



A study on the traditionalism of “trot” – Focused on Yi Nanyǒng’s “Tears of Mokp’o”



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Abstract In this paper, I explore the significance of Yi Nanyǒng’s contribution to the history of Korean popular music through her song “Tears of Mokp’o.” Using the data I gathered from surveys and interviews as well as a formal analysis of the song, I expounded on the perceptual changes of “Tears of Mokp’o” from a hybrid colonial song to an ethnic, national song. For this purpose, I structured this paper as follows: In the second section, I looked into the meaning and changes in trot spanning different periods, and investigated the current public sentiment toward trot. In the third section, I examined Yi Nan-yǒng’s life and her songs, as well as the public opinion of her works via survey analysis. Finally, I expounded on the traditionalism found in “Tears of Mokp’o.” Through these materials, we could delineate how trot shifted from a foreign song to a traditional one.

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Introduction

Shaped by the influences of foreign music, Korean traditional songs, Japanese-style songs and current Korean popular songs, trot has undergone a series of changes over the years while retaining its position as one of the mainstream genres of Korean popular music. Generally, a new form of culture, including music, assimilates to a new environment through the following process: introduction, adaptation and naturalization. Trot was

not an exception. Through the aforementioned process, trot became a mainstream genre. However, trot is also one of the most problematic genres not only because it is hybridized and complex, but because it was created during the Japanese occupation of Korea, making its national identity nebulous. However, even though some Koreans reject it as foreign, with good reason, many others still embrace, and relate to it viscerally.

Trot made its first appearance in Korea as foreign music. It became “naturalized” and accepted as traditional music after 1950, but some still criticized the genre as being tainted with Japanese style. In more recent history, trot was viewed as nightclub entertainment. Interestingly, despite the varied musical elements that characterize this genre, Koreans can easily identify a trot when they hear one. In other words, even

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without a concrete definition, when people hear the term trot, certain songs come to their minds, and they are able to identify them even if they are in the guise of different forms. Another interesting fact is that unlike other popular music genres that have come and gone, trot has maintained its foothold in the Korean popular music scene despite the many controversies that surround it.

There are many reasons for trot’s enduring popularity, but one of the main reasons is that trot has evolved with the times rather than remaining fixed. Trot has never remained static musically or literarily. In contrast, *sinminyo* (new folk music)—a genre that was contemporary with trot—failed to thrive, disappearing completely from the popular music scene. While the remnants of *sinminyo* were absorbed or otherwise changed into a different genre, trot continually evolved with the times, extending its popularity to the present day.

What I would like to focus on in this paper is the process through which trot made its transition from a foreign song style to a Korean traditional song style. To this end, I will investigate Yi Nan-yŏng’s “Tears of Mokp’o” [mokp’oŭi nunmul]—a song still widely enjoyed by the masses after its release in 1935. When the song was first released, it was perceived as new and foreign but since Korea gained independence, it was regarded as a traditional as well as a national song. This paper will examine the conditions that fostered this transition.

The argument I am proposing is in the same vein as E. Taylor Atkin’s assertion that “Arirang” became nationalized as a Korean song despite the fact that it was previously considered a “song of empire”—a category reserved for songs that were created under Japanese colonialism (Atkins, 2010). Further, my argument expands upon Clark Sorensen’s argument that “Tears of Mokp’o” gained popularity in Japan and was considered a “song of empire.” These “songs of empire” were widely popular not only in Korea but also in Japan, which at the time was occupying Korea. These songs were not associated with any one nation but with all imperial subjects. However, Sorensen makes the point that while Koreans and other colonized people were thought to possess “ethnicity,” Japanese considered themselves as “people of the interior”—or people who originally belong to the empire with no need for “ethnicity” to set them apart from other imperial subjects (Sorensen, 2012). This makes it difficult to identify “Tears of Mokp’o” as nationally Korean since “songs of empire” were considered hybrid products of all colonized people. However, many Koreans imbued these songs with nationalism especially after they gained independence from Japan. While these songs enjoyed immense popularity with all imperial subjects at the time of their release, Koreans regarded them as uniquely their own—even after their popularity faded.

