

# Itinerants in the Extreme Orient: Preliminary Notes From the Korean Archipelago

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## Introduction

The study of itinerant groups in the Extreme Orient — China, Korea and Japan — deserves more attention by Western scholars. Far Eastern itinerants are often called "Gypsy-like" by Occidentals and Orientals alike. However convenient, the indiscriminate comparing of Far Eastern itinerants with Romani-speaking Gypsies of the Occident is not always meaningful and enlightening. Emphasis is better placed initially on those Far Eastern historical, geographical and social conditions that have been major factors in the development of Far Eastern itinerancy. Comparisons between various groups can follow.

In this paper, Korean itinerants are discussed first as products of their own environment, and then briefly as parts of a broader picture of world itinerancy. In rural south Korea (Republic of Korea) there are ordinarily found small groups of itinerant entertainers and peddlers about which very little is known. The rugged archipelago region of the Korean peninsula is a likely place to encounter them. In order to understand the interactions between Korea's contemporary itinerants and their clients among sedentary populations, it is useful to sketch out the social history of the despised classes in Korea. This paper concludes with some speculations for further study.

## The Archipelago Region

Itinerant groups were once commonplace in the Far East. However, itinerant life styles have been severely curtailed in the Communist countries of China and north Korea during the past quarter-century. Itinerancy persists in Japan despite its high degree of industrialization. Both Korea and Japan encourage free enterprise, an ideology that helps to sustain forms of itineracy that are practical economies of effort.

At land's end, south of the 36th parallel in Korea, there is a vast archipelago region encompassing the rich Nakdong River delta, high mountains, and thousands of islands. Here, some ancient forms of far Eastern itinerant traditions have long persisted in semi-isolation from the mainstreams of Korean life and culture.

Until recently, ease of access into much of the area has been hampered by poor roads. As for sea access, the archipelago has monster storms and freak tides that are the talk of seaman's clubs around the world. Cliffs rise abruptly from the waters' edges. Thick fogs are commonplace.

In this land of dangerous coasts, poor harbors and unwieldy boats, isolated villagers are said to be quick-tempered, rough and sly. Their reputations diminish toward the lower latitudes. Cheju Island, the most southern and isolated place in the archipelago, is considered to be the least Korean of Korean territory. Early Western maps of Korea, for example the Luis Teixeira map of 1559, refer to the archipelago as "Islands of Thieves" and "Pirates' Point".

The archipelago was long considered by most Korans to be "beyond Heaven's influence" and a place from which little of significance would ever come. It was therefore misgoverned and--not surprisingly--little of significance ever came from there. However, exiles, convicts and lepers continuously arrived to the archipelago over the centuries. These increased the indigenous populations, their poverty, and their notoriety among outsiders.

More recently, thousands of little traditions under attack by Korean modernization have found some refuge in the archipelago. Superstitious, conservative villagers share their isolated niches with uncountable denizens of the shaman's spirit world. Open-air entertainments occasionally come into the archipelago with

itinerant troupers, and these diversions are extremely popular among the villagers.

Who are these Korean itinerants? How do they fit into Korean society? What are their origins? Since there are only a handful of English-language sources that refer to Korea's itinerants, and since no fieldwork is being done among contemporary itinerants in Korea, such questions are not easily answered.

### Itinerants and Korean Social History

The Korean social system up through the 19th century consisted of two general classes of peoples. "Respectable peoples" formed the majority, dominant population, and its members kept family histories to prove their respectability. "Base peoples" were the despised minorities who could not identify or trace their ancestry.<sup>1)</sup> Both "respectable peoples" and "base peoples" were grouped into a hierarchy of sub-classes.

Occupations were a primary differential between the social classes of Korea. Occupational groups dealing in pain, blood, death and dirt comprised the lowest classes. Some "base peoples" were so disgusting to "respectable peoples" that they were degraded into legal outcaste groups. These outcastes were distanced from "respectable peoples" and kept under strict controls.

Although the legal class system collapsed at the end of the 19th century, many farmers, artisans and merchants—even those in cultural backwaters like the archipelago—still consider themselves to be "respectable peoples." This colors their relationships with Korea's itinerants, who are linked by their own occupations, and by historical circumstances, with Korea's traditional outcaste groups.

Prior to the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910 A.D.) Korea's outcaste groups were known by several names. One of the earliest groups was called *koli such'ok*, meaning "willow—basket wanderers." The name indicates that the *koli such'ok*, followed a trade that concentrated them in regions like the Naktong Valley and delta, where riverside vegetation useful in basket construction was easily obtained.

