt to address a wide range of potential target audiences. Friends of theatre or opera, musical fans and *p’ansori* aficionados – there is something for (almost) everybody here.

A categorization according to the dichotomic framework that Killick suggests in his historical analysis – traditionality versus popular appeal – turns out to be difficult, if not impossible. All productions embrace popularity without completely giving up the traditionesque features that distinguish *ch’anggŭk* from other forms of music theatre.

*Sugung-ga*, maybe the most ambitious (and certainly most costly) of the five pieces, goes a great way to look as little as possible like *ch’anggŭk*, but retains the canonical source and traditional music. The peculiar combination of radically different voices and sounds in *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* evokes contemporary theatre and its effective use of a variety of different source materials, rather than *ch’anggŭk*. *Paebijang-jŏn* manifests almost all features commonly associated with *ch’anggŭk* (including those that might make the genre appear “outdated”, such as *hanbok*-costumes, fake beards, and folk songs) but uses its intimate setting to charm the audience with comedy, slapstick, and some opportunities for interaction. *Sŏp’yŏnje* might be mistaken for a state-of-the-art musical thanks to its well-tuned use of stage machinery, its mellow background music, and its nostalgic storyline, yet presents *p’ansori* at its purest. In *Medea* many scenes look and sound similar to classical *ch’anggŭk* productions, especially when the *han*-struck heroine cries out her anger, pain, and grief with a breathtaking voice that resembles those of Ch’unhyang or Simch’ŏng.

Despite these many individual differences, the National Repertory Season 2012-13 shows some notable trends in recent *ch’anggŭk* practice: adapted plots, although not necessarily of *p’ansori* pieces; music that stresses the aesthetic integrity of the piece; the integration of the narrator into the fictional plot.

Even when not relying on the classical *p’ansori* canon, *ch’anggŭk* remains an art of adaptation.[[29]](#footnote-29) More often than in earlier times, the presentation of the adapted work is influenced by other versions of the same material, most obviously in the case of *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* and *Sŏp’yŏnje* and the respective movie adaptations. Personal constellations and interpretations provided in the performance pamphlets offer further connections, e.g. with spoken theatre (*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*), opera (*Sugung-ga*, *Medea*), and musical (*Sŏp’yŏnje*, *Paebijang-jŏn*). These intermedial references do not only increase the marketability of the productions, but also provide further points of comparison in positioning *ch’anggŭk* as a flexible genre that goes beyond *p’ansori* and traditional music.

Although musical eclecticism is not completely absent in the pieces discussed, the music tends towards unity and the creation of an immersive fictional world rather than diversity in style and episodic number-structures. Projections, light design, and stage decoration further contribute to a self-contained work of art. The through-composed score of *Medea* that joins the arguments of the opposing parties, the beautiful animations of *Sŏp’yŏnje* that make the seasons virtually change before one’s eyes, the disembodied singers of *Sugung-ga* hidden behind their masks, and the intense spotlights in *Changhwa Hongnyŏn* that let the singers emerge from all-encompassing darkness – while these effects add to the autonomy of the respective work, they also make audience interaction difficult.

A similar tendency can be seen in the use of the narrator. This character, once standing on the threshold between stage and auditorium, has been either completely abandoned (*Sŏp’yŏnje*) or is integrated into the play, where he serves varying purposes that range from commentator (*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*) or emblematic part of the stage design (*Sugung-ga*) to acting party (the narrator-choruses in *Medea*). In *Paebijang-jŏn*, in contrast, several factors such as the small venue, the engaging actors, the mediating narrator, and, last but not least, the reduced instrumental ensemble, hand in hand with the diegetic songs and dances, add to a slightly more open, spontaneous, and interactive situation. Here, the narrator, although scarcely used, appears as an active mediator who draws the audience into the stage action.

