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## Instrumentalization of the Media Industry and Rise of Popular Trot Music in South Korea under Park Chung-Hee (1961-1979)

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Recently, reality singing competition shows focusing on the music genre of *trot*, such as *Miss Trot* (2019), *Mister Trot* (2020), and *Voice Trot* (2020), have occupied screen time on South Korean television. Though the South Korean public opinion on *trot* may vary, especially among the younger generation who tends to view *trot* as an old-fashioned music genre, *trot* has been widely accepted, promoted, and marketed as a “pure” product of Korean culture for decades. However, the historical reasons behind the creation and popularization of the genre should be further investigated to better grasp the significance of *trot* as a quintessential product of Korean national culture. The origins of *trot* have been widely debated over time. This is because the genre emerged from Japanese *enka*, a popular music style of the colonial era from 1910-1945. In the 1970s, the Park Chung-Hee military regime implemented cultural policies as part of the Cultural Nationalism movement to galvanize a sense of national identity and patriotic sentiments among citizens through the creation and promotion of cultural products. Thus, the “*Koreanization*” of *trot* was undertaken to erase its tainted colonial origins. *Trot* became instrumental for the government in the creation of a national popular music and promotion of its ideology, as well as an essential channel to explore and reinvent “*Koreanness*”, despite the heavy censorship imposed on the media industry at the time. The historical flexibility of the genre in itself allowed for its resurgence in the 1970s. Through the development of specific and recognizable musical and lyrical patterns combined with the government’s cultural ideology, *trot* could then be finally (re)shaped as a “pure” Korean product which listeners got accustomed to and continue to enjoy in the present day.

### The Park Chung-hee Era and Cultural Nationalism

Park Chung-hee came to power through a *coup d'état* in 1961 and remained the president of South Korea until his assassination in 1979. Often credited as the instigator of the “*Miracle on the Han*”, Park successfully pushed for the economic revitalization of South Korea, through the state-led development of heavy and chemical industries.<sup>1</sup> This was made possible by the creation of specialized and unskilled labor forces throughout the eighteen years of his authoritarian rule. Following in the steps of his predecessor Syngman Rhee, Park’s regime remained highly authoritarian and militaristic, and by 1972, Park declared martial law along with the implementation of the Yushin Constitution which signified the beginning of one of the most repressive periods in modern Korean history.

In addition to economic growth, the state was concerned with finding ways to convey its ideology of anti-communism, nationalism, and self-dependence. As a result, it actively used and controlled the media and culture industries to promote its vision of a new, independent, and culturally unique Korea. The unique characteristics of Korean culture were to be developed under the scope of Cultural Nationalism, which aimed at promoting a homogeneous Korean national identity. However, some obstacles stood in the government’s way and needed to be quickly eliminated to better promote a sense of shared identity solely based on culture. As pointed out by Haksoom Yim, there were three major obstacles to overcome. Firstly, the issue of “cultural identity”, dated back to the Japanese colonial era from 1910-1945. The Japanese government had tried, over 35 years of colonial rule, to implement assimilation policies such as *bunka seiji* (Cultural Rule) after the March 1<sup>st</sup> Movement, 1919.<sup>2</sup> These policies consequently influenced the development of a modern Korean cultural identity highly tied to its past colonial legacies. Secondly, the division between South and North Korea in 1945 created cultural differences between the two nations and thus impacted the cultural identity of the peninsula as a whole. Thirdly, the influence of Western culture through the increased consumption of Hollywood cinema and foreign goods, especially after the Korean War (1950-1953), over time started to conflict with Korean traditional culture and ways of life. This persisted even after the 1970s, as Yim also mentions

1 Eckert Carter, *Korea Old and New: A History*, (Harvard University, Korea Institute, Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), 359-367.