The *koli such'ok* were thought to be the remnants of unsubdued tribal peoples.

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1) Chang Dae Hong, "A Study of the Korean Cultural Minority: The Paekchong." In Andrew C. Nahm (Ed.) *Traditional Korea—Theory and Practice*. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University Center for Korean Studies, 1974), 66-7.

They were unregistered with the government. They paid no tribute or taxes. They lived a nomadic life style, changing their residence frequently. Besides making and selling willow baskets and related manufactures, they engaged in hunting. Dancing girls came from their families.<sup>2)</sup>

The *koli such'ok* were, from the beginning of the historical record, something of a reservoir for foreign elements and influences entering Korea. Their culture was constantly enriched by early and continuous intermingling with foreign elements.

Aside from their mongrel pedigree, the *koli such'ok* were condemned by "respectable peoples" for their hunting, killing and slaughtering practices, and even for their basketry: all of these trades were repulsive to Korea's Buddhists. What did basketry have to do with butchering animals? Apparently, both occupations ran counter to prevailing Buddhist sentiments; Peeling bark from trees is so much like skinning an animal that these occupations ranked together.<sup>3)</sup>

The *koli such'ok* may have originally been itinerants by necessity, since they had to provision themselves by migrating up and down the river valleys. However, by the early 13th century they were beginning to become sedentary. Their reduced itinerancy may reflect changing emphasis in their choices of occupations.

At that time the "respectable peoples" distinguished two occupational groups within the *koli such'ok* population: One occupation group disgusted them; the other diverted them. The "respectable peoples" called the disgusting outcastes *hwach'ok*, and despised them for their being hunters, slaughterers and basketmakers. Members of the other group were called *chaein*; "Respectable peoples" found them diverting since they specialized in entertaining, comic acting, acrobatics, music, magic and prostitution.

The Mongol invasions, beginning in 1231A. D. brought drastic changes to Korean society. The invaders were meat-eating calvary; "To provide the meat, milk and kumiss they needed the Mongols stocked the Korean peninsula with horses

2) Herbert Passin, "The Paekchong of Korea: A Brief Social History." *Monumenta Nipponica* 12,3-4(1957-1958), 215.

3) S. F. Moore, "The Butchers of Korea." *The Korean Repository*. 5(April 1898), 129.

and cattle.<sup>4)</sup> Cheju Island, off the archipelago, became an important Mongol pasture.

Since the Mongols had special needs and amusements, and did not trust the Koreans, they imported corps of skilled assistants selected from among their loyal allies. Their helpers came from as far west as Turkestan, and included Muslim butchers and entertainers. For example, when the Mongol princesses wed Korean princes, the girls imported to Korea male and female entertainers from their fathers' vast Eurasian empire for their pleasure. When the Mongols were finally driven from Korea, not all of their helpers left with them.

As before, stray foreign elements came to reside among the *koli such'ok*. Soon, words like "Tartar (Mongol) *hwach'ok*" and "*kan* (Chinese) *chacin*" began to surface in the Korean lexicon, reflecting major changes in the make-up of the Korean outcaste groups.<sup>5)</sup> There were other changes: the *hwach'ok* began to emphasize slaughtering among their several occupations. The *chacin* population grew rapidly. At this time the term "*koli such'ok*" is replaced in common usage by the hybrid term "*hwach'ok-chacin*."

During the social and economic upheavals triggered by the Mongol invasion and its aftermath, the *hwach'ok-chacin* became more vagrant. They increasingly added to social unrest. One Korean scholar has described the situation in this manner :

As time elapsed the small groups were sometimes consolidated under a single command. They were well armed with a variety of weapons and organized into a well-disciplined calvary. They invaded many villages, murdered innocent people, burned down houses, stole crops and other valuable properties. Sometimes they kidnapped men and women.<sup>6)</sup>

Also, they occasionally sided with or impersonated the enemies of Korea. As a result, the government attempted to reform, exterminate and assimilate the unruly *hwach'ok-chacin*. Very often, *hwach'ok-chacin* who were captured and not executed were exiled to the archipelago region.

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4) Passin, 218.

5) Passin, 217.

6) Chang, 67.

With the onset of the Yi Dyansty (1392-1910 A. D.), attempts were made to assimilate the *hwach'ok-chaein* directly into the lower ranks of the "respectable peoples" classes. The government assimilation program included renaming the *hwach'ok-chaein* as "*paekchong*," a term that meant "common people." However, "respectable peoples" would not accept the outcastes in their revised status: They called the outcastes "new *paekchong*" and treated them exactly as before--as outcastes.

