

Priests, Entertainers, or Prostitutes: The Three Roles of the Female Performers (*Sadang*) in Chosŏn Korea*

Kim Sung Soon

Translated by Ksenia Chizhova

In the early Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) itinerant performer troupes (*sadangp'ae*) were comprised of lay monks and female performers, or *sadang*. This community appears to have been brought into being by the Monk Registration System (*toch'ŏpche*) that forced monks and temple slaves to leave monasteries and organize themselves into half-monastic, half-lay communities. Although the Chosŏn elites continued to stigmatize itinerant performers, it was apparent that the broader society depended on the Buddhist beliefs and practices they propagated, and after the Imjin War (1592–1598) the activities of the *sadangp'ae* became even more widespread. By the sixteenth century, because of the increased propagation of Confucianism, itinerant performers gradually lost their originally strong association with Buddhism, and by the eighteenth century they became professionalized vagrant performers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, itinerant performers began performing at marketplaces across the country, and sexual services were added to their regular repertoire of singing, dancing, and Buddhist chanting. Although traces of the itinerant performers disappear after the nineteenth century, it is apparent that until that time they played a vital role in satisfying popular cultural demands.

Keywords: Community leaders (*sajang*), lay monks (*kōsa*), itinerant performer troupes (*sadangp'ae*), female performers (*sadang*), male performers (*namsadang*), Buddhism

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Kim Sung Soon (shui1@naver.com) is HK research professor at the Geumgang Center for Buddhist Studies, Geumgang University. Ksenia Chizhova (kc2423@columbia.edu) is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Columbia University

Introduction

Typically, troupes of itinerant performers (*sadangp'ae* 社黨牌) in the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910) organized themselves in places they called Buddhist shrines and under the leadership of lay monks (*kōsa* 居士). Their troupes included male and female members—lay monks and female performers, or *sadang* 社堂—and they eked out a living by performing Buddhist rites and giving stage performances. Having a strong connection with Buddhism, the community of itinerant performers frequently became an object of the Chosŏn elites' criticisms and attacks.

This paper brings together various historical documents to illuminate the formative process of itinerant performer troupes, the performers' social backgrounds, the repertoire of their activities, the evolution and historical context of their practice, as well as the image of itinerant performers in contemporary society and their own self-perceptions. Having no surviving records in the itinerant performers' own voices, we must rely on third-person accounts, such as transcriptions of the songs they performed. The fact that itinerant performers survived over the span of five centuries bespeaks their cultural relevance and the immense popular demand for their activities. In this paper, I will situate the activity of itinerant performers in the context of multidirectional tensions between the Chosŏn state and society, paying special attention to the figures of female performers, or *sadang*.

I would like to single out several scholarly works focused on itinerant performers that provide the context for my study. A North Korean scholar, Pak Ŭnyong (1964), offers a historical perspective upon the formation and activity of the itinerant performer troupes. Chang Hwiju (1999) explores the music played by the itinerant performers and the various names they received in society. On the other hand, Yi Pohyŏng (2005) explores the musical performances held outside Buddhist temples during the late Chosŏn period. Chin Nara (2004) also produced a study on the predecessors of the itinerant performers—the community leaders (*sajang* 社長). Chŏn Kyŏnguk (2002) shows how some itinerant performers were originally performing monks (*chaesŏng* 才僧). Although I will not focus on male itinerant performers in this paper, it is also necessary to note the work of Sim Usŏng (2012) on this subject and Chu Kanghyŏn and Yi Kibuk's (2004) discussion of the image of male itinerant performers in the oral history of the Ansŏng region.

Earlier studies of itinerant performers focus on the process of the troupes' formation, the emergence of male performers in the nineteenth century,

performance content, and the figures of lay monks who constituted the majority of itinerant performers. This paper, on the other hand, will focus on *sadang* or female members of the itinerant performer troupes. Due to the fact that only a limited amount of pertinent historical records remains, I have had to rely on the perspective of the dominant class as articulated through the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (*Chosŏn wangjo sillok* 朝鮮王朝實錄), which offers no more than a glimpse of the life of itinerant performers. But it is the goal of this paper to infer the history of the itinerant performers from, and also against, the view of the dominant class.

Community Leaders in Early Chosŏn: Popular Demand alongside Contempt

During the early Chosŏn dynasty, lay monks and *sadang* resided in communities organized under the leadership of a head monk (*sugŏsa* 首居士), also called a *mogap* 某甲. Male and female members of these communities were collectively termed community leaders (*sajang* 社長). First, it is necessary to illuminate how the term lay monk (*kŏsa* 居士) came to be used in this context. Chŏng Yagyong (1762–1836), in his *Aŏn’gakpi* 雅言覺非 (Reforming language and realizing mistakes), notes that the term lay monk, or *kŏsa*, is the incorrect derivative of *kŏlsa* 乞士, which itself is a liberal rendition of the Sanskrit-derived word for monk—*bigu* (*bhikṣu* 備芻, 苾芻). *Sadang*, on the other hand, is said to have originally referred to lay Buddhist followers who became the wives of the lay monks.¹ If we turn to Yi Hakkŭyŏ’s (1770–1835) literary collection *Nakhasaengjip* 洛下生集, we see that “lay monk” refers to married Buddhist monks.

The community of lay monks and female performers reflects the contradictions within the tax-collecting policy of the Chosŏn state, carried out in conjunction with the Buddhist reform and civil administration.² In 1405, the

1. “*Kŏlsa* 乞士 refers to an unshaved monk. In Chosŏn, people call them *kŏsa* but this is wrong. In a translation of a Buddhist text included in Wang Shizhen’s *Wanwei yubian* 宛委餘編, *kŏlsa* clearly refers to *bigu*, a person who prays to Buddha and begs for alms. The wife of a *kŏlsa* is termed *ubai* 優婆尼, also commonly referred to as *sadang*.” Chŏng Yagyong, *Aŏn’gakpi* (Reforming language and realizing mistakes), *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* [a_281_531b], *Database of Korean Classics*, <http://db.itkc.or.kr>.

