

Portraying feminist beliefs and transcending cultural norms: Korean women artists' reinterpretation of songs traditionally performed by men

● Heeyoung Choi, PhD
Northern Illinois University

ABSTRACT

This study explores how contemporary women artists in the field of traditional Korean music have recently portrayed feminist beliefs on stage. At the concert titled *The Songs Once Used for Men*, two South Korean women artists completely transformed Korean court music called *Jongmyo jeryeak* (Royal Ancestral Shrine Music, which has rarely been adapted by contemporary performers because of the desire to preserve the original form of cultural heritage). Women artists sang songs, played musical instruments and danced – all these practices were originally performed by male performers in accordance with Confucian traditions. Beyond their androgynous looks, low-pitched voices, the use of electronic music sounds and newly manufactured musical instruments indicate the resistance against traditional gender roles in the Korean music scene and, more generally,

contemporary Korean society. The unconventional performance formats and styles exemplify today's women artists in the field of fusion *gugak*, a contemporary form of the traditional Korean music, which portrays ideas on gender issues through stage performances. The findings expand our understanding of feminist music criticism, which argues that music does not solely reflect passive societal views but serves as a public forum within which various modes of gender organisation are asserted, adopted, contested and negotiated.

Keywords

Jongmyo jerye, *Jongmyo jeryeak*, *gagok*, contemporary performing arts, feminist music criticism, fusion *gugak*, electronic sounds, women artists

Introduction

On 27 April 2020 at 5:00 p.m., two women musicians performed a concert titled *The Songs Once Used for Men* (*Namchang gagok*) at the Seoul Namsan Gukakdang, situated in Namsangol Hanok Village on the northern side of Namsan Mountain in Seoul, South Korea (hereafter Korea).¹ The concert was streamed live on Naver TV (2021), a free video streaming service in Korea, due to the Covid-19 crisis, providing an opportunity for people all over the world to see how the performance work of contemporary artists has broken new ground in the field of Korean traditional music. Throughout the performance, one woman standing on the left side of the stage sang a series of songs. Meanwhile, the other woman, standing on the right, was mainly in charge of making electric percussive

sounds. Both occasionally played newly manufactured musical instruments. The women performers, with short hair, wore loose-fitting suit jackets, matching pants, a denim skirt and casual sneakers. They kept moving their bodies freely to their music and changing their position to play different musical instruments.

The concert subverted existing cultural norms in traditional Korean music. The women artists broke away from the songs' original practice, which includes singing in a seated position, wearing traditional costumes and accompanying singing with traditional Korean musical instruments played by instrumentalists. Above all, as the concert title implies, the performance has traditionally – for hundreds of years – been sung by male vocalists.

Focusing on the first part of the concert, where the women artists transformed Korean court music called *Jongmyo jeryeak* (Music for Royal Ancestral Shrine), this paper examines what motivated the women to produce such an innovative performance and what messages they sought to deliver to the audience. The main focus of this research is on gender issues underlying such newer approaches to promoting traditional Korean music.

This study expands our knowledge and understanding of fusion *gugak*, a contemporary genre of traditional Korean music designed to appeal to the general public.² Fusion *gugak* has been dominated by women performers. Many female students are engaged in fusion *gugak* as full-time or part-time fusion *gugak* team members. Almost 90 per cent of the population in the Korean music departments (*gugakgwa*) at colleges and universities in Korea are women. Many of them begin their careers in fusion *gugak* groups because of the limited job market; 180 active *gugak* fusion groups, out of approximately one thousand university graduates majoring in *gugak*, are produced every year in Korea (Kim Jungwon 2012, 35; So 2015, 31). Only a modest number of graduates enter government-sponsored arts organisations upon graduation. Most of the rest, predominantly women, choose to organise teams to present a new performance using Korean traditional musical instruments or musical idioms under the project of popularising *gugak* – fusion *gugak* can be understood as a generic term for various art forms created by such a group. Discourses on fusion *gugak* have been concentrated on its musical style. They have focused on new ensemble music pieces combining traditional Korean instruments with foreign instruments, traditional Korean music played by Western classical musical instruments, or collaborative performance deftly grafting traditional Korean music onto other performing arts such as dance, drama and the visual arts. Only recently have scholars in ethnomusicology discussed gender-based perspectives.