The *hwach'ok-chaein* themselves objected to their assimilation. They had group pride. Besides, as "respectable peoples" they would have to register and settle down to cultivating the soil. The *chaein* itinerants in particular were adverse to abandoning their horses to learn the dull poverty of the Korean peasant yoemen.

In addition, "respectable peoples" had to pay taxes, fulfil military and civil obligations, and were tried by public courts of law. Worst of all, by assenting to their assimilation the *hwach'ok-chaein* would be forever forfeiting their monopolies on inherited occupations. While some of these occupations were bloody, dirty and disgusting, it was not an uncommon observation that in times of turmoil and famine "respectable peoples" died, while the outcastes with their special occupations and survival skills somehow lived on. In sum, "respectability" was not incentive enough for the *hwach'ok-chaein* to abandon their traditional ways of life.

Brief successes in the assimilation program were offset by unforeseen problems. For example, Korean officials monitoring the industries began to complain:

since the [hwach'ok] have intermarried with the common people and their previous professions have been prohibited, they no longer make the willow cases, which had until that time been their speciality: therefore measures must be taken to have them made by common people.<sup>7)</sup>

With no mass support, the government's assimilation program failed miserably. The program did, however, serve to give the once inoffensive word "*paekchong*" a new, distasteful meaning. After this failure the social order in Korea became increasingly rigid.

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7) Passin, 222-223.

Soon there was "established as a national custom the degradation of the seven classes,"<sup>8)</sup> Here, the seven lowest peoples were identified as : Servants of the sheriff who beat men, ect. ; buffoons, or travelling singers ; butchers ; basketmakers ; sorceresses : dancing girls : and, makers of leather shoes.

Although the *hwach'ok* were primarily butchers, they still followed that major occupation of their ancestors, which was basketry : They still made and sold baskets, assorted wickerwork, sieves, hoops and the like. And, until the breakdown of Korea's traditional order at the end of the 19th century

they were like the untouchables of India or the *eta* of Japan, forced to live in segregated quarters isolated from the common people, and confined to despised and menial occupations, which were considered polluted...<sup>9)</sup>

At the same time the *chaein* continued practicing their diverting occupations and "were frequently nomadic, although many did live in fixed settlements from which they went out to their work."<sup>10)</sup>

In general then, peoples referred to in Koryo and Yi dynasties' folklore and history as *koli such'ok*, *yang such'ok*, *hwach'ok*, *such'ok*, *chaein*, *kwangdae*, *paekchong*, *peu*, and so on, were essentially a widespread and often persecuted itinerant culture and its remnants, practicing a vast repertory of survival skills ranging from hunting and gathering in the wilds and remote river valleys to entertaining in the inner palaces of the capital cities.

Since the entertainers were apparently the most mobile of the outcastes, it is useful to take a closer look at them. Popular Yi Dynasty era entertainments were : high-wire acts, tumbling, magic, sword-dancing, drama, comedy, puppetry and masked dances.<sup>11)</sup> At the palace, the principle entertainers were : female entertainers (*ki*) ; musicians (*kong*) ; and actors (*peu* ; also *kwangdae*, *chaein*, *such'ok sung*, etc.). The following entertainers appeared before royalty less frequently : comic

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8) Moore, 129.

9) Passin, 197.

10) Passin, 211.

11) Yi Doo Hyon, *Hankook Yonhuksa* (History of Korean Drama). Seoul, Korea : Posong Munhwasa, 1978, 79.

magicians(*hwarang*): dancing and singing troupes(*sadang*); and female shamans (*mudang*). Farmers' bands(*nongmin*) also performed for the court.<sup>12)</sup>

Beyond the palace walls, itinerant entertainers were everywhere. A 16th century Korean scholar looks down his nose at them, and writes:

The begging *chaein* and *paekchong* are people who have no real employment or property. They are merely entertainers; beggars strolling village to village. Note how they defraud the common peoples. If there is a famine they increase their thefts, and are twice worse than usual.<sup>13</sup>

Time was no solution to the problem. A "respectable person" at the beginning of the 18th century remarked how the *kwangdae* "gathered in coastal villages during the spring and summer, subsisting off of the fishermen there. However, in fall and winter they drifted inland to prey on farming villages."<sup>14)</sup>

At that time, the travelling entertainers were still widespread throughout Korea. As usual, they were very much a social nuisance. Particularly at the end of the harvest season when their songs, meat, liquor and girls appeared suddenly to part foolish farmers, grain-storage officials and ferry-boatmen from their hard-earned profits.