Apart from *Paebijang-jŏn* and few exceptions like the performance-in-the-performance-scene in *Sŏp’yŏnje*, that might well be considered as proving the rule, these works imply an “interpreting” audience, rather than the actively participating audience of *p’ansori*. While this phenomenon, also known as the “fourth wall”, is nothing unusual in all kinds of stage arts, including *ch’anggŭk*, the National Repertory Season seems to stress this point even more than earlier productions. The tendency of highlighting the autonomy of the single work over the history of the genre creates a distance to the “traditionesque” identity of *ch’anggŭk*, that is closely connected with *p’ansori*. The whole project itself, a repertory that consists of more or less fixed, repeatable pieces based on various traditional and modern, Korean and foreign sources (rather than, say, the *p’ansori* canon or folk tales), constitutes a step towards defining *ch’anggŭk* as a modern music theatre, capable of adapting all kinds of material, rather than an exclusively Korean traditional opera. While the choice of pieces downplays the national and the traditional aspect, the various styles of staging them opens *ch’anggŭk* towards other genres, including musical and spoken theatre.

Collaborations of writers, directors, and composers from different artistic fields have a tradition in the history of *ch’anggŭk*, in particular with regard to the NCCK. So far, the change of course the ensemble has taken with the National Repertory Season – from establishing *ch’anggŭk* as Korean traditional opera to imagining it as contemporary music theatre – is of a quantitative rather than a qualitative nature. While *Paebijang-jŏn* has inaugurated an ongoing series of small-scale productions of restored *p’ansori* pieces, turning the hierarchy of Yu’s twofold concept on its head, the future of *ch’anggŭk* remains open, although history has shown again and again that quantity can suddenly turn into quality. What we can expect, in any case, are more aesthetically strong works of music theatre that can convince on their own.

Killick’s discussion of *ch’anggŭk* focuses on the generic level, because, at the time of writing, “*ch’anggŭk* does not consist of ‘individual musical products’ in the way that those genres [*kabuki*, various kinds of Chinese operas] do.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Further explorations, however, will need to take into account the individual works and their respective use of traditional and modern sources, Korean and foreign music, song, and dance, as well as the new experiences these experiments offer.

**Note**

This paper is based on the presentation “Recent Experiments in Ch’anggŭk: The National Repertory Season 2012–13”, at the Royal Asiatic Society Colloquium in Korean Studies in Seoul on March 15, 2014.

**Performances Discussed**

*Sugung-ga* (Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King), written by Pak Sŏng-hwan, directed by Achim Freyer (also responsible for stage, costume, and light design), composition by Yi Yong-t’ak, song composition by An Suk-sŏn (5–8 September, 2012; premiere on 8 September, 2011).

*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, written by Chŏng Pok-kŭn, directed by Han T’ae-suk, musical director Wŏn Il, composition by Hong Chŏng-ŭi, song composition by Wang Ki-sŏk (27–30 November, 2012).

*Paebijang-jŏn*, written by O Ŭn-hŭi, directed by Yi Pyŏng-hun, composition by Hwang Ho-jun, song composition by An Suk-sŏn (8–16 December, 2012).

*Sŏp’yŏnje*, written by Kim Myŏng-hwa, directed by Yun Ho-jin, composed and conducted by Yang Pang-ŏn, song compositions by An Suk-sŏn (27–31 March, 2013).

*Medea*,written by Han A-rŭm, directed by Sŏ Chae-hyŏng, composition by Hwang Ho-jun (22–26 May, 2013).

With the exception of *Paebijang-jŏn*, which was shown at the Small Hall “Dal”, all performances took place at the Main Hall “Hae” of the National Theater of Korea. Video recordings and pamphlets of the performances discussed are available at the archive of the National Theater. A collection of material and links on the productions discussed can be found on the author’s blog at http://seoulstages.wordpress.com/2014/03/05/recent-experiments-in-changguk.