There have been several studies investigating the roles and activities of women in the Korean music field. Kim Jungwon (2012) performed a case study of three performing groups composed of young women. She demonstrated that fusion *gugak* teams have been involved in forming Korean national identity, promoted new styles of music and expressed their sexual identity in their performances. Mueller (2013) furthered Kim's study by focusing on different genres of traditional Korean music

divided by gender. As Mueller (2013, 18) argued, men perform well-respected traditional genres such as *aak* because they are required to pursue work that will enable them to support a family, while the ratio of women in fusion music tends to be higher. Choi Yoonjah (2014) examined women's participation in Korean drumming, which was once a field dominated by men. According to her findings, women drummers' presentation of 'femininity' as a way of differentiating themselves from male drummers exemplifies a cultural phenomenon in capitalist societies emphasising femininity and sexuality to survive consumer culture.

This article builds upon these recent studies and further specifies contemporary Korean women musicians' new attempt to challenge existing gendered power in the field of traditional Korean music. An analysis of *The Songs Once Used for Men* reveals that the concert was characterised by musical uses of reiteration, recycling, fragmentation and hybridisation, which I view as strategies for subverting the conventions of gender roles. I argue that the radical transformation of the Korean court music, to which preserving its original form has been of great importance, exemplifies women's access to and use of music performances to portray feminist beliefs.

The theoretical framework I employ in this study derives from the lineage of Susan McClary's theory on feminist music criticism. As McClary (1991, 8) stressed, music does not just passively reflect society but serves as a public forum where various models of gender organisation are asserted, adopted, contested and negotiated. She also noted that music is often used as a tool to manifest music-making participants' desire through the channel of sound that resembles the sounds of sexuality. Based on Stephen Heath's (1982) research on the construction of sexuality through a set of representations, McClary particularly focused on women producers who made music, through which women can engage in an important political position and strategy. A study of Negus (1997) on Sinéad O'Connor, an Irish singer who achieved worldwide success in the early years of 1990s, is an exemplary study demonstrating McClary's argument. Negus stressed that the words (lyrics), sounds and images that O'Connor formulated in her music articulated her ideology of gender roles. This study explores the two Korean women artists' manifestation of feminist beliefs by using the lyrics, sounds and images on stage in illustration of McClary's theory.

Two women artists of *The Songs Once Used for Men*

Two women artists who performed the concert *The Songs Once Used for Men* have been trained at key educational and cultural institutions established to preserve traditional Korean music. They have worked as a duo named HAEPARY since late 2020.³ They are leading artists in fusion *gugak*, even though they insisted that the performance be called 'ambient *gagok*' not merely fusion *gugak* (All That Art 2020).⁴

Choi Hyewon, a graduate of the Korean Traditional Performing Arts High School (Kungnip *gugak godeung hakgyo*) and Seoul National University (Seoul *daehakgyo*), is a percussionist and sound artist. Choi has been working as a member of various Korean music teams such as Kinetic Korean classical music group YIEN, Kwon Song Hee Pansori Epic Chant Lab and Taru. She has honed her skills in performing Korean traditional music and has continuously expanded her music through collaborative works with artists in other fields. As shown in *The Songs Once Used for Men*, her interests extend to learning electronic music production and creating the soundscape for a variety of needs. Her recent activity as a sound director or sound artist attests to her boundless enthusiasm for music (Elektronmusikstudion 2019).

The popularity of electro-acoustic music in Korea today is enormous, so much so that Korea is not merely 'a receiver or consumer but a maker of not only music but also instruments' (Kye and Yim 2018). The emergence of this music in Korea began in the late 1960s after *The Feast of ID (Wonsaek ui hyangyeon)*, produced by Kang Sukhi at the Korea Broadcasting System radio studio. The electro-acoustic music's popularity resulted from the socio-economic backdrop in the late 1980s, when 'relatively affluent and media-driven consumerist society emerged', as Korean society accommodated 'global cultural imageries and forms' (Lee Keehyeung 2000, 477). The quick appropriation of international music trends was crystallised in the late 1990s (Lee Jung-yup 2009, 491). Electro-acoustic music, which produces danceable electric sounds with the latest technology and production techniques, is one of the factors behind the development of the K-pop industry (Yang 2017, 104). In the history of electro-acoustic music in Korea, women are almost invisible.