2. “These days, in P’yŏngan province there are unshaved performing monks. According to a record in the *Yuanshi* 元史 [History of the Yuan Dynasty] from the fourth year of the *Dade* 大德 era [1297–1307], unshaved monks do not take care of their parents, avoid military duty, and bring harm to people, so according to the royal decree they are to be treated as enemies of the people. This means that unshaved monks existed even during China’s Yuan dynasty. In the

temple dissolution policy brought about the disrobing of many Buddhist monks and sequestering of privately inherited temple slaves (i.e., they became publicly owned). Another wave of sequestering temple slaves occurred in 1420, and the sole exception was made for cases where inheritance of the slaves was already formalized. In addition, the Chosŏn government instituted the Monk Registration System (*toch'ŏpche* 度牒制) in order to control the number of Buddhist monks, but it only produced the reverse effect of increasing the number of unregistered monks (*mudoch'ŏpsŭng* 無度牒僧), who left household life to avoid taxation. At the same time, extensive civil engineering works carried out at the beginning of the Chosŏn dynasty, and the reconstruction work required after the Imjin War increased the government's need to mobilize unregistered monks in the form of monk armies (*sŭnggun* 僧軍), and this facilitated the formation of half-monastic half-lay communities of lay monks.³

Those monks who returned to society either by their own will or by coercion in the wake of controversial taxation policies often built houses in the form of Buddhist temples, chanted prayers and performed rituals. The fact that these lay Buddhist communities endured even despite the dissatisfaction of the Confucian elites—as often expressed in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty*—could be explained by their ability to satisfy popular religious demand. Although the Chosŏn government prohibited women from visiting Buddhist temples, dissolved many Buddhist temples, and prevented Buddhist monks, lay monks, and female performers from settling in towns, they survived and continued to propagate Buddhist rituals and beliefs among the general populace, even though their identity and activity underwent significant changes from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Starting with the *Veritable Records* of the reign of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450), the term “lay monk community” (*kŏsabae* 居士輩) was used to designate both lay monks and *sadang*, who are also often collectively termed community

Koryŏsa 高麗史 [History of the Koryŏ Dynasty], a record from the sixth year of King Ch'ungnyŏl's reign [r. 1274–1308] states that King Ch'ungnyŏl kept a monk censor at this court. The king gave robes of patterned silk to lay monks and gave them office, so people would refer to them as “Gauze-Robe Master” and “Patterned-Robe Preceptor.” Most of those people were married and set up their own house. Their present-day counterparts are lay monks and itinerant performers.” Yi Hakkyu, “Yubalsŭng” (Unshaved monks), *Nakhasaengjip* [a_290_611a], *Database of Korean Classics*.

3. Chŏn Kyŏnguk traces the Chosŏn dynasty itinerant performers to the performing monks (*chaesŭng* 才僧) of the preceding Koryŏ (Chŏn 2002, 243). Chin Nara, on the other hand, suggests that those monks whose status and geographic origin prevented them from receiving monk registration and who belonged to the inferior ranks of the Buddhist community later became itinerant performers during the Chosŏn dynasty (Chin 2004, 88–89).

leaders. During the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), the term community leader was used to refer to local elders who had reached a position that made them fit to instruct the youth, and who were therefore elected as community leaders.⁴ This original meaning of the term changed during the Chosŏn dynasty, when it became used to collectively designate not only lay monks, but also *sadang*:

These days, outside the capital everyone calls them community leaders or lay monks, and compared to religious masters, they are neither monks nor laity, and they only seek to remain idle and evade military duties. Outside the cities, they gather into groups numbering millions, and they burn incense in temples. Even in the capital, inside their communities men and women mingle and live together, clamorously beating their drums. There is not one place they have not reached. While it does no great harm to the elderly, it is completely unacceptable for youths and children [to be exposed to their ways]. Thus, the number of our soldiers dwindles, fields turn into wasteland, various military duties fail to be imposed, men and women mingle together, and good people are led astray. Nothing can be more disastrous than this. (*Yejong sillok* 1 [1469/6/29])

In the quoted excerpt, the term community leader makes no distinctions with regard to age and gender. We can see also that the criticism is directed at the communal dwelling, disregard of land cultivation, evasion of military duty, and mingling of men and women practiced by the community leaders. In other words, economic and social consequences of their activities, rather than religious beliefs of community leaders, provoke greatest criticism. Traces of lay monks and *sadang* can be found even earlier, during the Koryŏ dynasty. According to Yi Kŭngik's (1736-1806) *Yŏllyŏsil kisul* 燃藜室記述, during the Koryŏ dynasty, female performers were called "lay followers" (*ubai* 優婆夷, *upāsikā*), which makes it clear that their status was distinct from, and inferior to, the status of Buddhist nuns (Pak Ŭnyong 1964a, 19).

The formation and wide proliferation of the itinerant performer troupes was first of all related to the economic policy of the early Chosŏn state. As the Confucian ideology became foundational in the political and social culture of the early Chosŏn, Buddhism lost its prestige and the economic status of monasteries and Buddhist monks began to decline. As a result, lay monks and *sadang* were compelled to find alternative ways to maintain their livelihoods, and thus turned to performing Buddhist chants, music, and dance. Realizing that the connection to temples brought additional profits, itinerant performers dressed in Buddhist robes, offered sacrifices to the Buddha, and performed

4. See "Chojin simusŏ," *Tongmunŏn* (Compendium of Korean literature) 54, *Database of Korean Classics*.

ritual dances.⁵ On the other hand, it was also economically advantageous for temples to consider these performers as temple dependents and to rely on their services (Pak Ŭnyōng 1964a, 23).