2 David, Brudnoy, “Japan’s Experiment in Korea,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 25, no. 1/2 (1970): 155–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2383744>.

that later during the 1990s, the emergence of information technologies and culture industries, which channel cultural globalization, also played important roles in the diverse cultural policies implemented across nations.<sup>3</sup>

The government's answer to these issues came in the form of cultural policies, heavy censorship, and the imposition of strict regulations on media, which allowed the state to fully supervise the production and promotion of cultural contents. Yim points out that:

*“Even though excellence and access were seen to be the primary goals of cultural policy, a major priority objective of this plan was to establish a new cultural identity by highlighting a specific cultural tradition (Ministry of Culture and Information, 1973). For this reason, from 1974-1978, 70 percent of the total public expenditure on the cultural sector was distributed into folk arts and traditional culture (Ministry of Culture and Information, 1979, 228).”*<sup>4</sup>

In order to legitimize Park's authoritarian rule and establish his government as the ultimate power holder, the discourse on “specific cultural tradition” was shaped to appeal to the population who shared a collective memory of ancient national cultural *grandeur* and glorious military power. The goal was to efficiently tie Korean traditional culture under the scope of Cultural Nationalism, highly influenced by Neo-Confucian thoughts, with Park's “revitalization” process, which targeted rural areas and labor-intensive industries. The cultural policies *de facto* became an essential part of the government's newly implemented and constantly evolving economic policies.<sup>5</sup>

A key factor that contributed to the success of Park's cultural policy was the effective mobilization and instrumentalization of the media industry, which served as an essential channel to spread the government's ideology. With the implementation of the Yushin Constitution in 1972, the state exercised censorship and regulated the contents of major media outlets, such as the radio, journals, and television. Television channels in

3 Haksoom, Yim, “Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in South Korea,” *The International Journal of Cultural Policy* 8, no.1 (2002): 39. doi: 10.1080/1028663029003242

4 Ibid, 40.

5 Ibid, 43-44.

particular participated in the promotion of *trot* singers, most notably through the national broadcast of the *Gayo Daejeon*, in which popular singers promoted their newly released hits. As pointed out by Kwon and Kim, the state's ideology incorporated the ideas of economic growth as well as military power into its daily discourse and used television broadcast as a major channel to promote its agenda. The authors also emphasize that by 1973, "Korea's three major broadcasting stations transmitted more than 600 programs promoting the Park military government."<sup>6</sup> The state-controlled broadcasting content was based on standards of morality, showing patriotism and support for the ruling government. Thus, television programs underwent severe censorship and only those approved by the government were aired. Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, the merging of small private industries and regional broadcasting operators into the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) strengthened the state's control over television broadcasting.<sup>7</sup> The political instrumentalization of television was an efficient move to spread the government's ideology, since by 1963 the number of television sets owned by Korean households reached 34,774 and continuously increased to 1.2 million in 1973 and 5.6 million by 1979.<sup>8</sup> It is within this context that television broadcasts introduced *trot* under the supervision of the government who purposely used the combination of media and culture to promote a sense of "*Koreanness*".

### Rise and Popularization of Trot (1961-1979)

As previously mentioned, the historical origins of *trot* have been a subject of heated debate, due to its Japanese colonial origins. *Trot* was strongly influenced by Japanese *enka*, a popular genre of music that was, and still is, particularly enjoyed by elderly people and "stereotypically associated with rural areas and the working class".<sup>9</sup> Yet, despite the Japanese influence, Park's government was determined to erase the colonial past of the peninsula and focus on promoting the superiority of Korean culture over others, particularly Japanese

6 Seung-Ho, Kwon and Joseph, Kim, "From censorship to active support: The Korean state and Korea's cultural industries," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 24, no. 4 (December 2013): 520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304613508873>

7 Ibid, 520.

8 Ibid, 519–521.

9 Deborah, Shamoon, "Recreating traditional music in postwar Japan: a prehistory of *enka*," *Japan Forum* 26, no. 1 (2014): 113. doi: 10.1080/09555803.2013.824019.

culture. *Trot* was an excellent tool to do so for various reasons. Firstly, it was already a familiar and popular music genre to the public. Secondly, the style of the music itself did not require heavy change, as it already had undergone modifications after Korea's independence. The musical composition shifted from the use of minor to major key, and the lyrics were used to convey Korean nationalist and patriotic sentiments.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, with the creation of broadcast operators and the increased use of television, *trot* was able to be promoted on TV programs with visual elements such as costumes and haircuts following the government's standards of decency, which greatly assisted in popularizing the genre, as people were able to listen to popular music privately in their homes.<sup>11</sup>