The invisibility of women in electro-acoustic music

holds true for fusion *gugak*. The electro-acoustic music scene in Korea has greatly influenced musical activities of young *gugak* musicians. A significant number of them have become interested in sound arts and collaborated with artists producing electronic sounds. There have been many attempts to reinvent certain genres of age-old Korean music by blending it with electronic and electro-acoustic music. The 21st-century Korean Music Project (*Isibil-segi hanguk eumak peurojekteu*) in 2020 aptly demonstrates this.⁵ It is an annual government-sponsored music contest to discover talented young *gugak* musicians and creative traditional music with contemporary influences. Three of the ten teams who qualified for the finals employed the bass guitar, electronic guitar, synthesiser keyboard or Musical Instrument Digital Interface controller – that is, electronic sounds (for information on these instruments, see Holmes 2002). Those who produced such electronic sounds were predominantly men. In this regard, Choi's visibility in the field of sound arts is in itself significant.

Park Minhee, a vocalist trained in the Korean intangible cultural heritage property of *gagok*, graduated from the leading educational institutions in traditional Korean music as Choi did. *Gagok* is widely believed to have originated in Joseon Korea in the 15th century and become popular in salons in the 18th century. As a contemporary *gagok* singer, Park has been producing innovative live performances by adapting the traditional vocal music. For example, the performance entitled *No Longer Gagok (Gagok silgyeok)* was the product of her unceasing efforts to help the public appreciate the *gagok* sound in a new stage setting. Audiences were supposed to move around small rooms where an individual *gagok* singer presented a piece of vocal music on a particular subject. The performance was to formulate a new kind of expression in the limited space using the traditional song. The new format, as Park noted, was intended to arrange 'equal relationship' between the performer and the audience on a rotating one-to-one basis (THE aPRO 2018). Park also founded a group called Parkpark to create and perform such a new performance. Her recent performance works in the group are indicative of her wishes to break down existing stereotypes of traditional music: 'boring', 'profound' or 'far from the reality of modern life'.

Both Choi and Park have been participating in various kinds of events and concerts to present this time-honoured tradition in music, receiving government aid in many cases. At the same time, both promoted a new

type of music that varies significantly from what they had performed at the government-affiliated institutions. With respect to their bidirectional musical activities, one thing seems sure: their continued attempts to revive traditional culture in contemporary society. The 2020 concert, where they completely transformed the format of *gugak* pieces, was a more radical experiment. The concert is significantly different from their previous performances – and surely from other musicians’ performances labelled as fusion *gugak*.

Traditional Korean music emblematic of Confucianism: *Jongmyo jeryeak*

For the first part of *The Songs Once Used for Men*, Choi and Park transformed a genre of Korean court music called *aak*, a collective term referring to many forms of music performed at the royal palace until the fall of the Joseon dynasty. Historical references of the music genre and *Jongmyo jeryeak* in particular would help understand the implications of the performance.

As part of official rituals and political events, Korean court music was performed on various occasions, such as state sacrificial rites, ancestral rituals, formal banquets and royal ceremonies (Kim Hee-sun 2012). Accordingly, its audiences were originally limited to royalty and elite aristocrats. *Jongmyo jeryeak* is a piece of Korean court music representing Confucian traditions of Joseon Korea. King Sejong (r. 1418–1450) composed new pieces of music for the ritual based largely on Korea’s native, indigenous music (*hyangak*). The music consists of singing, instrumental music playing and dancing in honour of the kings of the Joseon dynasty. Today, the ritual, *Jongmyo jerye*, is held every year at the Jongmyo Shrine on the first Sunday of May. Members of the National Gugak Center (*Kungnip gugagweon*) play its music, and the National Korean Traditional Performing Arts High School students dance to the music. *Jongmyo jeryeak* became an Important Intangible Cultural Asset (*Jungyo muhyeong munhwajae*) in Korea in 1975. Both the ancestral rite and ritual music were designated as the first Korea’s Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001.