Although the dominant class stigmatized lay monks and criticized their activities, in reality lay monks appealed to the needs not only of the general populace, but of the Chosŏn elites as well. Quoted below is the description of a scene in which staunch Confucian scholars and government officials in spite of themselves take part in a Buddhist celebration alongside lay monks:

In order to open the celebration of the Buddha, Chief Royal Secretary Yi Sach'ŏl was ordered to offer sacrifices at the designated place before the memorial day and also to oversee all preparations. In addition, heads of several temples were charged to supervise the preparation of the food offerings, and the preparations made in the kitchen were in no way inferior to the royal table. After that, the food was set outside of a temple in Kŏnch'ŏn and monks and community leaders (*sajang*) were invited to share in the feast. The number of people who joined the feast each day never fell below seven or eight hundred, and 2,570 *sŏk* of rice was consumed. New melodies were composed and all the instruments were made anew; fifty performers and ten dancing children rehearsed in advance and offered [their performance] to the Buddha—this was the so-called musical offering. Cymbals, gongs, chants, strings and windpipes were heard even at the royal palace. Chŏng Pun, Min Sin, Yi Sach'ŏl, Pak Yŏn, Kim Suon and others, joining several monks, were running around day and night without stop, and although they were drenched in sweat, they showed no sign of fatigue. (*Sejong sillok* 30 [1448/12/5])

Community leaders thus created an arena where even such high-ranking officials as Kim Suon, former Academician of the Hall of Worthies and acting Minister of the Board of Taxation, could express their emotions through song and dance.

In the aftermath of the Imjin War, community leaders became ever more active. War fugitives joined the ranks of the community leaders in search of the solace offered by shared dwelling, prophecies, charms, and chants of the community leaders:

The Inspector-General reports: “Because so much work was required in the

5. Kim Hwansoo has noted the following about lay monk villages in Hamgyŏng province: “Villagers read the *Kwanŭmyŏng* (Avalokiteśvara Sūtra) ... and the Lotus Sūtra, chanted the name of Amitābha Buddha, celebrated the Buddha’s birthday, and observed other Buddhist rituals and traditions throughout the year. The lay monks cremated their dead in the same manner as traditional Korean monastics, and in contrast with mainstream Korean burial customs. ... They also regularly performed the monk dance (*sŏngmu*) and wore monks’ hats when they went out. Even their wives wore a style of pants that took a form similar to a nun’s robes” (Kim Hwansoo 2013, 283–284).

aftermath of the [Imjin] War devastation, the matter of education was left unattended. As a result, while elders have all died, their disciples failed to be cultivated. Educated people have lamented this for a long time. Starting about ten years ago, people's mores became confused, heretical words were spreading, and even when forbidden, they cannot be controlled. Foolish people become confused, and so men start calling themselves lay monks, and women start calling themselves *sadang*; they abandon their proper occupations, don monk robes, beg for food, and entice each other. Their multitudes are thriving. Because in the provinces they are not suppressed, more than half of the people just roam about, so there are long processions of them on the roads, and in the mountains there are hundreds and even thousands of them gathering together. This is a surprising sight. [...] I fear that a disaster, similar to the White Lotus Movement (*paengnyŏn kyodo*, Ch. *bailian jiaotu* 白蓮教徒), may arise leading to unsightly corruption of the realm." (*Sŏnjo sillok* 40 [1607/5/4])

Present-day mores are becoming frivolous and the desire for perverse things increases daily. Outside the capital, men and women, in order to evade corvée labor, call themselves community leaders or lay monks, and they wander in all directions, confusing the people. Having no occupation, they are just enjoying themselves and depleting people's resources, which alone is despicable, but on top of that they assemble their companions and continuously hold large gatherings, which become an increasingly grave problem. (*Sŏnjo sillok* 39 [1606/6/4])

What became the source of solace for the general populace, exhausted by the war, was a matter of great concern for the Chosŏn elites. The prospect of popular unrest became an extremely sensitive matter because of the failure to foresee and repel the Japanese invasion, which led to the king's surrender of the capital: the Imjin war embodied the failure of the Chosŏn elites, and perhaps the Confucian ideology itself, thus undermining royal authority. The scorn Chosŏn elites expressed towards lay monks and community leaders was thus masking their fear of the people's growing disaffection with their rulers.

It is important to note that community leaders gradually lost their foothold because of the destruction of their "Buddhist shrines." At the same time, they were still mobilized by the Chosŏn government to perform reconstruction work, either as part of the monk armies or as subjects of commoner status, which further obfuscated their half-monastic half-lay status. In either case, the gradual distancing of community leaders from their monastic identity coincided with the time when Confucian ideology was entering all realms of Chosŏn society. Not only their status but the title of community leaders also underwent significant changes in the wake of the Japanese invasions. Instead of community leaders—a term that referred to men and women alike and had a wide semantic range from professional ritualist to priest of popular religion—male members of

these communities came to be called lay monks, while women were referred to as *sadang*, or temple vagrants (*hoesa* 回寺). These new appellations clearly marked the distancing and distinctness of this group from the monastic order. With the overall marginalization of Buddhist practice in Chosŏn society, from their original role of community leaders with religious functions, lay monks and *sadang* transformed into professionalized itinerant performers.