The "Camelia Lady dispute" is a notable event that illustrates the government's strict control over the music industry. The 1964 "Camellia Lady" song by Lee Mi-ja was a hit, selling more than one million copies. However, it was banned in Korea due to its "Japanese color" as the song resembled *enka* in terms of its musical composition. Strangely, despite its lyrics being politically friendly, as they corresponded to the state-imposed censorship regulations, it was still considered "vulgar" according to the state's standards. Most importantly, the banning of "Camellia Lady" reflected the contradictions of postcolonial Korea, as it highlighted the complexity of reshaping a national culture, while simultaneously dealing with postcolonial social, economic, and political forces. Numerous foreign influences, along with Japan, participated in the creation of the *trot* nostalgia felt by the older generation of Koreans. This generation remembered the colonial period and still enjoyed listening to Japanese music. This was a reality that did not match with the one that Park's regime was trying to build. Those ambivalent feelings towards Japanese culture are important to acknowledge as Park Chung-Hee himself was never a complete anti-Japanese activist and even less a Western culture sympathizer. Lee also notes that the banning of the song was an extraordinary event at the time since never before had a popular song been subject to censorship and "purification".<sup>12</sup> The success of the song came in contradiction to the government's push for the creation

10 Yujeong, Chang, "A study on the traditionalism of "trot" – Focused on Yi Nanyŏng's "Tears of Mokp'o", *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5, no. 1 (June 2016): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imic.2016.04.002>.

11 Seung-Ah, Lee, "Decolonizing Korean Popular Music: The "Japanese Color" Dispute over Trot," *Popular Music and Society*, 40, no.1 (2017): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2016.1230694>.

12 Seung-Ah, Lee, "Decolonizing Korean Popular Music", 107.

of an exclusively Korean cultural identity devoid of foreign influence.<sup>13</sup> This incident shows that Park's government actively shaped Korean culture of the 1960s and 1970s by defining the cultural objects which could be considered Korean and those that could not. Hence, *trot* was considered to be Korean under the strict supervision and approbation of Park's regime.

Within this context, Park's government started to introduce "healthy popular music" referred to in Korean as *geonjeon gayo*, which conveyed ideologies related to the country's economic success, values of work, and morals, which aimed at promoting a strong sense of national community.<sup>14</sup> *Geonjeon gayo* was a quintessential product of the 1970s cultural industry because it simultaneously promoted Park's vision of a new and economically independent South Korea while providing viewers with an entertaining experience, highlighting the importance of each individual in the creation of the new nation. Jungmin Mina Lee notes that *geonjeon gayo* includes two key values, namely *jaegeon* (reconstruction) and *jucheseong* (self-reliance), which were essential concepts for Park's regime. In 1970, Park Chung-hee had already started his "revitalization" campaign by initiating the New Village Movement referred to as "*Saemaul Undong*". This movement aimed at modernizing rural villages and dealt with the issue of "New Village Song" (*Saemaeul Undong Norae*).<sup>15</sup> Even though the "New Village Song" is arguably not a typical *trot* song, its creation highlights the simultaneous effort of the government in promoting *geonjeon gayo* and the deliberate use of the media and culture industries to spread Cultural Nationalism as the state's primary ideology. Thus, the political climate of the 1970s concretely impacted the production of *trot* and it is under these strict regulations that it emerged as a popular and successful genre.

### **"Koreanization" and Popularization of Trot: Han and National Sentiments**

The development of a cultural industry regulated by the state and the rise in mass media and technologies, coupled with "the increasing demand to

13 Ibid, 105-110.

14 Chang, Yujeong "A study on the traditionalism of "trot" – Focused on Yi Nanyŏng's "Tears of Mokp'o"," *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 5, no. 1 (June 2016): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imic.2016.04.002>.

15 Seung-Ho, Kwon and Joseph, Kim, "From censorship to active support: The Korean state and Korea's cultural industries," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 24, no. 4 (December 2013): 519, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304613508873>.

produce “healthy popular music”, led to the emergence of *trot* as a flexible medium that the government could manipulate through the “*Koreanization*” and popularization of the genre. Songwriters, as well as singers, participated in this national “renaissance” of *trot*, now technically free from foreign influences and produced exclusively in Korea, by addressing diverse topics in their songs, such as concepts related to traditional *Koreanness* like “*han*”, meaning a sense of loss, unfairness, and helplessness unique to Koreans, as well as lighter topics regarding romantic, family and platonic relationships. Thus, analyzing singers whose songs were both a public success and significant in terms of their lyrics in promoting the government agenda, can shed light upon the characteristics of the *trot* genre during this time.

