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Korea Writing Assignment

Korea is a country that is rich with culture and traditions dating back to its formation over four thousand years ago. Throughout its existence, music has played an extremely vital role in the society of Korea, as is the case with just about every other civilization in the world. After all, music is a universal language. This paper will be discussing the history of Korea and the role that music has played in the country over time and today.

First, it is important to note the geography of Korea. This country is a peninsula located in the easternmost portion of Asia, surrounded by sea on three sides. It is bordered by China to the north and Japan to the south, across the Korea Strait (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 16). Korea’s geographic proximity to China and Japan has played a notable role in its history and culture. This nearness has resulted in a significant exchange of cultural practices, languages, and traditions among the three nations.

Beyond its location on the map, the geographic attributes and landscape of Korea are imperative to note as well. Korea is blessed with gorgeous scenery, from mountains and beaches to waterfalls and rivers (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 16). This, in addition to the way their environment changes through the seasons, has had a particular impact on Koreans and their outlook on life. They see their lives as being one with nature, connected in a deeply intimate way. This affects their music as well, making it more gentle, peaceful, and slow. In Western culture, it is very common to hear the tempo of a song be related to a pulse or a heartbeat, but

Korean music is centered around the breath (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 16). As a result, the music is more meditative and grounding.

Now to move into the history of Korea. With thousands of years to cover, it will be necessary to simply touch on the main eras and their characteristics. The following summation of Korea’s history was garnered and paraphrased from GoBillyKorean’s YouTube video “The History of Korea - Learn Korean History in Under 12 Minutes.” It is believed that the civilization of Korea began around 2300 BC, but the first written record of Korea was documented in China in the seventh century BC. This marked the beginning of the ancient kingdom of Gojoseon. Invasion by the Hun dynasty of China broke the region into several smaller states, each ruled by separate kings. This time came to be known as the Three Kingdoms Period, beginning in 108 BC. The first of the three kingdoms was the Silla Kingdom, which was an aristocratic society governed by royalty, famous for their gold and for their class of elite and extremely skilled young warriors. The second kingdom was the Goguryeo Kingdom, which was famous for its military horses, having used them to defend themselves from invasion from the China’s Tung Dynasty. They also expanded Korea’s borders up into China. The third kingdom was the Baekje Kingdom, which was famous for its agriculture (particularly rice) and had a good trading relationship with China and Japan.

These three kingdoms did not particularly get along, and there was a lot of fighting between them. Silla ended up taking over Goguryeo and Baekje, unifying Korea as one kingdom. This marked the Unified Silla Period, which lasted from 668 AD to 935 AD. However, as a result of constant civil war and the emergence of the Goryeo Kingdom, Silla broke apart. The Goryeo Kingdom began in 918 AD and came to cover all of Korea. Korea entered a period of growth and cultural flourishing during this time. This period saw the introduction of Buddhism,

which quickly grew in popularity. Chinese influence was also significant because Korea opened immigration with China and recruited musicians, writers, translators, doctors, etc.

In the early 1200s, Mongols from the Yuan Dynasty in China invaded several times, which brought devastation and upheaval. Over 200,000 Koreans were taken as slaves, and many cities and artifacts were destroyed. Mongols controlled Korea for around eighty years, but their reign came to an end when the Yuan Dynasty in China fell apart. Out of this tumult emerged the Joseon Dynasty in 1392. This era saw the decline of Buddhism in favor of Confucianism, which became the root of Korean identity and values. This includes the common Korean culture of respecting ones' parents, respecting those who are older than you, and wives respecting their husbands. From the beginning of this period through the nineteenth century, Korea faced multiple invasions from Japan and China. Korea ended up closing its borders for trade (except from China) in the 1800s because of opium problems circulating throughout the world, but eventually made trade agreements with both Japan and the United States.

The twentieth century brought many challenges to Korea. 1910 to 1945 marked a period of Japanese occupation. Originally entering Korea solely for strategic reasons to fight a war with Russia, Japan forced Korean leaders to sign over the country. Japanese classes and culture were forced onto Koreans, which left a major mark on Korea for better and worse. The end of World War II also brought an end to the Japanese occupation of Korea, but soon after (in 1950) came the Korean War. North Korea, which embraced communism from Russia, decided to attempt to take over South Korea. The United States stepped in because they were afraid of communism and helped South Korea push North Korea back up, while China jumped in to help North Korea push back down. The two regions never officially agreed to stop fighting, but the United States divided Korea in half along the 38th parallel. Today, they are still distinctly marked by their

divergent political and economic systems, with North Korea favoring communism and South Korea epitomizing capitalism with its incredible electronics and technology industries (“The History of Korea”).