Sadang: Women Performers' Social Background

In the previous section I examined multiple tensions that existed between the group of community leaders and the society and state of Chosŏn Korea, and now I would like to take a closer look at the social background of community-leaders-cum-itinerant-performers, focusing specifically on the origin of their female members. The *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* offers the following description:

Since former times, the tyranny of the Buddhist monks was so extreme that when they were building their temples and shrines they would arrogate people's land, and all of their possessions would thus be mired in litigations. By deception they entice foolish people, who then abandon their houses, become monks, lose their occupations, flock together—men and women—and call themselves community leaders. They stay together day and night and commit adultery. The worst of them, taking their wives and children, go to live among common households without ever receiving punishment for their depravities. This is why so many local functionaries (*hyangni* 鄉吏), petty functionaries (*ilsu* 日守), peasants on duty (*chŏngbyŏng* 正兵), marine guards (*sŏn'gun* 船軍), and public and private slaves (*kongsa ch'ŏllye* 公私賤隸) become monks. (*Yejong sillok* 1 [1469/6/29])

Dating from the second half of the fifteenth century, this record applies the general term “foolish people” (*umin* 愚民) to people from the lowest social strata who became community leaders.

In addition, Pak Ŭnyong notes that itinerant performer troupes must have included temple slaves skilled at dancing. Yi Nŭnghwa seconds this suggestion (Yi 1992, 445). A note in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* intimates that some of the main members of itinerant performer troupes must have been private and public slaves and village women:

So who are those lay monks? They are neither laity, nor monks. They are uncultivated, and they behave recklessly. They invite public and private female slaves [to join them], seduce village women, and then roam around singing songs,

performing shaman rituals (*musul* 巫術), or reciting sutras. They do not cultivate land or weave, and have no occupation, just enjoying themselves and receiving [free] food and clothing. Sowing confusion through the realm, they cause great harm to the people and destroy people's customs. How could this not be lamentable?⁶

It is noteworthy that, according to the text, village women become objects of “seducing,” while private and public slaves are simply “invited.” In other words, village women of commoner status needed to be persuaded to become *sadang*, while a mere invitation sufficed for slave women.

In the nineteenth century, however, a significant change occurred in the status of public and private slaves who together with village women filled the ranks of itinerant performers.⁷ Early signs of this change in status system appear in the eighteenth century, when complaints about harsh taxation and heredity of status imposed upon slaves begin to appear. Here is one example recorded during the reign of King Chǒngjo (r. 1776–1800):

Third inspector in the Office of Inspector-General, Yi Chint'aek, memorializes: “Nowadays, people suffer under numerous abuses, which have to be addressed, but among them the most pitiful and the hardest to protect are the municipal slaves. They are the same people as everybody else, but once they enter the slave ranks, their children and grandchildren are forever subjected to base work and have no means to achieve commoner status. Because of this, among them there are men who are unable to find wives until old age, and women who cannot marry until they die. Is this not a matter that does great harm to the harmonious way of heaven?” (*Chǒngjo sillok* 17 [1793/12/10])

Given the harsh condition of the slaves' lives, for many of them the prospect of joining itinerant performer troupes might have appeared to be a much more attractive option. Following the dissolution of the Buddhist monasteries and sequestering of temple slaves carried out in the fifteenth century, many of the former temple slaves became attached to public institutions, and we may

6. *Ilŏngnok* [Records of daily reflection], Chǒngjo 10 [1786/1/22]. Cited in Pak Ŭnyong 1964a, 25.

7. Depending on the slave owner, slaves in Chosŏn were distinguished into public (*kongnobi* 公奴婢) and private (*sanobi* 私奴婢) slaves. Public slaves were further distinguished into palace slaves (*naenobi* 內奴婢), municipal slaves (*sinobi* 寺奴婢), postal slaves (*yǒknobi* 驛奴婢), rural school slaves (*kyonobi* 校奴婢), government office slaves (*kwannobi* 官奴婢), etc. Palace slaves included palace housekeepers and also slaves attached to different palaces, while municipal slaves belonged to different government offices. Because palace slaves and municipal slaves comprised the majority of public slaves, the term public slaves mostly refers to these two groups. See Chŏn Hyǒngt'aek 1978, 190.

assume that many of their descendants would be more inclined to join the *sadangp'ae* than continue to perform the most menial tasks for the state.

In the nineteenth century, another important shift took place. The number of female members of itinerant performer troupes dwindled, and their parts were instead performed by young boys, which produced troupes comprised exclusively of male performers or *namsadang* 男社堂 (Chang Hwiju 2004, 235). In addition, instead of going from door to door, itinerant performers started performing at marketplaces, and their repertoire, originally centered on Buddhist chanting and dance, became more diverse with the addition of traditional farmers' music, mask dance, puppet theater, and tightrope walking; sexual services were also added to the list.

What, then, caused the emergence of male performers who came to replace female performers or *sadang*? Firstly, it is important to look into what caused the number of women in the troupes to dwindle. The abolition of palace slaves in 1801 must have played an important role in this process. King Sunjo (r. 1800–1834) continued the reform of palace and municipal slaves commenced by his predecessor, King Chǒngjo, when he ordered that all records of palace and treasury slaves be burned at the capital.⁸ Public burning of slave registries in front of the Tonhwa gate was meant as a spectacle that would impress upon the public the fact of the slave system abolition. The 1801 edict thus removed all status-related hardships⁹ in the lives of public slaves, which also meant that female public slaves no longer saw itinerant performer troupes as a means to alleviate the burden of their low status.¹⁰

While mixed male and female itinerant performer troupes coexisted for a while with exclusively male troupes, in the nineteenth century female performers

8. "Slaves are the same as the rest of the people, and the king has to treat them as children. Therefore, seeing them as being of the same descent [as the rest of the people], [the king] manumitted 36,974 palace slaves and 29,090 municipal slaves and issued an edict that ordered Office of the Secretariat to burn all slave documents in front of the Tonhwa gate." *Sunjo sillok* 1 [1801/1/28].