A similar phenomenon can be seen with Yi Aerisu’s “The Traces of the Imperial City” [*Hwangsŏngeuichŏk*] (1932), Go Poksu’s “Away from Home” [*T’ayangsaŕi*] (1934) and Kim Chŏnggu’s “Tumen River is Crying” [*Nunmulchŏchŭn Tuman-gang*] (1938). These songs—although initially seen as new—contributed to the traditionalization of trot. Particularly, Yi Nanyŏng’s “Tears of Mokp’o” was viewed as nationalistic since the time of its release, and the sentiment only grew stronger after Independence. Yi Mija’s wildly popular “Camellia Lady” [*Tonghaegagassŭ*] was released in 1964 but was banned after losing a controversial battle over the accusation of adopting a Japanese musical style. On the other hand, “Tears of Mokp’o”—well loved and frequently sung by the people—

played a vital role in aiding trot to take root as a traditional genre in Korea. Even when other songs were accused of being vulgar or having been influenced by Japanese style, “Tears of Mokp’o” remained immune to those criticisms.

In this paper, I will examine the significance of Yi Nanyŏng’s contribution to the history of Korean popular music through her song “Tears of Mokp’o.” Using the data I have gathered from surveys and interviews as well as a formal analysis of the song, I will expound on the perceptual changes of “Tears of Mokp’o” from a hybrid colonial song to an ethnic, national song. For this purpose, I have structured this paper as follows: In the next section, I will look into the meaning of and changes to trot spanning different periods and investigate the current public sentiment toward trot. In the third section, I will examine Yi Nan-yŏng’s life along with her songs, as well as the public opinion of her works via survey analysis. Finally, I will expound on the traditionalism found in “Tears of Mokp’o.” Through these materials, we can observe how trot shifted from a foreign song to a traditional one.

The meaning of trot¹

Trot was not always considered a genre in the Korean popular music scene. The name came from a abbreviation of foxtrot, but the music was different from the trot we know as a genre. Foxtrot, which was hugely popular in North America during the 1930s, is a kind of dance music in four-four time accompanied by big band instruments. This style of music was introduced to Korea at that time and Koreans were indeed exposed to this music although it bore no relationship to trot as a genre, besides a similar name.

What Koreans now call trot was initially referred to as *yuhaengga* during Japanese Occupation. However, the word *yuhaengga* [流行歌, popular song] literally means songs that have gained popularity during a specific period and are heard and sung by the masses. When trot was first introduced, it was categorized under the umbrella of this definition. However, calling trot *yuhaengga*, as it was referred to at the time, is nondiscriminatory and confusing. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I will use the term trot over *yuhaengga* since the genre emerged and was popularized long before the 1950s when it was given the name.

Even though the assumption is that the name trot appeared in the 1950s, there is no way of knowing exactly when the term became accepted by the masses. After Independence, Western rhythms were widely introduced in Korea as evidenced by the record titles that bore their names. Trot was included among records of mambo, cha-cha-cha, waltz, tango and rumba. However, only trot became an independent genre of its own.

The origin of trot is still a very sensitive subject for Koreans. Two large so-called “*ppongtchak* (another word for trot) controversies” took place in the 1960s and 1980s. One side argued that trot derived from traditional music while the other asserted that it was a foreign song style since it originated from Japan’s *enka* [演歌]. It is true that both Korean traditional

¹ Overall aspect of initial Trot can be found at Yujeong Chang, Brother is a Street Musician-The Modern Era in Popular Songs [Oppanŭn p’unggakchaengi-ya-taejunggayoro pon kŭndaeŭi p’ung-gyŏng], Mineumin, 2006 and Yujeong Chang, The Continuation and alteration of Korean Modern Popular songs [Kŭndae taejunggayoŭi chisokkwa pyŏnmo], Somyeong, 2012.

music and trot were built on a pentatonic scale and shared other similarities. However, different chord progressions distinguished one from the other, and trot was considered a newly emerging song with a distinct style.

At its conception, trot was influenced by Japanese popular music. In order to analyze Japan's influence on trot, it is necessary to investigate the nature of Japanese music. Generally, Koreans believe that trot's origin lies in Japan's *enka* and question its validity as a traditional song. However, *enka* was not regarded as a popular music genre at first. The terms *enka* and *enkasi* [演歌師]—a singer of *enka*—existed, but the meaning of *enka* differed from what the term denotes today as a Japanese popular music genre.

It is widely known that Japan enthusiastically imported Western music into its culture from the beginning. What we call *enka* today was a new popular song that fused Japanese and Western music. At the time, Japanese called these songs *ryūkōka* [流行歌, popular song]. In fact, it wasn't until the 1960s that *enka* was considered traditional. In the process of reinventing its national identity, Japan established *enka* as part of its traditional music. Moreover, as *enka* fans grew older, the music naturally became traditionalized.²

Because the term *enka* was not used to denote a popular music genre in the earlier days, Korean trot wasn't called *enka*, but *yuhaengga* until the name trot became widely accepted later. Japanese adopted rock and jazz as genres to define their own music that have been influenced by them. However, since *enka* was not considered a genre when it first made its appearance in the musical scene, trot was initially placed in the genre of *yuhaengga* until the term trot took hold. For this reason, trot was able to forge a separate identity from *enka* and evolve independently.