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1. For the opening section I relied on the detailed historiographies of *ch’anggŭk* provided in Andrew Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera: Discourses of Ch’anggŭk* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010) and Paek Hyŏn-mi, *Han’guk Ch’anggŭk-sa Yŏn’gu* (Seoul: T’aehaksa, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the preservation of *p’ansori* tradition see Keith Howard, *Preserving Korean Music: Intangible Cultural Properties as Icons of Identity* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 60-67. Two recent monographs deal with *p’ansori* and its history in detail: Haekyung Um, *Korean Musical Drama: P’ansori and the Making of Tradition in Modernity* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2013) and Yeonok Jang, *Korean P’ansori Singing Tradition: Development, Authenticity, and Performance History* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the ambivalent position of *ch’anggŭk* between tradition and popularity, see Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, xvi–xxii. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For consistency and easy reference, I use the McCune-Reischauer-system for the romanization of Korean terms, titles, and names, regardless of existing alternative spellings. The only exception are commonly used transliterations of proper names like Seoul or Park Chung-hee and authors of cited English-language works. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yu Yŏng-dae, “*Ch’anggŭk*-ŭi t’ŭksŏng-gwa taejung-hwa,” *P’ansori Yŏn’gu* 9 (1998): 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yu Yŏng-dae, “*Ch’anggŭk*-ŭi chŏnt’ong-gwa saeroun mudae: Kungnip *Ch’anggŭk*tan-ŭi *ch’anggŭk* ‘Ch’ŏng’-ŭl chungsim-ŭro,” *P’ansori Yŏn’gu* 27 (2009): 269-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The pamphlet of the performance I saw in May 2010 records more than 50 performances and more than 60,000 spectators in less than four years. On *Cheong*, see also Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 145-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The original play by dramatist Ch’a Pŏm-sŏk has been translated as “Burning Mountain” by Janet Poole and can be found in Richard Nichols, ed., *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 15-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Two other productions that involved members of the NCCK, the inter-ensemble collaboration *Hwasŏn Kim Hongdo* about the eponimous Chosŏn-era genre painter and the young audience production *Nae Irŭm-ŭn O Tong-gu* (“My Name is O Tong-gu”), are excluded from my discussion as they do not belong to the ensemble’s core productions and I did not have the chance to see them. I always use the romanized original titles of the productions instead of apocryphic translations, with the exception of *Medea* – the *han’gul* spelling, probably based on the English pronouncation of the title, would read “Media”. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The international title this particular production is *Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King*. After its premiere in Seoul (Sept. 2011), it was shown in Wuppertal, Germany as a guest performance (Dec. 2011). My discussion of the piece refers exclusively to the slightly modified version of the 2012 revival. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Director’s Note”, pamphlet *Sugung-ga*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For possible reasons see Jang, *Korean P’ansori Singing Tradition*, 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Killick interprets *Paebijang-jŏn* as an inversion of the Ch’unhyang-plot and its gendered “celebration of resistance against penetration”. The much less melodramatic piece makes a similar point with a male protagonist sent out to peripheral territory (Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, in the NCCK’s aforementioned *ch’anggŭk* adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (2009), the protagonists have similar-sounding Korean names (Mun Ro-myo and Ch’oe Chu-ri, respectively) and the story substitutes the Montague-Capulet vendetta with the rivalry between the Chŏlla and Kyŏngsan provinces. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pamphlet *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On *han* and *p’ansori*, see Heather Willoughby, “The Sound of Han: *P’ansori*, Timbre and a Korean Ethos of Pain and Suffering”, *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 32 (2000): 17-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 199-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See ibid., 134-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Pamphlet *Paebijang-jŏn*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Statement by stage designer Yi T’ae-sŏp, pamphlet *Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This traditional way of interaction can often be heard at *p’ansori* performances attended by enthusiasts and similar requests for participation are not uncommon. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. To my knowledge, the NCCK has, up until now, never staged a truly original work of *ch’anggŭk*, one that is neither based on historical records or literary sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Killick, *In Search of Korean Traditional Opera*, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)