9. After the seventeenth century the mother's status became the defining legal norm in determining the status of the offspring of slave fathers and commoner mothers: those children would now inherit their mothers' status. This blurred status boundaries between slaves and commoners and facilitated upward mobility. This trend not only expanded the commoner population, but was also a major impetus for the 1801 slave reform. See Chǒn Hyǒngt'aek 1978, 214.

10. The majority of those slaves who later became itinerant performers were temple slaves. Although privately inherited temple slaves (*sasa nobi* 社寺奴婢) were sequestered by the state in 1421, those temple slaves who were bequeathed to relatives of less than fourth degree were exempted from this policy. Sequestered private temple slaves were then attached to various government offices and became public slaves. The system of public slaves was finally abolished with the burning of slave registries in 1801.

gradually disappeared. As popular demand for their performances increased, itinerant performer troupes divided among different regions, and their repertoires developed distinctive traits. In this process of division, well-trained female performers became scarce, and their parts would be performed by young boys dressed as women.¹¹ Instead of completely replacing mixed troupes, male troupes continued to coexist with mixed troupes, and they exerted mutual influence on each other (Yi Kyöngyöp 2001, 235).

By the nineteenth century the majority of the itinerant performers formed mobile communities without set bases, which signified a departure from the temple-based half-monastic half-lay communities that had predominated prior to the eighteenth century (Pak Ŭnyong 1964a, 29).¹² They toured market places where they performed to earn a living. However, as there were not enough female performers, apparently retired *kisaeng* and prostitutes were recruited into their ranks:

Dong-dang-dong-dang-dong-dang. A retired *kisaeng* (*t'oegi* 退妓) from Honam and a dancing girl (*ch'ang* 娼) from Haesö—why would there be a fight, in the same temple? “She is my sadang!” “No, she is my sadang!” Surrounded by a large crowd, hands are groping in the deep recesses of the skirts.¹³

The economic transformation of premodern Korean society, together with the change in the social status system, were thus accountable for the new appearance of itinerant performer troupes in the nineteenth century: they became increasingly male, with aged *kisaeng* or young boys dressed as women performing the female parts.

Itinerant Performers: Between Priesthood and Entertainment

The Confucian elites' stigmatization of itinerant performers never carried enough power to eradicate them, and itinerant performer troupes turned into strictly organized communities with accepted codes of rules and punishments

11. Male itinerant performer troupes filled their ranks with children whose parents could not support them and instead consigned them to itinerant performer troupes. These troupes also took in orphans and runaways, and sometimes they would even kidnap children (Sim Usöng 2006, 42).

12. In the *Veritable Records of Chosön*, these itinerant performers are termed “a group that wears monk robes” (*ch'üü chi to* 緇衣之徒), which means that at the time they believed that wearing monk robes brought them additional benefits.

13. Yi Hakkyu, “Kölsahaeng” [Monks' conduct], *Nakhasaengjip* [a_290_574b], *Database of Korean Classics*.

dispensed to those who failed to abide by the rules. The troupe head was called *hwaju* 化主 or *mogap*, and he was responsible for internal order, interactions with the outside world, planning of activities, and dividing the profits. Generally, members of itinerant performer troupes who possessed superior artistic or organizational skills were elected as troupe leaders, but at times the choice could fall on an outsider with particular interest in performance, or even on apostate monks (*p'agyesŭng* 破戒僧). In earlier times, those who became community leaders were most likely troupe leaders (Pak Ŭnyong 1964b, 27).

Here, I will outline the changes that over the span of several centuries transformed community leaders, originally connected to Buddhist monastic tradition, into professionalized entertainers who toured marketplaces. In the fifteenth century, the activities of the community leaders were mostly religious in nature:

Minor inspector from the Office of Inspector General, Kim Suson, reports, “Community leaders (*sajang*) gather monks and nuns together for prayer; the sound of their chanting is filling the realm, and men and women bow obediently [following their prayer]. I am afraid to think about the future. This is not a trivial matter and I request that these activities be banned.” (*Sŏngjong sillok* [1471/5/11])

This fifteenth-century record indicates that community leaders propagated Buddhist practices alongside Buddhist monks, and their function was thus religious rather than purely entertaining. The situation changes drastically in the sixteenth century. Confucian elites certainly criticized community leaders even before this time, but from the early sixteenth century onwards, even the term “community leaders” becomes changed to “lay monks,” “itinerant performers,” or “temple vagrants:”

The governor of Chŏlla province, Kwŏn Hŭng, reports, “I have seen how corrupt the morals are in Chŏlla province: male lay monks and female temple vagrants (*hoesa* 回寺) abandon the cultivation of land and give themselves to debauchery, roaming around and destroying people’s customs. This has to be prohibited by law.” (*Chungjong sillok* 8 [1513/10/3])

Buddhist chanting and rituals performed by the itinerant performers would certainly disagree with the general anti-Buddhist stance of the Chosŏn government, but in addition to it, cohabitation of men and women in the itinerant performer troupes blatantly undermined the strict distinction of male and female realms of activity that was fundamentally important in Chosŏn. This report focuses on the fact that itinerant performers “abandon the cultivation of land,” which itself has little connection to Buddhist practice and

thus underscores the dwindling of religious elements in the itinerant performers' activities.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, itinerant performers reached the peak of their activity as entertainers; they designated a particular Buddhist temple as their base or "founding mountain" (*ponsan* 本山),¹⁴ and thus their activities became organized, as they also grew in scope (Pak Ŭnyong 1964a, 26). Numerous temple paintings capture the image of the itinerant performers, but before turning to the records of itinerant performers in the Buddhist paintings, it is important to note the social and economic changes that occurred during the Late Chosŏn, the time when these paintings came into being.¹⁵