In sum, *enka* and trot were new forms of popular music that were created contemporaneously. However, while they shared musical similarities, the lyrics of trot were written in Korean by Koreans to express the pathos that was uniquely shared by the people who heard and sang them. These songs became an outlet for them to vocalize the despondence, despair, loss and deprivation they experienced while living under the oppression of the Japanese Occupation. These songs became popular not only at the time of their release but with later generations of Koreans as well.

Changes in trot by time-period

I have mentioned that Korean trot has undergone a series of changes spanning different periods. During the initial stage, trot was usually played at a rather fast tempo in duple time in a pentatonic scale, omitting the fourth and seventh tone. Even though it used the same pentatonic scale as Korean traditional music, the chord progressions of trot sounded different, and duple time probably felt new to Koreans who were used to listening to music in triple time. Because of this, some claimed that trot played a role in changing the musical sensibilities of Koreans.

However, Korea has widely accepted various forms of Western music—especially hymns and Western military band

music—since the late nineteenth century, and the musical sensibilities of Koreans had already begun to change. Koreans were limited—at least to some degree—from preserving and passing down their traditional music during the Japanese colonial era. Admittedly, if Koreans had not suffered through the rule of Japan, Korean music would have taken on different aspects and new popular genres, such as trot, may never have emerged. However, in spite of these limiting conditions, the world became smaller due to the advancement of science in the late nineteenth century, and the interchange of contemporary culture became possible. Koreans faced changes in their musical sensibilities in the 1920s and 1930s, but those changes may not have been so much by choice as they were inevitable.

As previously stated, trot was created during the Japanese colonial era but it underwent a huge transformation after Independence. Even though trot songs were composed in the pentatonic scale, they were previously built on a minor key. However, songs in the major key began to be massively produced and circulated. In addition, these songs slowly began to be regarded as traditional. Trot had been well loved by fans for decades but only because its subjects were based on rural, indigenous themes. While trot was considered new and was enjoyed by modern girls and boys in the first half of the century, it was seen as old and traditional after Independence.

Simultaneously, however, the Japanese origin of trot created considerable controversy especially after Yi Mija's "Camellia Lady" [*Tonghaegagassi*] took first place for thirty-five weeks on the music charts. As a result of this controversy, "Camellia Lady" was banned for a period of time. Despite this fact, however, Yi Mija's other trot songs continued to be in demand. Popular male trot singers from the 1960s to the 1970s included Na Hun-a, Nam Chin and Pae Ho. Unlike Na Hun-a and others who sang songs with more rural sensibilities in a sentimental tone, Pae Ho became the first singer to sing with sophisticated urban emotion.

One of the most representative songs of this new urban sound was Sim Supong's "The Man of the Past" [*Küttae Kū Saram*], which won the Korean College Song Festival in 1978. Even though she was forbidden from performing for a time due to the fact that she had been present at the scene of Park Chung Hee's [Pak Chonghūi] assassination on October 26th, 1979 the songs she had written and performed provided a new trajectory for the future of trot. Although Cho Yongpil's career was not built exclusively on trot, his "Come Back to Pusan Harbor" [*Torawayo Pusanhang*], released in 1976, soared in popularity not only in Korea but also in Japan and is therefore worthy of note.

Trot completely transformed from its earlier in the 1980s with Chu Hyōnmi's "trot medley." In 1984, she—formerly a pharmacist—recorded a medley of already existing trot songs called "Couples-Only Party" [*Ssangssang-p'at'i*]. These songs, with their fast tempos and rhythmic nature, were played throughout the highway rest areas in Korea, catapulting Chu to popularity. She released "Raining on Yōngdong Bridge" [*Pi naerinūn Yōngdonggyo*] in 1985 and officially launched her career as a trot singer. From this period on, trot was considered as a pure form of entertainment without any association with nationalism as these songs began to be played in cabarets and nightclubs. As male singers such as Sol Unto, Hyōn Ch'ol and T'ae China also began to take part in these venues,

² Aspect of Enka can be found at 輪島裕介, 創られた '日本の心' 神話-演歌をめぐる戦後大衆音楽史 [tsukura re ta 'nippon no kokoro' shinwa - 'enka' o meguru sengo taishū ongaku shi], 光文社新書, 2012.

trot became solidly accepted as pure entertainment devoid of nationalistic values.³

Trot was thus accepted as nightclub entertainment up to the early 2000s. However in 2004, when Chang Yunchŏng’s “Oh My” [*ŏmŏna*] became hugely popular among audiences of all ages from children to adults, trot once again became a genre loved by the entire country. With a lighthearted and cheerful tune and various fun elements, “Oh My” helped audiences discover comedic possibilities in trot. Thereafter, many trot singers took advantage of this newly forged path and maximized its exciting, cheerful components. Good examples can be found in the titles of Pak Hyŏnpin’s debut songs, “Pparappappa”, “Dead Drunk” [*Kondŭre Mandŭre*] and “Dazzling and Glaring” [*Sabangsabang*].