The core of the ritual’s music and dance is *Botaepyeong* and *Jeongdaeeop*, meaning ‘Maintaining the Great Peace’ and ‘Founding a Great Dynasty’, respectively (Yi 1967, 211–212). The two musical suites and accompanying dances

were created during the reign of King Sejong for court banquet ceremonies. King Sejo (r. 1455–1468), the self-claimed heir of King Sejong’s musical tradition, modified the existing *Botaepyeong* and *Jeongdaeeop* pieces for the royal ancestral ritual (Chang 1985, 373). According to the original ritual practice, when the court music ensemble and singers present *Botaepyeong* praising the ancestor kings’ civil achievements, a dance called *munmu*, symbolising the exploits, is performed. Likewise, *Jeongdaeeop*, the music about the king’s military achievements, is accompanied by a dance called *mumu*. For the former, dancers hold *yak* (a flute-shaped prop with three holes) in their left hand and *jeok* (a stick with three parts of pheasant feathers hanging from the top, decorated with red and green silk ornaments at one end) in their right hand, while dancers for the latter hold *gan* (a wooden sword) and *cheok* (a wooden spear).

The inclusion of music and dance in the ritual came from a belief that musical performances would bring about harmony between human beings and non-physical souls (Geum 2000, 225). The total art form is performed by a group of musical instrumentalists, singers and dancers, thus needing a much larger space than other orchestral and ensemble music (Shim 2014). The National Gugak Center has focused on the artistry of the ritual music when re-creating *Jongmyo jeryeak* as performing arts for the 21st-century theatre scene (see fig. 1).⁶

The importance of *Jongmyo jeryeak* lies in its symbolic meaning not only for Koreans but also for East Asians (Shim 2014). Court music reflects the unique modes of traditional north-east Asian thought highlighting the harmony between heaven and earth, the balance between yin and yang, and the unity between gods and humans. Performers for the ritual are assumed to adhere to detailed rules, ranging from their costumes to the arrangement of musical instruments. Their performance styles have been somewhat ‘distorted’ and changed over the vast reaches of time particularly in varied note values, rhythmic cycles and *bak* (a wooden clapper used in Korean court music) cues (Nam 2007). The ritual music, like other Korean traditional music genres, was recontextualised as it became open to the public during the Japanese colonial period through concerts, broadcasts, recordings and staged performances (Han et al. 2001; Kim Eun-young 2008; Robinson 1988). Despite these contextual and musical changes, *Jongmyo jeryeak* has never lost its original framework.



Figure 1
 Staged performance of *Jongmyo jerye*.
 Photo: The National Gugak Center, 20 March 2014.

Music was germane to politics in most ancient societies. In Korea, as in all East Asian countries, 'such a heightened sensitivity to music's social, spiritual properties and energies' has existed much longer than it has in the West (Hesselink 2007, 8). As mentioned earlier, the continued presence of the music resulted from a government project to preserve a wealth of priceless cultural heritage – that is, the designation of *Jongmyo jeryeak* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage under the 1962 Cultural Property Protection Law (*Munhwajae bohobeop*). The law, modelled on the Japanese laws for the protection of cultural properties, aimed to uncover Korea's most precious treasures and preserve them for posterity (Pai 2001). *Jongmyo jeryeak*, under the protection and auspices of the government, is arguably one of the 'least' adapted repertoires in Korean music.

The project of preserving the original form of *Jongmyo jeryeak* was conducted by men according to its Confucian tradition. The association between Confucian ritual and men, in contrast to the one between Buddhism or shamanism and women, directly relates to the greater acceptance of women in musical genres derived from the latter practices; the unique Confucian culture has remained largely male-dominated despite the overall feminisation of the role of musicians in Korean society. Different from general women in Confucian society, women entertainers who performed Buddhist and shamanistic music were allowed to display the expression

of emotionality through performances. Expressing a range of emotional states would be permissible for *gisaeng* because they already existed 'outside of the social norms of respectable Confucian womanhood' (Mueller 2013, 13–15). In the same vein, women's participation in *Jongmyo jeryeak*, which was an emblem of the Confucian culture, remained taboo for a long time. From its birth until 1945, only members from the male-dominated royal music institute could participate in the ritual.

It is true, though, that today's *Jongmyo jeryeak* is performed both by men and women. Male and female musicians of the National Gugak Center play the music alongside the National Korean Traditional Performing Arts High School students who dance to the music. The inclusion of women musicians and dancers was an inevitable consequence of the phenomenon where the Korean music scene was statistically dominated by women. It was by no means an intentional change. At the National Gugak Center and the National Korean Traditional Performing Arts High School, which were established in the post-colonial period under the auspices of the Korean government initiative for the preservation and revival of Korean culture, women have far outnumbered men since the mid-1970s, so it became inevitable to include women in the ritual. Besides, the change did not make a big difference on the surface; because of the red costume and headdress covering performers' entire body and hair, it is hard to determine whether the performers are men or women. Herein lies

the reason why *The Songs Once Used for Men* deserves attention. In transforming this Confucianism-based Korean musical heritage, the women artists did not hide their gender identity. Rather, they highlighted their presentation of the music as *women* artists.