The late eighteenth century witnessed the demise of government licensing of markets (*sijŏn* 市廛), and the emergence of individual merchants facilitated the establishment of more than a thousand marketplaces across the country. Several towns constituted large market conglomerates and a network of connections braced together different marketplaces (Chŏng Sŭngmo 1992, 57). Growth of cities and marketplaces provided greater earning opportunities to the itinerant performers and facilitated increase in the number of troupes and improvement of the performance quality. Images of various performers that appear in the Buddhist paintings after the eighteenth century reflect these socio-economic changes (Hong and Min 2006, 96–97). The realm of the itinerant performers' activity thus changed from the streets to the marketplace:

Censor Ch'oe Chunggyu, upon entering the town on the same day, reports: "As of

14. The so-called "founding mountain" referred to a temple that provided the space for the everyday activities of itinerant performers and their performance preparations. Founding mountains began to emerge in the early sixteenth century. From a sixteenth-century record in the *Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Dynasty* it appears that an area just outside Ssanggye Temple in Hadong was occupied by itinerant performers, while the first founding mountain appears to have been Ch'ŏngnyong Temple in Ansŏng. Temples, designated as itinerant performer's founding mountains, often expressed their patronage over itinerant performers in various plaques and hanging Buddhist paintings. Alongside the stringent criticism of itinerant performers that appears in the *Veritable Records* in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries, during the same time period temple plaques and paintings record ample patronage of itinerant performers, which itself attests to their flourishing activity.

15. According to the Uniform Land Tax Law (*taedongbŏp* 大同法) implemented in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, artisans received remuneration for supplying necessary products to government offices. This in turn brought about the demise of the system of government manufacturing and facilitated development of independent production. Such increase in supply and demand spurred countrywide economic development. Increased agricultural productivity accompanied by the development of manufacturing led to commodification of surplus goods and further expansion of market scene where these commodities were circulated and exchanged.

late, amusements of the itinerant performers (*up'a* 優婆) are extremely harmful. Among the people there are so-called lay monks and *sadang*; neither monks nor lay people, they seem to be mere bandits. They perform at marketplaces, deceiving and enticing foolish people, and they enter towns seducing debauched people. It is the same across all eight provinces, although the three Southern provinces fare the worst.” (*Pibyōnsa tŭngnok*, Chŏngjo 20 [1796/1/16])

According to this record made at the very end of the eighteenth century, unlike begging monks, who went around to people’s houses reciting prayers, itinerant performers performed at marketplaces.

At the same time, begging monks, skilled in song and dance, also traveled among the people collecting alms. Similarly to the itinerant performers, begging monks mainly offered Buddhist prayers or performed dance to the accompaniment of a small drum.¹⁶ Yi Tŏngmu’s (1741–1793) poem, “Watching the Monks’ Amusements” (*Kwansŭnghŭi* 觀僧戲), describes mendicant monks’ performance in the following way:

About ten monks, hoisting flags and beating drums, come into town from time to time. They recite Buddhist prayers and dance. They agitate local people and beg for rice. This is indeed an amusing sight. In the following poem I more or less recorded the actual scene:

The sounds of drums and gongs agitate all the neighbors.
 In the yard, people gather, holding small trays.
 With flowers pinned to their colorful hats [performers] please the eye.
 Flags of red silk, flapping, summon the spirits.
 Half of the day is spent to sing praise to Amitābha.
 Ceaseless prayers are offered for the prosperity of the Eastern Realm.
 During the dance, one townswoman speaks bashfully.
 She has been told that she will give birth to a son in the coming year.¹⁷

People gathering together and holding trays recalls the scene of praying for the souls of the deceased (*uranbunjae* 盂蘭盆齋), during which people present offerings to the officiating monks. The important thing is that the performers are Buddhist monks, and the location of their performance is a courtyard between people’s homes, which distinguishes them from the itinerant performers.

16. Yi Kyŏngjin notes that mendicant monk troupes were active at the same time as the itinerant performers—in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries—but disappeared after the eighteenth century. Yi believes that after the eighteenth century, through exchange and cooperation with itinerant performers, mendicant monk troupes developed varied repertoire (Yi Kyŏngjin 2013, 245).

17. Yi Tŏngmu, “Kwansŭnghŭi” [Watching the Monks’ Amusements], *Chŏngjanggwān chŏnsŏ* [a_257_015c], *Database of Korean Classics*.

The way begging monks receive remuneration for their performance—offered to them on a tray—also differs from the way itinerant performers receive it. In the nineteenth century, itinerant performers would use their mouths to take brass coins squeezed between the giver's teeth, or else the money would be thrown on the ground. It is clear that in the eighteenth century, to which Yi T'ongmu's record refers, begging monks were ranked differently from itinerant performers in the popular perception.¹⁸ Although itinerant performers continued performing Buddhist prayers and drum dances, it appears that their religious function was transferred to begging monks.

In the excerpt above, we can see that Buddhist prayer and dance were part of begging monks' performances, but we find no glimpse of female performers or *sadang*. The following record, however, shows that *sadang* also took part in monks' performances.