When modern trot came to be associated with lighthearted fun, some K-pop singers such as “Orange Caramel”—a group formed by members selected from “After School”—as well as “Super Junior” and Taesŏng from “Big Bang” took to singing trot songs, contributing to the expansion of the fan base to a younger generation of listeners.

Although trot made its first appearance in the Korean popular music scene as a foreign song, it eventually became accepted as a traditional genre after it became “naturalized.” During the same period, however, it also endured accusations of being foreign in origin. Since the 1980s, trot has been viewed as crowd-pleasing entertainment which is evidenced by the fact that trot songs are usually the songs of choice to arouse excitement in one’s audience at *norebang*—singing rooms—or during company dinners. This is the general perception of trot in Korea today.

However, when we examine the changes trot has undergone as a genre, we can see that trot has been viewed through the lens of the changing zeitgeist of each period. In other words, trot has been dynamic and has sported many different identities. Yi Nanyŏng’s “Tears of Mokp’o” is the most relevant example and demonstrates how a new, foreign song style became a traditional and national one. In the next section, I will examine Yi’s life and her songs using the data I gathered through surveys and then discuss the significance and meaning of “Tears of Mokp’o” in the context of the history of Korean popular music.

The life of Yi Nanyŏng and her songs

In the early 1960s, a trio of Korean singers called the Kim Sisters moved to the U.S. and made their debut. The group consisted of Sukja and Aeja—Yi Nanyŏng’s daughters—and Minja—Yi Pongyong’s daughter and Yi Nan-yŏng’s niece. With their ability to play almost any instrument, these multi-talented women were forerunners of the K-pop groups that have led the Korean Wave in the twenty-first century. The three-part harmonies they created were especially beautiful. Yi Nanyŏng gave birth to nine children but two passed away, leaving her with four sons and three daughters. Like her two daughters, a few of her sons formed a group named Kim Boys (or Kim Brothers), taking up the musical baton of their parents.

³ 1990s main stream of popular music was mainly for young ages. However, Kim Suhŭi gained a lot of popularity with Trot style “Affection” [*Aemo*] and won the 1st prize of KBS Music Award 1993 and Korea Lyrics Award 1993.

Having contributed to the successful musical careers of her children, one could argue that Yi played a role as an archetypal and traditional mother. However, before she fully committed herself to motherhood, she had a prolific career as a singer who represented Korea. Especially in 1935 when “Tears of Mokp’o” gained recognition as a national song, she also became known as a national singer.

The following is a chronological timeline of Yi’s life events.

- 1916: Yi Nanyŏng born in Mokpo, as Okye (real name)
- 1923: Entered Mokpo Girls’ Public General School
- 1932: Made her first appearance at Taeyang Theater (troupe)
- 1933: Released “Withering Youth” [Sidŭnŭn ch’ŏngch’un] (Taihei records)
- 1934: Officially launched her career with the song “Nostalgia” [Hyangsu] (Okeh records)
- 1935: “Mokp’o’s Tears,” released in 1935 to astounding success
- 1936: Released Japanese songs such as “Joy of Spring (春の歡喜)”
- 1937: Married singer-songwriter Kim Haesong
- 1939: Toured Korea and other countries as a member of Chosŏn Musical Troupe.
- 1940: Performed as the main singer of Okeh Singing Team, “Jeogori Sisters”
- 1945: Performed in K.P.K band formed by her husband, Kim Haesong
- 1950: Kim Haesong abducted by North Korea and killed
- 1954–1955: Founded ‘Yi Nanyŏng Band,’ replacing K.P.K Band
- 1959: The Kim Sisters, comprised of her daughters, moved to the US, and Kim Boys (Kim Brothers, Yi Nanyŏng’s sons) made their debut via radio
- 1962: Moved to US, accepting Kim Sisters’ invitation
- 1963: Gave a benefit performance in Chicago in May and performed in Hawaii in August with the Kim Sisters
- 1965: Passed away at Hoehyŏn-dong, Seoul, on April 11th.