Portrayal of feminist beliefs onstage

As described above, the composition of *Jongmyo jeryeak* includes orchestration, singing and dancing, all strictly established in accordance with its symbolic meanings. Choi and Park transformed all these elements of the ritual music to portray feminist beliefs. Below are the results of analyses of the concert, which are divided into three parts: lyrics, sounds and images.

Lyrics

The most important feature to note here is that the ritual's vocal part has never been replaced by women singers. Male vocalists' singing in a deep bass voice to accompany the court music ensemble's grand and sublime sound is a salient feature of the age-old court music in Korea. In this sense, the women's presentation of *Jongmyo jeryeak*, including the vocal parts at the concert *The Songs Once Used for Men*, can be seen as an epoch-making event.

The lyrics of Park's singing began with '*O hwang seong ik, ji bok gwol byeok*' 於皇聖翼 祗服厥辟, consisting of eight Chinese characters. This part, meaning 'Alas, the Great King Ikjo, he honoured and obeyed his forefather!', is a line from *Botaepyeong*. In this way, Park extracted several short lines from *Botaepyeong* and *Jeongdaeop*, both of which are about the virtues of the Joseon kings as discussed above. Park, just as *male* vocalists of the ritual music had been doing, sang in a relaxed and confident mood. When asked about the implications of the concert and meanings of the concert title, Choi and Park put the greatest emphasis on the content of the lyrics in Korean traditional music as follows:

We have noticed that lyrics in women's vocal music are about a sad love story like waiting, parting or getting stood up. By contrast, those of men are completely different. Relaxed and independent attitudes, like enjoying their lives to the fullest by reciting a poem with a drink, are often described in lyrics only for male vocalists' songs. [...] We feel like

they [male vocalists] express themselves freely. We have always wanted to do music that makes us feel refreshed and comfortable rather than presenting beautiful melodies [and images] in the eyes of others. (*Chosun Ilbo* 2020, translated by the author)

The remarks above manifest the women artists' desire to break down perceived gender stereotypes around the field of Korean traditional music by, first and foremost, transcending cultural norms about the use of gender-specific lyrics. They wanted to express the self and individuality. As they highlighted, songs for women vocalists tend to express 'passive' attitudes – in sharp contrast to men's songs. As the title of the performance indicates, they wanted to reject the diagram linking women to passivity.

Sounds

Choi and Park entirely changed the format of the original performance while not forgoing key elements in Korean court music. One of the elements was the original style of singing. Male singers at the ritual usually create a resonant, low-pitched voice that sounds much lower than their natural voice range. As a female *gagok* singer, Park has been accustomed to singing in a high-pitched falsetto voice. At the concert, however, she followed the ways the male vocalists have sung. She did not intend to make 'beautiful' sounds; her low-pitched voice at the concert not only preserved the inner essence of the music but also expressed feminist ideas.

Choi and Park produced a totally different soundscape by incorporating newly manufactured musical instruments, Korean folk music instruments and the electronic percussive sounds into the original *Jongmyo jeryeak* vocal melodies. Firstly, their use of newly manufactured musical instruments is a noteworthy sign of their commitment to reinventing traditional Korean music. They began and ended the performance by playing musical instruments for Korean court music like *bak*, *chuk* (wooden box played by hitting a stick on the inside) and *eo* (tiger-shaped wooden scraper). These percussion instruments play an important role in announcing the beginning, ending and transition points of the ritual. Choi and Park reproduced the beginning and ending parts of *Jongmyo jeryeak* played by these percussion instruments. However, they manufactured new *chuk* and *eo* that are well suited to the performance theme and stage settings.