In 1972, Cho Yong-pil’s song “*Come back to Busan Harbor*” became a surprise hit after having been the target of criticism from the government due to the “Japanese color” of the song. Despite this criticism, the song sold one million copies and has since been covered by many other popular *trot* singers, notably Na Hoon-a, who will be discussed in the following paragraph.<sup>16</sup> The song revolves around the port of Busan and a man who misses his brother lost at sea. As one of the characteristics of *trot* is the repetitiveness of lyrics, the song is easy to remember and thus was enjoyed by a large audience. An essential element that contributed to the success of this song is the universal sense of loss and longing, a recurrent theme in the genre. The association between the lost brother and the port of Busan is purposely made to appeal to the Korean audience who immediately visualize the port of Busan and can relate to the suffering of the man. The lyrics did not require censorship and also corresponded with the government’s desire to appeal to a sense of community and shared culture, notably through the sense of “*han*” the song inspires. “*Han*” is an emotion unique to Korean people which cannot be shared with foreign nationals, thus the exclusive characteristic entailed in the term perfectly fit the goal of re-introducing *trot* as a pure Korean music genre.

As previously mentioned, *trot* was used as a tool to convey national and collective imagery of “*Koreanness*” due to its flexibility. This “flexibility” is intrinsically linked to the origins of the genre as “*enka*” was influenced by foreign music during its creation. Thus, the genre in itself had already shown its flexibility and fluidity in both welcoming foreign influences as well as

16 More information on the release and complete album can be found on the *gayo album review* at <https://terms.naver.com/entry.naver?docId=3378007&cid=60487&categoryId=60495>.

receiving indigenous modifications throughout time. Yujeong Chang, mentions one major musical change that *trot* underwent after gaining independence from Japan in 1945. While *trot* was previously composed in minor key, an increasing number of songs began to be produced in the major key instead.<sup>17</sup> This hints at early attempts of “purification” of the genre from Japanese “*enka*”. Moreover, Chang points out that *trot* had been well-loved by fans for decades but only because its subjects were based on rural, indigenous themes.”<sup>18</sup> A concrete example of the exploration of those themes can be found in the work of Na Hoon-a, specifically the song “Far away hometown”. In the song, Na Hoon-a tells the story of a man who dreams and thinks about his faraway hometown to which he cannot return to. Particularly, the use of the term “*cheonritahyang*”, which translates as “thousand miles away from home”, expressing the loneliness felt by people who left their hometowns to work in urbanizing cities or regions and were unable to see their family regularly. It is significant that the lyrics included this term as it was commonly used at the time in popular songs, and it resonates with the lives of many Koreans living in rural areas who were forced to participate in the country’s revitalization process by working in factories far away from their hometowns. Notably in the South-East part of the peninsula close to the port city of Busan, where the government pushed for heavy and chemical industrialization as a way to achieve economic autonomy and independence. The sentiments of loss and melancholia are prominent throughout the song and participate in recreating the sense of “*han*” which characterizes a form of grief or helplessness said to be exclusively reserved and felt by Korean nationals. Thus, “*My Far Away Hometown*” is effective in establishing ‘Koreanness’ as it appeals to both collective memory and a shared sense of “*han*”.

While the “New Village Song” might not have been directly categorized as *trot*, the movement still inspired artists to create songs supporting the New Village Movement. In 1972, Nam Jin released the song “With You/With Someone” (“*Nimgwa Hamkke*”) which hinted at the movement’s motto. The first sentence of the song goes as follows “I want to live in a picturesque house with my beloved ones for the rest of my life”. This refers to the “Korean Dream” of the simple life promoted by the New Village Movement. Since the movement targeted the population living in rural areas, the “Korean Dream”

17 Chang, “A study on the traditionalism of “trot” – Focused on Yi Nanyŏng’s “Tears of Mokp’o,” 63-64.

18 Ibid, 62.

was linked to a return to physical and geographical national roots while also serving the country through labor and patriotism. In comparison to the two previously discussed songs, "With You/With Someone" is a joyful and uplifting song that suggests to South Korean listeners that under the new nation, a sense of community and brotherhood is prevalent and that this national sentiment ultimately brings people together, as they share the same goal of living a peaceful and humble life. This resonates with Park's emphasis on Cultural Nationalism and strong insistence on making all civilians participate in the effort of building the nation. Moreover, the image of the "picturesque house" hints at a return to more traditional values tied to Neo-Confucian legacies of filial piety and patriarchy, family-oriented society, and obedience to the ruler. In the 1970s, the state and Park Chung-hee embodied all of these legacies and was strongly advocating for a return to ancient traditional values which drastically came in opposition with modern Western lifestyles. Indeed, the Korean style of living, embedded in the symbolic value of the "house", and the central role of the family remained a priority in rebuilding the "new" nation under Park's regime.