Yi was born on June 6th, 1916 in Yangdong, Mokpo. She was originally named Okye even though it was recorded as Oksun in her family register. She made her debut at Taeyang Theater at the age of sixteen and went on to work with Okeh Records exclusively in 1933. However, prior to her collaboration with Okeh Records, she released a song with Taihei Records. Upon hearing her voice, Yi Ch’ol—an important figure at Okeh Records—attempted to hide her in order to sign her with his company. After being pursued in a car chase by employees of Taihei Records, and after engaging in numerous tugs-of-war, he was able to sign Yi with his company.

Yi worked with Okeh Records from this time until shortly before Independence. “Tears of Mokp’o” became immensely popular upon its release in 1935, and Yi was named the third most popular female recording artist by a poll conducted by Samchurisa, which propelled her to stardom. According to one of the journal entries of the then-trumpeter, Hyŏn Kyŏngsŏp who worked at Okeh Records, it was extremely difficult to attract audiences and have a successful run if Yi Nanyŏng was absent.

In 1937, she married singer-songwriter Kim Haesong who worked at the same company. She became a member of Chosŏnakkŭktan (Chosŏn Musical Troupe), formed by Okeh

Records, in 1939 and toured nation-wide in Korea as well as numerous other countries including Japan, Manchuria and Jiandao. Yi also performed in another group called Jeogori Sisters. Even though Okeh Records created the group for short term, it is significant in that it was the first predecessor of the girl groups that came to dominate the Korean popular music scene decades later.

After Independence, and after her husband's abduction by North Korea and his subsequent death, Yi took over the management of K.P.K Band, which was led by her husband. She continued her musical activities by founding Yi Nanyōng's Band, consisting of her daughters and sons, albeit not for very long.⁴ When the Kim Sisters took their career to the U.S. in 1959, Yi maintained a de facto relationship with a fellow singer from Okeh Records named Nam Insu. However when he passed away in 1962, she spent her days in depression and loneliness. Worried about her mother, the Kim Sisters invited Yi to the U.S. in 1962 and together they gave concerts for eight months in various places including Chicago and Hawaii. She returned to Korea after the end of their tour and passed away in her home in 1965.

According to many witnesses, Yi was a natural talent. Before Independence, her repertoire consisted of a wide variety of music including jazz and swing with freely improvised scat. In "Dreaming of the Tea House" [*Tabangūi p'urūn kkum*], she used her natural voice spanning both lower and higher registers in a bluesy tone while demonstrating her ability to scat in "Dream of the Ocean" [*Badaūi kkum*] and "Red Sleeve of the Harbor" [*Hangguūi pulgūn somae*].

A music critic and songwriter, Hwang Munpyōng reminisced about the time when he heard Yi sing at Bumin'gwan (an annex to the current Sejong Center): "She had a black turban on her head and a cigarette between her lips and sang in a slightly nasal tone with deep sadness." He also commented that her singing demonstrated the quintessence of Korean blues.

In contrast to the wide spectrum of music Yi performed in her earlier days, she resorted to singing trot almost exclusively, wearing a *hanbok*—Korean traditional dress—after Independence. Upon hearing the name Yi Nanyōng, many Koreans picture a demure woman in traditional dress, singing "Tears of Mokp'o." In fact when a survey was conducted through Google Forms from August to October of 2014, fifty-one people who were originally from Mokpo and twenty-eight people from elsewhere all uniformly answered that they knew of Yi Nanyōng and named "Tears of Mokp'o" as her most famous song. Even though she had a varied and diverse career during her younger years, she became known as the singer who only sang "Tears of Mokp'o" in a *hanbok* and continues to be remembered this way.

In many ways, Yi and her "Tears of Mokp'o" could be attributed to bringing about the traditionalization of trot. To substantiate this argument, I will analyze the song and investigate the process through which it transitioned from a new, foreign song to a traditional and national one.

The traditionalization of trot seen through "Tears of Mokp'o"

Prior to Independence, Mokp'o-themed songs such as "Tears of Mokp'o," "Memories of Mokp'o" and "Mokp'o is a Harbor" made their entrance to the musical scene. While these songs were all sung by Yi who was born in the city, "Tears of Mokp'o" garnered the most popularity. This song came into the limelight when Okeh Records chose it as its "rural anthem" (鄉土讚歌) among the songs submitted for a contest sponsored by the Chosun Ilbo in the six major cities in Korea. This song was categorized as regional *sinminyo* (地方新民謠) as indicated above the title on the album leaflet where the lyrics were printed. However, considering that the song was written in the pentatonic scale and in duple meter, it would be fair to say it took the form of a typical trot song. Even afterward, "Tears of Mokp'o" was considered the most representative song of the genre. Upon release, it sold over fifty thousand copies and its popularity extended even to Japan.