In addition, Park played the xylophone-like percussion instrument consisting of brass bars to Choi's electronic beats. The melodic percussion instrument represented the musical instruments like *pyeonjong* (a set of 16 bronze bells) and *pyeongyeong* (a set of 16 stone chimes) used in the original *Jongmyo jeryeak*. The use of their own musical instruments did not result from their inability to borrow the traditional ones – they used *bak* as it is with no adaptations – rather, making the simpler, white-coloured musical instruments was a strategy intended to show women artists' challenging and experimental spirit or the pursuit of 'unselfconscious' pleasure. Playing the original ritual's important musical parts with their *self-made* musical instruments was in keeping with the women's performance agendas: re-creating traditional Korean music without losing its core elements and showing the images of empowered women.

The inclusion of a folk musical instrument is another interesting feature alluding to their intentional transformation of the ritual. Choi played *jabara* (a pair of large brass cymbals) in the middle of the performance. It is a Korean musical instrument mainly used for Buddhist

music, shamanistic music and traditional military band music. There are no musical instruments for court music comparable to *jabara* in sound, shape or playing technique. Thus, the use of the musical instrument at the concert indicates a deviation from the previously accepted norms in Korean music.

Images

Visual elements are an essential aspect of any live musical performances (Bergeron and Lopes 2009; Cook 2008). What visual elements were used by Choi and Park to portray feminist beliefs? The different roles of the women artists naturally led to their continuous shifting in performing spots. They freely used the stage space. Also, the act of moving their bodies freely to the electronic rhythm exuded a relaxed atmosphere. The huge transformation of traditional male-oriented music was illustrative of the women performers' critical views on women singers' sedentary posture and the relevant passive images in the original form of their musical performances. Such radical changes in their postures and body movements demonstrate that the women artists paid careful attention to the visual presentation elements



Figure 2
Performance of *The Songs Once Used for Men*.
Photo: Naver TV, 26 April 2020.

as well; Park stressed that ‘women are supposed to sing with their hands on the top of their knees, while men usually sing in a more comfortable posture’ (Chosun Ilbo 2020). She added that male *gagok* singers’ less constrained hand gestures portray the impression that the male singers ‘can say what they want to say’ in singing (Chosun Ilbo 2020). Choi and Park’s rhythmic body movement in *The Songs Once Used for Men*, which is aligned with relaxed and independent attitudes, was an act of rebelling against the cultural norms and arguing for women’s equality.

Their unconventional stage costumes and hairstyles are another visual medium Choi and Park used to deliver feminist messages. As mentioned earlier, they wore loose-fitting suit jackets, matching pants, jean skirts and sneakers, all of which provided unrestricted movement and comfort. The women artists showed a sort of androgynous appeal not merely for practical reasons; they purposefully used the look for a symbolic expression of empowered women. The strategic stage costumes symbolising their independent attitudes held true for the concert promotional materials. As seen in fig. 3, the women artists wear trouser suits and sneakers in their promotional materials. No visual images indicating styles or genres of the traditional performance are presented in their posters. Such simple character-oriented images obviously differ from images of the royal palace or performers in traditional costumes that the National Gugak Center has illustrated in their *Jongmyo jeryeak* concert promotional materials.

The visual elements of *The Songs Once Used for Men*, both on stage and in advertising materials, show a striking contrast with those of other women musicians in the field of fusion *gugak*. Most, albeit not all, have emphasised femininity. Women performers often wear ‘Western-style cocktail dresses’ or ‘the clothes showing the bare skin of the women’s shoulders, arms, and legs’ as a marketing strategy (Kim Jungwon 2012, 2–3). Some are encouraged to present a ‘classy’ and ‘sexy’ look, reminiscent of a K-pop girl group that general viewers are used to (So 2015, 27). Women artists’ feminine presenting in fusion *gugak* performances – whether pressed by a team producer makes to do so or they do it on their own – is not found in *The Songs Once Used for Men*. The visual elements of the 2020 performance were thus a huge challenge against the deep-rooted feminine images of women entertainers in Korea.



Figure 3
Promotional posters for *The Songs Once Used for Men*.
Photo: Seoul Namsan Gukakdang, 7 April 2020.

Conclusion

This study investigated how contemporary women artists in the field of traditional Korean music have recently presented feminist beliefs on stage, with particular focus on the concert titled *The Songs Once Used for Men* performed by Choi Hyewon and Park Minhee. For the first part of the concert, Choi and Park completely transformed Korean court music called *Jongmyo jeryeak*, which has rarely been adapted by contemporary performers because of a desire to preserve the original form of the cultural heritage. Their androgynous looks and low-pitched voice, the use of electronic music sound and newly manufactured musical instruments, their unrestricted body movements and, mostly importantly, the transformation of traditional Korean music once sung by and used for men indicate their resistance against the status quo in the world of traditional Korean music.