Son W'ondal came from Miryang, and he lived during the reign of the great emperor. In the old days, those who were skilled in music and dance joined the Buddhist order and were called lay monks. Men and women together, they wandered through cities and towns. The instrument in their hand is called the small drum (*sogo* 小鼓). It looks like a regular drum, but is thinner and has a handle. While singing, they grasp the handle and beat the drum, sometimes throwing it into the air and catching it again; in the hundred times that they throw their drum, they make not a single mistake. W'ondal cultivated these skills and performed songs, also composing many new ones. His abilities were truly outstanding. Moreover, sometimes he would dress up and join performing monks, playing a woman's role.¹⁹

This nineteenth-century record depicts the emergence of male performers who played the role of female *sadang*, and also suggests that mixed itinerant performer troupes coexisted with begging monk troupes and all-male troupes. Although the role of female *sadang* is played by a man in this scene, this record

18. Sim Us'ong distinguishes between itinerant performers, mendicant monks (or *chungmaegu*), and begging monks. When entering a town, itinerant performers always presented a token of their belonging to a particular temple and they always performed under the pretext of providing money for temple services, receiving rice or money for their performance. *Chungmaegu* were themselves regular monks, and thus Buddhist prayers occupied a major part of their performances. In order to make their repertoire more attractive, in some cases *chungmaegu* invited professional performers to join them. Instead of praying, *chungmaegu* memorized sutras, such as *Thousand Hands Sutra* (*ch'onsugy'ong* 千手經), performed mask dances, and were mostly active in Northern Ky'ongsang province. Begging monks were mostly active in large cities. In the 1930s, male itinerant performer troupes and tightrope acrobat troupes merged and delivered complex performances (Sim Us'ong 2001, 192–195).

19. Kim T'aeg'y'ong (1850–1927), “Kajaj'ön” [Tale of a Singer], *Sobodangjip* [a_347_332a], *Database of Korean Classics*.

suggests that monks' performances still relied on the *sadang*'s participation. After the nineteenth century, the majority of itinerant performers become absorbed into rural communities; some of them continued performing farmer's music, while some others performed on seasonal occasions.

Sadang in the Nineteenth-Century Marketplaces: Buddhist Practice and Prostitution

In the seventeenth century itinerant performers settled in the vicinity of temples and started performing at the marketplaces that appeared in administrative or transportation centers. They thus turned into professionalized entertainers, traveling in search of audiences. It is at this time that itinerant performers developed an additional profitable specialization—sexual services. Not only female *sadang*, but male performers and lay monks as well began providing sexual services.

In the extant sources, the lifestyle of itinerant performers is described as precarious and unsettled, which prompts them to provide sexual services, even if just for a pittance:

Dong-dang-dong-dang-dong-dang. The singing mouth nears the hands that are beating a drum. Kat hats, made of fine Yöngam bamboo and hats with straw strings are placed over topknots. Petty officials from the three southern provinces and merchants from Wönsan, blinking and drooling, their hair fragrant with oil, spend money like water, and their purses are soon empty. [The performers] find a room in a house to the east, and beg for food in the houses to the west. They face wind and snow [wandering] through inns and markets and have no home of their own in this world. They do not forget to pray to Amitabha and when meeting people they bow and act like monks. [...] You are a woman who sells her body for nothing, and I am a man of leisure with no fixed place. In the morning—Miss Kim, in the evening—Miss Pak, like a wave, I roll, and I roam like violent wind. If you indulge me once, I will treat you to tea and wine.²⁰

Chöng Yagyong, in his *Mongmin simsö* 牧民心書 (Reflections on fostering the people), elaborates the punishment stipulated in the *Supplement to the Great Code* (*Soktaejön* 續大典) and suggests that it be dispensed to lay monks and *sadang* for their immoral behavior:

20. Yi Hakkyu, “Kölsaeng” [Monks' Conduct], *Nakhasaengjip* [a_290_574b], *Database of Korean Classics*.

According to the *Supplement to the Great Code*, *hwarang* 花郎 and *yunyŏ* 游女 have to be identified within cities and charged for the offenses [they commit]. In the commentary it states, when *hwarang* and *yunyŏ* are discovered, those of commoner birth should forever be settled in villages and turned into slaves. Public and private slaves should be flogged with a hundred sticks and exiled 3000 *li* away. *Hwarang* and *yunyŏ* no longer exist, and there are instead unshaved monks (*yubalsŭng* 有髮僧) and lay monks who wander around selling debauchery (*maegan* 賣姦), so this punishment should be dispensed to lay monks. *Sadang* and singing girls from taverns are similarly propagating depraved mores, and their crime should be considered as equal to that of a bandit gang's leader, and they should be treated accordingly.²¹

It follows, then, that in 1776, when commentaries were appended to the *Supplement to the Great Code*, sexual services provided by lay monks and *sadang* were already widespread in Chosŏn society.

Pak Chŏnyŏl, using the “Song of Lament” (*Chat'an'ga* 自歎歌), has shown that *sadang*, who provided sexual services alongside their performances, received even more contemptuous treatment than *kisaeng*, already thought to be the lowest possible station (Pak Chŏnyŏl 1981, 301–302):

I dress myself prettily into fine cloth of Hansan
 And go to Ch'ŏngnyong Temple in Ansŏng to perform.
 Are my hands door handles? This scoundrel and that scoundrel grab them.
 Are my lips a wine cup? This scoundrel and that scoundrel suck on them.
 Is my belly a boat? This scoundrel and that scoundrel ride on it. (Yi Nŭnghwa
 1992, 444–450)

As public performers, *sadang* dress in fine Hansan cloth, but this dress immediately fashions them not only into stage performers, but into sexually available objects as well. This song thus captures the profoundly tragic aspect of the *sadang*'s lifestyle. Dated later than the “Song of Lament,” the following *sadang* song was recorded by Sin Chaehyo (1812–1884):

It is time to leave. It is time to leave.
 Having not finished my steamed rice, I have to follow my husband. It is time to
 leave.
 Following the winding road towards the western fortress,
 Wife, like a fish full of roe, and children trail slowly, lagging behind. (Chang
 Hwiju 1999, 114)

21. Chŏng Yagyong, *Mongmin simsŏ* [Reflections on Fostering the People], “Hyŏngjŏn” [punishments] art. 6, *Yŏyudang chŏnsŏ* vol. 5 fasc. 25. *Database of Korean Classics* [http://db.itkc.or.kr].