Like "Arirang," "Tears of Mokp'o" was well loved by both Koreans and Japanese and was regarded as a "song of empire." However, as Sorensen indicates, there were different reasons for its popularity; for Koreans, the song was imbued with nationalism. In fact, I contend that hidden meanings in the lyrics were one of the contributing factors that launched this song to prominence among Koreans.⁵ The following are the lyrics of "Tears of Mokp'o":⁶

The Sailor's song fades and [*Sagong* (沙工) *ūi paenmorae kamulgo*]

The waves of Samhak Island burrow deeply into the land [*Samhakto* (三鶴島) *p'ado khipi sumōdūmūn ttae*]

It wets the skirt hem of a young bride at the port. [*Pudu* (埠頭) *ūi saekssi arong chōdūn otcharak*]

Are these the tears of farewell? The sorrow of Mokpo? [*Ibyōr* (離別) *ūi nunmuriya mokp'o* (木浦) *ūi sōrum*]

Underneath Nojeok Peak, we hold three hundred years of enmity. [*Sambaegyōn wōnanp'ung* (三柁淵願安風) *ūn nojōkpong* (露積峰) *mit'e*]

Here, I clearly feel traces of you—a sorrowful devotion. [*Im* (任) *chach'wi wanyōn* (宛然) *hada aedalp'ūn chōngjo* (情調)]

The winds from Mount Yudal embrace the Yōngsan River. [*Yudalsan* (儒達山) *paramdo Yōngsan'gang* (榮山江) *ūl anūni*]

I cry tears of yearning. This is the song of Mokpo. [*Im* (任) *kūryō unūn maūm mokp'* (木浦) *ōūi norae*]

The night is deep and the crescent moon drifts. [*Kipūn pam chogaktarūn hūllōganūnde*]

How do old wounds come back anew? [*ōtchōt'a yet sangch'ō* (傷處) *ga saerowōjin'ga*]

⁵ Pak Ch'anho, *History of Korean Popular Songs* [Han'gukkayosa], Hyōnamsa, 1992, p.276. Yi Hayun who worked as a poet and lyricist of popular music in the Japanese Occupation era, mentioned that "Mokp'o's Tears" swayed Yoohanggaye (流行歌界). (Yi Ha-yun, "Changes of Chosun Popular Music-Looking over Popular Music", *Sahaegongnon*, 1938 No.3), while, "Breathe of Masterpiece, Looking for Literature mile stone (40): "Mokp'o's Tears" (碑)", ("Kyunghyang Shinmun") in October 22nd, 1980 says the sales record as 30 thousands.

⁶ Detailed analysis of "Mokp'o's Tears" can be found Yujeong Chang, previous book, 2006.

⁴ Yi Nanyōng had 9 children between Kim Haesong, but 4 boys and 3 girls remained and they worked as "Kim Sisters" and "Kim Brothers (Kim Boys)".

If you can’t return, I wish I had given you my heart. [*Mot onŭn iminyŏn i maŭmdo ponael kōdŭl*]
 My fidelity is tied to the port. This is the love of Mokpo.
 [*Hanggu* (港口) *ŭi maennŭn chōlgae*
 (節介) Mokp’ (木浦) *oŭi sarang*]

“Tears of Mokp’o” is written in an A-B-C-D form and depicts a woman yearning for her beloved, swearing her fidelity to him. However, an important question surfaces: who is the recipient of her love? Han Yong-un, a Korean independence activist, wrote in his poem “Superfluous Words” [*Kum-mal*]: “A person who is dear to one’s heart isn’t the only kind of beloved. Anything one longs for is also one’s beloved.” Similarly, the recipient of the narrator’s love in “Tears of Mokp’o” takes on a meaning beyond the typical concept of one’s beloved. The beloved in the song could be interpreted as an actual person or could be referring to the narrator’s homeland—Korea.

The lyrics of this song became problematic at the time of its release and the individuals who were involved in creating the song were summoned by the police. Son Mok-in, the composer of this song, relayed the following story in his autobiography:

“When this song became hugely popular, a high-ranking detective at Jongno Police Station called in the president of the record company as well as those who were creatively involved in the project for reasons of suspicion. What the Japanese cop had a problem with was the phrase *Sambaegyŏn wŏnanp’ung* (三柁淵願安風) *ŭn nojŏkpong* (露積峰) *mit’e* in the second verse. Those at the company, including the president, fiercely asserted that *wŏnanp’ung* didn’t mean the wind of enmity but a misunderstanding of a similar sounding word with a different meaning—the wind of mandarin ducks. The incident thankfully came to an end, but the truth was the phrase *Sambaegyŏn wŏnanp’ung ŭn* indeed signified the three hundred years of sorrow and anger Koreans held against the Japanese for the oppression they experienced during the occupation. Through the song, Koreans sang the rage of the entire Korean nation. The sales of the SP climbed even higher after the fiasco.⁷