The government intervened, both on behalf of social order and ensure their own projected tax revenues, by seasonally outlawing eight kinds of wayfaring groups from roads leading to grain-storage areas. These eight were: dancing and singing troupes(*up'a*); prostitutes(*ch'ang ki*); female wine-sellers(*chup'a*); comic magicians (*kwarang*); minstrels(*ak kong*); puppet players (*necha*); gamblers(*ma jo*); and butchers(*dosa*).<sup>15)</sup>

Here follow two descriptions of late 19th century *hwach'ok-chaein* peoples illustrating some of the outward manifestations of their long isolation from Korea's "respectable peoples": In the first example, a cosmopolitan American consul encounters some *chaein* entertainers with Middle Eastern mannerisms:

12) Yi Doo Hyon, 77.

13) Yi Doo Hyon, 78.

14) Yi Doo Hyon, 80-81.

15) Chong Yak Yong, *Mokmin Simsok*; *Sepop*(Administrative Code; Tax Laws)1818.



Mr. Cho led the way to the courtyard, where *khisang*, acrobats, and musicians, on a raised platform, commenced their performances. Their dresses and the character of their dances recalled the *almees* of Constantinople and the *ghawazee* of Cairo and Upper Egypt; they are derived, indeed, from a common origin.<sup>16)</sup>

More striking is this description, also by an American diplomat, of some *hwach'ok* hunters near Seoul :

They were interesting people, these pariah hunters. All were well over six feet tall. One of them was florid in complexion with red hair, red bushy beard and bright blue eyes.<sup>17)</sup>

The *hwach'ok-chaein*, or *paekchong*, suffered increasing indignities under the Yi Dynasty. They had to show deference even to the children of the "respectable peoples." By the late 19th century they were petitioning the government for some relief from their miseries, which were not only social and psychological, but economic.

By the end of the Yi Dynasty many "respectable peoples" were entering into the despised occupations without losing their respectability. At the same time the *paekchong* were being treated as outcastes no matter what they did. Herbert Passin makes this acute observation on the nature of pollution and untouchability : it has broad implications in the studies of itinerant peoples everywhere :

Once such an idea of pollution takes firm hold, then the peoples who are identified with it are considered polluted, no matter what they do. Instead of people being polluted by the kind of work they do, the work is polluted by the kind of people who do it.<sup>18)</sup>

Thus in the minds of "respectable peoples"—and their attitude lingers down to the present—the despised *chaein* entertainers, from their intermittent close historical

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16) (Colonel) C. Chaille-Long. *My Life on Four Continents*. Volume 2. London : Hutchinson and Co., 1912, 352.

17) William Franklin Sands. *Undiplomatic Memories : The Far East 1896-1904*. New York : Whittlesey House, 1930, 139.

18) Passin, 214.

contacts with the despised and bloody *paekchong*, were themselves contaminated. Contemporary itinerants cannot easily disassociate themselves from the stigma of past associations.

### Concluding Remarks

It is most striking that basketry has been so successful an outcaste occupation throughout Korean history. Moreover, suppose that basketry was more than just popular among itinerants; suppose it was also root and stem of Korean itinerancy from its shadowy beginnings up through the 19th century? There may be something to this scrap of an idea worth running with.

The term "riverine migrant" was coined, I believe, by Edward Norbeck in order to classify some of Japan's traditional itinerants.<sup>19)</sup> "Riverine migrants" also seems to apply well to the *koli such'ok* of Korean history. Consider the appropriateness of basketry as an occupation belonging to a small society of peoples moving seasonally within the many river valleys of Korea, from mountains to seashore and back again. This may have been the origin of the *koli such'ok* that is, they do not have to be thought of as once sedentary peoples fallen on hard times. "Riverine migrants" is a term that at least provides a reasonable description of the *koli such'ok* throughout much of Korean history.

Was every riverine migrant a basktmaker? Probably not. There was some division of labor perhaps: The men were hunters: the women made and sold the baskets. A fugitive comment about *paekchong* peddlers from the early 20th century reinforces this line of thought. It reads:

Very often *paekchong* used to come to my aunt's home to sell her their basketwork, like sieves, and baskets, and winnows. It was usually the women, not the men, who did this.<sup>20)</sup>

19) Edward Norbeck, "Little-Known Minority Groups of Japan." In *Japan's Invisible Race*. George DeVos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma(Eds.). Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1966, 183--199.

20) Passin, 232.