This song, having no Buddhist motifs at all, is a very typical folk song that reflects the hardships of the itinerant performer's vagrant life.

Although itinerant performers typically performed Buddhist chants to the accompaniment of a small drum, at times they also sang folk songs, if the audience wished. The *sadang* usually sang the leading voice, dancing and waving kerchiefs, while lay monks accompanied them with small drums and sang the backing vocals. According to Sin Chaehyo's description in *Karujigi t'aryöng*, itinerant performers did not really perform Buddhist chants in their pure form and instead supplemented them with folk songs (Yi Pohyöng 2005, 495). From Sin Chaehyo's account, made in the mid-nineteenth century, it appears that itinerant performers sang such popular songs as "Nollyang," "Kalkka poda," "Ottolttogi," "Panga t'aryöng," and "Chajinpanga t'aryöng." Originally, itinerant performers' repertoire consisted of Buddhist chants, but in the mid-nineteenth century it included long and short Buddhist chants, and various popular songs (Ch'oe Hyejin 2002, 16–18).

Sadang are frequently mentioned by Sin Chaehyo, and in his descriptions they appear as colorfully dressed professional entertainers. They arranged their hair into attractive coiffures tied with colorful kerchiefs. They wore yellowish-green jackets and had long pipes in their mouths. Those whose legs were weak would have walking sticks, and luggage-bearers walking behind their processions would carry such things as blankets, pots, sacks, and bottles with oil. Their bases would be located in such places as Ch'öngnyong Temple near Ansöng in Kyönggi province, Yöngnam's Hwadong area, Söngpuram Valley near Hamyöl in Cholla province, the Taejuam Mountains in Ch'angp'yöng, Tamyang, Okch'ön, Chönggüp, Tongmak, and Wörang Mountain in Hamp'yöng. While itinerant performers used temple grounds as their bases, also giving part of their earnings to the temple, they had a distinct professionalized identity that set them apart from the larger community of monastic dependents.

The *Han'guk pulhwa hwagijip* 韓國佛畫畫記集 (Collection of Korean Buddhist paintings and painting records), compiled by Hong Yunsik, shows that, especially around the eighteenth century, both lay monks and *sadang* frequently appear on hanging paintings as beneficiaries of temple patronage.²² After the eighteenth century, however, although paintings frequently depict temple

22. Hong Yunsik's collection includes 24 paintings from the Koryö dynasty, ten paintings from the early Chosön dynasty, and 423 paintings from the late Chosön dynasty all of which depict temple dependents. Late Chosön paintings are supplemented with paintings records, of which there are 24 for the seventeenth century, 156 for the eighteenth century, 243 for the nineteenth century, and 121 for twentieth century. Until the eighteenth century, *Sadang* and lay monks comprised the majority of temple dependents appearing in painting records (Hong Yunsik 1995).

dependents, they never include lay monks or *sadang*. By the nineteenth century, the itinerant performers lost their monastic connection and completely transformed into vagrant performers. The improvement of agricultural techniques and development of monetized economy enabled itinerant entertainers to support themselves exclusively by their performances and obviated the necessity for receiving the temples' support (Kim Chongjin 2011, 302). Moreover, the addition of sexual services to itinerant performers' repertoire also extended the source of their earnings and possibly played a role in their gradual distancing from the temples.

Conclusion

The dissolution of Buddhist monasteries in the early Chosŏn dynasty and consequent disrobing of monks, manumission of private temple slaves, and the promulgation of the Monk License System facilitated the creation of a half-monastic, half-lay community comprised of lay monks and *sadang* or female entertainers, collectively termed community leaders. Although the group of community leaders frequently came under the attack by the dominant Confucian elites, popular demand allowed them to continue disseminating Buddhist beliefs and practices, and they became even more active after the Imjin War. The propagation of the Confucian moral system after the sixteenth century reduced the space for itinerant performers' activity and their declined religious status and professionalization as entertainers was reflected in the new names they were called—lay monks and *sadang*, or female performers.

Sadang were mostly lowborn women or descendants of privately inherited temple slaves that were exempted from government sequestering. The abolition of the palace slave system reduced the number of women who were willing to escape their low status by joining itinerant performer troupes, and retired *kisaeng* and singing girls were recruited in their stead, while young boys also dressed and acted as female performers. On the other hand, all-male groups of itinerant performers also emerged.

In the fifteenth century, itinerant performers performed Buddhist prayers and chants, and their audiences had to travel to the location of their performance. However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the growth of a monetized economy and emergence of marketplaces across the country, itinerant performers started traveling to places where they could find the largest audience. From the sixteenth century onwards, itinerant performers started to lose their monastic connection. By the eighteenth century they became

professionalized vagrant performers, although still maintaining their bases at Buddhist temples; now their repertoire became comprised predominantly of popular songs, which were most loved by the audience. Sexual services—a sought-after commodity in the marketplace that became the itinerant performers’ main stage—was also added to their repertoire. Increasing monetization of the economy in the nineteenth century enabled itinerant performers to completely relinquish their connection with temples, which they had used as bases, and to support themselves independently from temple patronage. Although after the nineteenth century itinerant performers became absorbed into troupes of different types, for five centuries prior to this time they continued playing a vital role in satisfying popular cultural demands.

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