Okeh records asserted that the word *sambaegyŏn* was the name of a pond and that *wŏnanp’ung* meant the wind of mandarin ducks although neither the place nor the word existed in reality. As Son Mok-in revealed, *sambaegyŏn wŏnanp’ung ŭn* was an altered spelling of *sambaeg yŏn wŏnhan p’umŭn*—three hundred years of enmity—and the pronunciation bears resemblance to the latter when one listens to the SP that was recorded at the time. “Tears of Mokp’o,” then, can be seen as a song that expressed the enmity of Korean people against Japan which robbed them of their homeland. Even though there is no way of telling whether the lyricist, Mun Ilsŏk, intentionally composed his words for this purpose, it is highly probable that Koreans who heard and sang this song tacitly agreed

to the hidden meaning. This can also be evidenced by the fact that the SP sales increased after the song underwent investigation by the Japanese police.

In addition, the song is naturally connected to the Japanese invasion of Korea in 1592. The unique topological characteristics of Mokpo allowed Koreans to keep watch for impending foreign enemies at sea. Nojeok Peak is actually located in Mount Yudal in Mokpo where Admiral Yi Sun-shin [Yi Sun-sin] allegedly fought and won against his enemy without an actual by piling up fake military provisions as camouflage during the invasion (Pak, 1991). Therefore, the line, “the three hundred years of enmity” signifies the deep loss to Koreans for losing their national sovereignty and the rage they felt against Japan. The phrase “Here, I clearly feel traces of you,” in the second verse implies that even though the country was taken by the enemy, the spirit of Admiral Yi Sun-shin and their homeland live on underneath Nojeok Peak.

In the last verse of the song, the narrator laments her inability to send her beloved her heart and promises her enduring love and fidelity. When she declares, “My fidelity is tied to the port. This is the love of Mokpo,” she is in fact promising her love and fidelity to her country. As demonstrated by the above examples, “Tears of Mokp’o” became a vehicle that allowed Koreans to express their sorrow for losing their homeland and swear their loyalty through symbolism.

For the people of Mokpo, the meaning of the song takes on a greater significance. In the survey I mentioned earlier, fifty-one people, who were originally from the city, were asked to concisely write what “Tears of Mokp’o” might mean to the people of Mokpo. Fourteen people believed it was a song of deep sorrow, nine people replied it was a song of home, and six people answered that it was a song that reflected a time in history. Other answers included a national anthem, a song of the nation, a song that I always want to sing, a song of comfort, and a song of farewell. The fact that “Tears of Mokp’o” was released during the Japanese Occupation and that the song used their city as its setting seemed to have contributed to the understanding that this was a song of their home as well as a historical song that mirrored the era from which it came. Many associate the aesthetics of the song with sorrow, tears and somber memories and regard it as a song of *han*—or deep lamentation.

Because Mokpo was a seaport, its residents quickly accepted Japanese culture and products when they were under Japanese rule. However, for the same reason, the city became the portal through which Japanese plundered the people’s crops and took them back to their own country. While the people of Mokpo were able to naturally embrace and become relatively tolerant of Japanese culture due to its frequent exposure, they harbored great pain and resentment for the plunder and exploitation they experienced. To them, “Tears of Mokp’o” was a song of *han* as well as one of comfort.

However, the purported meaning of the song was not an exclusive property of the residents of Mokpo. Even for people who weren’t originally from the city, “Tears of Mokp’o” maintained the same meaning especially if they learned of the song during the Occupation. People empathized with one another and shed tears while listening to the song, turning public places like theaters into spaces of political assembly and forging emotionally inspired social reconciliation. Rousseau defined the phenomenon of people shedding tears together in public places as universal sensibility. This universal sensibility can be experi-

⁷ Son Mok-in, *Unfinished Song about Life- Son Mok-in’s Living Away from Home* [Motta purŭn insaeng ch’an’ga- Son Mokinŭi t’ahyang-sari], HOTWIND, 1992, p.52. Yi Myŏngchae confirmed this in an interview with an important figure at the Japanese Government General of Korea. As Yi Myŏngchae’s “Tears of Mokp’o” gained immense of popularity, the Japanese Government General of Korea investigated Okeh records and strictly censored any anti-Japanese lyrics in the albums it released.” (Yi Myŏng-chae, *Korean Literature of Japanese Occupation Era*, Chungang University, 1991, p.48).

enced not infrequently through popular music written during the colonial period. People probably listened to the same songs, felt moved, cried together and felt a particular sense of solidarity.