Was basketry always a major source of income for the outcastes? Again, probably not. The door-to-door peddling of basketwork initially brought itinerant women into direct contact with "respectable peoples," where opportunities were then gradually created for other sources of income. According to this scenario, Korea's sorceresses and female entertainers evolved from repeated confrontations between the basketmakers and their "respectable" clients.

At the same time of men of the outcaste tribes, those itinerant hunters, were gradually branching out into butchery and leatherworking. Male acrobatics, magic and the like, may have been purely exotic occupations introduced into Korea by foreigners and absorbed by the *koli such' ok*.

Thus, all of the occupations related to the "degradation of the seven classes" in Korea can be associated with the riverine basketry trait-complex, and all save one--the servants of the sheriff--might have evolved from within a single diffuse society of outcaste itinerants. The point is that, viewed from the inside, Korean itinerant society was probably more cohesive and self-perpetuating than the "respectable peoples" of Korea ever imagined.

Indeed, the itinerants are acknowledged to have had their own social institutions to maintain internal order. These may have also been used to guide them toward some kind of collective destiny. Outcaste society also seems to have had a liberal policy that increased on their natural population growth by encouraging recruitment of outsiders into their ranks. Certainly religion--shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Islam--played important roles in providing the *hwach' ok-chaein* with economic security. But in the final analysis their complex society depended on their monopolies of certain occupations: When these eroded, outcaste society began to lose its characteristic viability.

Its visibility also diminished: for example, as disenfranchised outcastes began seeking out more conventional work and new lives for themselves in faraway places, where they would no longer be identifiable as "base peoples." However, newcomers with vague origins are long regarded with suspicion by native villagers, are closely watched, and are occasionally found out, as in this anecdote told by Mr. Oh Moon Pok of Cheju Island:

As you know, the basketmaker and the shell-diver are the lowest of the low: He with his twisting and twining among the bushes, and she with her poking and prying among the fishes. They are made for each other...and surely no one else would have them! So it was that a boy basketmaker and a diving girl fell in love, and vowed to begin their matrimony in a new village, posing as decent folk. A grand idea, but impossible, as their true nature eventually betrayed them. It happened in the busy market-place, when the two began to quarrel. One thing leading to another, and with a great crowd of their new neighbors looking on, they came near to blows:

"Bitch!" he threatened, "I'll thrash you with my willow branches!"

"But not before I carve you with my diving tool!" she cried.

In closing, I am anxious to expand the theme of Far Eastern riverine migrants to cover something I learned about the Romani-speaking Gypsies in the West: Gypsies in the San Joaquin Valley of California used to camp by the irrigation ditches and make wicker furniture for sale. Perhaps they still do. I have also read of Gypsy basketmakers in the southeastern United States, in Australia, and in England and on the Continent.

I wonder, therefore, if the popular image of Gypsies--the image that Gypsy scholars scorn as romanticism: The image of Gypsies frozen into Victorian times, grouped around the cooking fires of a riverside encampment--is not less of a useless myth, and more of an unconscious and profound insight into the nature of their own itinerancy: Were Gypsies also riverine migrants? I conclude this paper with this fetching possibility: Rom Gypsies can often be found in rented quarters located on the main streets and boulevards of American cities: are these roadways then their substitute streams?

— Summary —

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Korean geographical, social, and economic conditions have been the major factors in the development of an indigenous itinerant culture. Reviewing the social history of the despised classes in Korea is essential to understanding Korean itinerants. For example, those travelling entertainers that have been active until recently in the Korean archipelago region. Although analogous to Occidental Gypsies, Korean itinerants are here discussed as products of their own environment. Korean itinerancy may have evolved as part of a basket-making trait-complex. Were Western Gypsies also riverine migrants?

〈略抄〉

## 樞東의 流浪族

— 韓國의 南道를 中心으로 한 서설적 考察 —

데이비드·니멜쓰

한국의 지리·사회·경제등의 여러 조건은 그 나라의 “유랑 문화”를 이루는 데에 주요한 요인이 되어 왔다.

그 유랑민들을 이해하기 위해서는 천민 계급——가령 지금도 남도 등지에서 활동하는 유랑 기예단 등——에 대한 사회사적 검토가 필요하다.

서양의 집시들과 비교가 가능하지만, 本論考 에서는 우선 한국의 유랑민들을 그들의 自体 환경에서 派生한 것으로 논하였고, 유랑은 부분적으로 고리(楊柳)를 利用하는 데에서 발생하기 시작하였을 것이다.

西洋의 집시들도 沿河住居의 流浪民이 아니었나 思料된다.