Amidst the trials endured throughout Korea’s history, its musical heritage evolved and adapted to changing times. The word Gugak encompasses the entirety of Korean traditional music, and its direct translation means national music (“4. Gugak”). This form of Korean music is generally divided into court music and folk music, both of which encompass several genres. Court music is rooted in Confucian rituals and ceremonies and reflects Korea’s aristocratic past (“Korean Music”). Folk music, on the other hand, captures the spirit of everyday life, drawing inspiration from rural landscapes, communal rituals, and oral traditions.

Some of the instruments common to traditional Korean music include the ajaeng, piri, daeguem, changgo, and kayagum. Each of these bring a unique sound and significance when they are played. The ajaeng is “a zither—with seven strings and movable bridges—that is not plucked but...bowed with a rosined stick of wood” (“20 Traditional Korean Musical Instruments”). The piri is a bamboo double-reed wind instrument “made from two pieces of wood tied together” (“20 Traditional Korean Musical Instruments”). The daegeum is a “flute with six finger holes, a membrane-covered hole for a buzzing sound, and open holes near the end” (“Korean Music”). The changgo is the most popular percussion instrument in Korea. It is an “hourglass-shaped, two-headed drum struck by the hand on the left head and a stick... on the other” (“Korean Music”). The kayagum is “Korea’s favorite native instrument”—it is a zither with twelve strings and twelve movable bridges that is plucked/strummed (“Korean Music”).

Court music in Korea, known as “a’ak,” “dangak,” and “hyangak,” reflects a blend of indigenous traditions and influences from neighboring China. A’ak, imported from China in the

12th century and most popular in the 15th century, is a form of Confucian ritual music performed during memorial services and court ceremonies (Hwang). Dangak, introduced around the same time as a'ak, originated as “popular vocal music... in Sung-dynasty China” before being adapted for palace celebrations in Korea (Hwang). Hyangak, in contrast, is a genre of court music native to Korea, reflecting the nation's unique cultural identity.

Folk music tells the story of the everyday, average Korean. Like court music, it is also made up of a variety of genres and styles. P'ansori originated as “humble marketplace storytelling” for the common people, but in the 19th century it gained popularity among the upper class and from there became a preferred form of entertainment for royals and aristocrats (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 18). This genre of music is typically performed by a vocalist accompanied by a drummer. Sanjo is a solo instrumental genre accompanied by the changgo drum, which showcases virtuosic improvisation and technical mastery—it is a “highly developed art” (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 18). Nongak, also referred to as “farmers' music,” consists of an “outdoor ensemble of drums and gongs parading through villages and marketplace alleyways inviting good spirits and scaring bad spirits, gathering an audience of young and old, men and women, and having fun” (“OnMusic of the World,” Class 18). Sinawi, associated with shamanic rituals, involves “communication with the unseen world” through the use of musical instruments and vocalizations (“Korean Music”).

The modern musical landscape of Korea has seen much influence from Western music, while still maintaining some semblance of tradition. K-pop, which is short for Korean pop music, has emerged as a global phenomenon. In the West, the term K-pop “has become synonymous with girl groups and boy bands,” but there are a wide range of genres that are popular currently in Korea, from hip-hop to R&B to rock (Kim). South Korea's rock scene traces its roots back to

the 1950s, drawing inspiration from Western rock'n'roll and indie-rock that “American soldiers fighting in the Korean War played... on military bases” (Kim). Adult contemporary, also called “ballad” in Korea, has maintained its popularity in the country since the 1980s and continues to be the most prevalent listened by Koreans, regardless of age (Kim). Trot is the “oldest form of Korean popular music,” having been very popular in the 1960s and 70s, and “blends traditional Korean folk songs, Japanese enka, blues, swing, jazz and other Western genres” (Kim). Rap and hip-hop were introduced to Korea in the '90s and more recently, rap competition tv shows in the 2010s helped to launch “the careers of Korean hip-hop artists” (Kim). R&B mixed with soul gained popularity with Koreans in the second half of the 90s and has come to be “sung by K-pop idols and ballad singers alike” (Kim). All of these popular music genres exemplify the interplay between modern day musical trends and traditional Korean music expressions.

To conclude, the music of Korea offers a great insight to the rich cultural heritage that lies within the thousands of years of history of the country. From the ancient rhythms of court rituals to the beats of modern K-pop, the spirit of Korean culture is clearly reflected.

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