“Tears of Mokp’o,” with its many accompanying colonial anecdotes, tacitly helped construct a specialized culture. It allowed Koreans to form a community out of shared emotions. This did not change even after Liberation as can be seen through the fact that most people knew of Yi Nanyōng and selected “Tears of Mokp’o” as her most famous song even if they were not from Mokpo. Even at the time of its release, the song was considered a national song—at least to Koreans—and the sentiment remained the same after Liberation.

As I mentioned before, trot created major controversy over its foreign origin in the 1950s and 1960s. Some even believed the songs should not have been sung since its roots were based on a Japanese song. For this reason, the Korea Communications Standards Commission banned popular trot songs at the time. However, even in the midst of this controversy, “Tears of Mokp’o” remained unaffected. It was even considered a traditional song by some.

By the fact that Americans from the Peace Corps knew of “Tears of Mokp’o” after visiting Korea in the 1960s, we can speculate about how widely the song was sung and circulated during the decade. Some Koreans believed that the song made its debut in the fifties or sixties because of its immense popularity after Liberation.

In the fifties and sixties, “Tears of Mokp’o” overlaps with the image of Yi Nanyōng demurely singing in a *hanbok*. Opposed to the various types of music she performed before Liberation, she almost exclusively sang “Tears of Mokp’o” in traditional dress after Liberation, which played a significant role in molding her image as the “mother of tradition.” There is no way to tell whether this effort was intentional or not. However, she was well aware of the controversy surrounding the genre, and quite possibly, her singing trot in the same costume performance after performance might have been a calculated effort to appear more traditional. In an interview, O Chōngsim—the wife of the songwriter, Son Mokin, who composed “Tears of Mokp’o” and a close friend of Yi Nanyōng—testified that even though the singer could have enjoyed a more varied career, she insisted on only singing trot songs in a *hanbok* after Liberation.⁸

As I mentioned earlier, Yi demonstrated the ability to sing a wide spectrum of genres before Korea gained independence including the Korean blues, which she sang with unequalled originality according to Hwang Munpyōng. Even so, what we remember of Yi is her rendition of “Tears of Mokp’o” always dressed immaculately in a *hanbok*. Her outstanding mothering of her children and her efforts to help them lead successful careers as the Kim Sisters and Kim Brothers further reinforced her image as a traditional woman and an archetypal mother figure. Thus, she and her song, “Tears of Mokp’o” contributed to the traditionalization of trot.

Conclusion

In 2003, the play *Oktanō* (written by Ch’a Pōmsok and directed by Yi Yunt’aek) opened at The Art Theater of Korean

Culture and Arts Foundation (the current Arco Arts Theater). The play was about a female protagonist born in Mokpo and “Tears of Mokp’o” was played during the entire duration of the performance. At the end of the play, all the audience members and cast stood and sang the song. I still vividly remember how moved I was by the experience. As we sang, I felt we had become one. Even after all these years, we still regard the song as a traditional and national song.

However, as I have discussed earlier, trot wasn’t considered traditional from the beginning. It faced many musical and literary changes as it evolved through different time periods. It first emerged as a foreign song and then became accepted as traditional while simultaneously being accused of having a Japanese origin. Now it is seen as a pure form of entertainment devoid of political agendas. Trot’s transformation had been accompanied by opposite or conflicting ideas until it took on its contemporary form. In spite of the changes trot has undergone, Yi Nanyōng’s “Tears of Mokp’o” constantly retained its reputation as a national as well as a traditional song.

Even though trot sported various styles through the years, the reason it came to be considered as a traditional genre was largely due to Yi’s “Tears of Mokp’o.” First released in 1935, the song depicted the city of Mokpo and rural themes through its lyrics. Songs that shared the same rural sentimentality maintained this tradition after Liberation and played a role in firmly solidifying trot as a traditional genre.

The physical look Yi showcased after Liberation also contributed to both the nationalization and traditionalization of trot. Always in a *hanbok*, she stubbornly refused to sing music other than trot. She raised seven children as exceptional musicians and from this, we can glean the image of a traditional and archetypal woman or mother figure. For this reason, Yi’s “Tears of Mokp’o” is still considered a national and traditional song despite the fact that the current trot exhibits many different styles and is enjoyed by a varied audience. Thanks to this historical background, Yi Nanyōng also came to be regarded as the mother of the nation.

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⁸ The author interviewed with O Chōngsim at least 4 times from 2007.

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