Breaking barriers of male-dominated performance of Joseon Korea’s high-class music through visual and aural stimuli, Choi and Park intended to challenge the perceptions of women musicians occupying the field of fusion *gugak* and, by extension, women’s attitude towards life. *The Songs Once Used for Men* should not be seen merely as a new turn of traditional Korean music in pursuit of popularising lesser-known cultural heritages; the stage performance was a tool for women artists to present their views on social issues – more specifically, gender equity and the empowerment of women.

Choi and Park were not just the performers but

the producers for *The Songs Once Used for Men*. They were empowered to control their performance content. The women artists were no longer passive performers who complacently followed the rules of the musical performance established in the Joseon dynasty. Conversely, they completely transformed the time-honoured tradition. By using unconventionally transforming the lyrics, sounds and images of the court music, they asserted, adopted, contested and negotiated models of gender organisation in the Korean music fields. Simply put, the concert exemplifies new moves by today's women artists, who present their critical perspectives on feminist issues through experimental performing arts – that is, feminist music criticism.

It is premature to argue that gender equality has been or could be achieved solely by two women artists simply singing and playing male-centred court music. However, *The Songs Once Used for Men* allowed for Choi and Park to express their own interpretation of traditional music, unencumbered by the task they had been assigned: inheriting traditional heritage and preserving cultural traditions. In addition, audiences who left comments and reviews on the Naver TV broadcast site noted that they enjoyed the relaxed and cheerful performance. Many of them also became interested in the way Choi and Park performed and dressed in a more comfortable manner, in connection to the fact that the women artists were singing songs once used for male singers. Such responses show that some audiences became intrigued by these feminist signals, although they perhaps did not fully grasp the nuanced feminist messages behind the performance.

Further research may be needed to identify social factors contributing to how the two women artists created such unconventional performances and whether their feminist messages were adequately delivered to the audience – especially with age, gender, education and occupation in mind. These studies can continue to enrich our understanding of music through the lens of gender. In conclusion, this study provides evidence demonstrating shifting cultural perspectives prompted by performances such as *The Songs Once Used for Men*, questioning musical traditions beyond accepted performance norms of gender and social structures. 🇰🇷

ENDNOTES

1. In Korean, *nam* means men and *chang* means songs. Thus, *namchang* means songs for/by men. *Gagok* refers to a genre of Korean vocal music professional vocalists sang to a chamber ensemble accompaniment. The Seoul Namsan Gukakdang was established in 2007 to spread the excellence of Korean traditional music and promote traditional performing arts.
2. *Gugak*, literally meaning 'national music' in Korean, includes traditional music of the upper and lower classes both in a historical context and in performance at present through the system of preservation.
3. To find their activities, see the official webpage: <http://haepaary.com/>. The author wrote this paper before Park Minhee and Choi Hyewon officially formed the group named HAEPARY. For this reason, the names of the respective artists are used, instead of the group name, in this paper.
4. The women artists defined 'ambient *gagok*' as a new form of musical performance combining *gagok* singing and electronic music sounds.
5. The 21st-century Korean Music Project, sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Gugak FM Broadcasting System, has launched teams into the performance sphere to present a new direction for 21st-century Korean music since 2007. The contest is usually held on the stage of the Yeakdang, the main hall of the National Gugak Centre, lasting two and a half hours on the designated day. For more detailed information on the 21st-century Korean Music Project, see Stephanie Choi (2012) and Kwon (2014).
6. Fig. 1 shows the staged performance of *Jongmyo jerye* in 2014 at the National Gugak Centre. *Jongmyo jerye* consists of procedures to welcome the royal spirits, to make offerings of gifts, food and wine (three times), and to see the spirits off. The ritual has been passed down as an art form and ceremony meticulously observing *yeaksasang* principles, the Confucian ideal and the governing ideology of the Joseon dynasty, as the instrumental music, song and dance are performed together in each step of the rite. See <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/jongmyo-jereak-national-gugak-center-gugakwon/KQJirFAyrTjIKg?hl=en>.

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