### **Trot: a reflection on the "Dream of Koreanization"**

The process of the popularization of *trot* appears to have been a rather smooth process since it was already popular and supported by the emergence of "healthy popular music". Moreover, the genre proved to be a channel for artists and the government to experiment and reappropriate trot as a "pure" Korean product free from foreign influences. Nonetheless, *trot* is still a hybrid genre in terms of how it was shaped, promoted, and marketed. Due to the heavy censorship imposed on the culture industry, the genre was not free from political pressure and was partly shaped by the government and its agenda. Therefore, the artistic agency of songwriters in producing *trot* can be questioned, yet they still enjoyed relative freedom in production and promotion, which allowed the songs and singers to become successful. The hybridity of *trot* resides in both its origins and flexibility, as it was re-adapted in Korea under Park's authoritarian regime. Successful in establishing the basis of a sense of "Koreanness", notably through lyrics focusing on collective memory, deep emotions, and familiar national places, 1970s *trot* has paved the way for the listeners of contemporary versions in the present day. Arguably, since the 1970s, *trot* has not drastically evolved in the same way it did after independence from Japanese colonization in 1945. Rather, hit songs that were released at the time have been covered numerous times. For example, Cho Yong-pil's "Come back to Busan Port" has been remade by over 10 different

singers since 1977 and repackaged multiple times in collection albums.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this non-evolution indicates that *trot* as a Korean cultural product—including the musical composition, lyrics' themes, and purification process—was finalized during the 1970s and galvanized by the popularity and market success of the songs produced at the time. The genre was and remains a concrete example of the instrumentalization of a cultural object in promoting “*Koreanness*”. Hence, the need to reshape and/or modify specific elements has not been prioritized in the present day. Nevertheless, the pursuit of the “*Dream of Koreanization*”, which characterizes the Park Chung-Hee era, has directly intervened in the evolution of *trot*, which has played a crucial role in developing diversity within the genre itself. Now considered a quintessential cultural object of South Korea, *trot* participated in the spread of a sense of “*Koreanness*” specific to the historical context in which it was developed. Therefore, *trot* in the Korean sense, is indivisible from “*han*” as previously discussed, while also being a vehicle for patriotic and nationalist messages. As pointed out by Chang, “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’.”<sup>20</sup> The naturalization and *de facto* “*Koreanization*” of *trot* ultimately appear to have served the national purpose of promoting a Korean cultural identity during the Park Chung-hee era.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the extent to which *trot* actively participated in promoting a sense of “*Koreanness*” during Park’s authoritarian regime. The process of the popularization of *trot* in the 1970s has undeniably been influenced by the government’s instrumentalization of the media and culture industries. However, it is essential to nuance this popularization process by considering the genre as an original hybrid that was progressively modified, manipulated, and reshaped as a pure Korean cultural product during the 1970s. The flexibility of the genre itself allowed for its musical re-composition, followed by a reappropriation of the lyrical content by the state, which needed to promote Cultural Nationalism as well as the songwriters who, despite censorship, were able to explore themes related to a sense of “*Koreanness*”.

19 More information on the song can be found on Naver Dictionary at <https://terms.naver.com/entry.naver?docId=3378007&cid=60487&categoryId=60495>.

20 Chang, “A study on the traditionalism of “*trot*” – Focused on Yi Nanyōng’s “*Tears of Mokp’o*”, 63.

The rapid popularization of the genre following these modifications demonstrate that it was indeed an efficient cultural object used by the government in promoting its ideology beyond the specifically designed songs such as the “New Village Movement Song”. The state profited from the genre’s familiar and popular origins and, through a heavy reliance on censorship policies and regulations, as well as the suppression of its colonial origins, reached the goal of re-creating and imagining *trot* as a pure Korean cultural object.

*Trot* is still a popular genre nowadays, and in rare instances would it be denied its Korean origins despite its tumultuous past. As previously mentioned, “*enka*” was remembered and enjoyed by the older generation because it was the popular music during the colonial era. Similarly, it could be argued that listeners of today enjoy listening to 1970s *trot* with the same emotion, as the songs convey a form of melancholia and regret of a time that no longer exists.