Introduction

Material Modernity, Consumable Tradition

When Taebok turned the knob of the radio on the little table beside Master Yun’s bed, traditional music poured out instantly, as if it had been waiting:
— Ch’ae Man-sik, Peace under Heaven, 1938

I passed a stone lion at the entrance to the tearoom and stepped inside to the slow rhythm of a folk song from one of the northwestern provinces. A wedding costume from long ago mounted on the wall caught my eye. Kites ornamented the ceiling — a unique sight. With its wooden chests serving as tables, its candlestick holders shaped like butterflies, its framed folk paintings and such, the tearoom was cozy and classic. — Kang Sŏk-kyŏng, “A Room in the Woods,” 1986

The relics of early Korean modernity appear in museum displays of vintage radios — like the one described in Ch’ae Man-sik’s period novel — gramophones, old photographs, magazines, and postcards; their contemporary equivalents, in the high-tech gadgetry that South Korea so adroitly produces for global and domestic markets. Seoul subway cars reverberate to cell-phone renderings of symphonies, Christian hymns, and rock tunes from the Korean wave. Anthropologist Daniel Miller argues that “consumption represents, at the very least, one possible idiom for these larger problems of modernity,” a conscious coming to terms with things not of one’s own making (1995a, 2). But if, as Baudrillard (2001) asserts, the objects of consumption are primarily “simulacra,” copies or citations in infinite replay of something else, some contemporary South Korean simulacra are conscious citations of “tradition”: the nearly inevitable portrait of the bride and groom posed in traditional costume, the CD of traditional or traditionalist-fusion music, the folk village theme park or staged folk festival as a site of both foreign and domestic tourism, the elegant riffs on traditional ceramics, textiles, and woodcraft on sale in Seoul’s Insadong District. The traditional motif tea-
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room in Kang Sŏk-kyŏng’s story of alienated South Korean youth traffics in the notion that replicas of old furniture and folk paintings and herbal teas served in rough earthen bowls are in some basic sense “traditionally Korean” and therefore the customer’s own things — a pleasurable eliding of their other identity as reproductions and commodities. At the same time, the traditionalist tearoom décor provides pleasant background to the quintessentially modern possibility of two college-educated women meeting for conversation in a commercial tearoom even as their grandmothers might have imbibed modernity in the roof garden of an early twentieth-century Seoul department store. Dean MacCannell offers the apt observation that “the best indication of the final victory of modernity over other socio-cultural arrangements is not the disappearance of the non-modern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction in modern society” (1999, 7).

As an ideological position, modernity suggests receptivity to social and technological innovation and a repudiation of the past, but modernity also implies encounters with new material environments and new ways of regarding and engaging the world (Baudrillard 1987; Bennet 1988; Mitchell 1989). Arjun Appadurai writes of how, growing up in Bombay, he “saw and smelled modernity reading Life and American college catalogs at the United States Information Service library, [and] seeing B-grade films (and some A-grade ones) from Hollywood at the Eros Theatre, five hundred yards from my apartment building” (1996, 1).

This material, sensate, and embodied experience of modernity, and how such a modernity comes to define, package, and selectively present “tradition” as its own shadow image, concerns us here. Modernities are seldom complete and far from uniform. The radio, a luxury in 1930s Seoul, contained within itself the slow rhythm of a Korean folk song, an image Ch’a Man-sik uses to suggest the conservative Korean patriarch contained within Master Yun’s modern veneer. Decades later, the influx of consumer goods from a global marketplace breeds South Korean anxieties over a perceived loss of cultural traction (Cho Hae-joang 1998; Nelson 2000, 2006), a local variation of what Ulf Hannerz (1992) has dubbed “Cocacolonization.” Miller (1995c), David Howes (1996), and James Watson (1997) argue to the contrary that even despite the relentless flood of new commodities, local cultures have sufficient resilience to appropriate new forms into local meanings and uses, as described for South Korea’s experience of McDonald’s (Bak 1997), Starbucks (Bak 2005), and global-
ized consumption more generally (Bak 2004; Moon 1997a). Consuming Korean Tradition looks at the other side of the mirror, exploring the ironic space where contemporary South Koreans consume a traditional “us” that, like the music lurking inside Master Yun’s radio, comes packaged in such modern commodity forms as recorded music; commercial venues for food, tea, and alcohol; ticketed performances; shopping mall entertainments; gallery art; and alternative tourist itineraries. In other words, tradition becomes a commodity enabled by updated iterations of some common apparatuses of modernity that Koreans first encountered in the early twentieth century, including the staged performances, department stores, reproducible images, and early tourism discussed in this volume.

Consuming Korean Tradition, like the conference that preceded it, sustains a dialogue between historians of early modern Korea and scholars of contemporary South Korean life. We describe how experiences of new “modernity” in the colonial period and of “traditional Korea/Korean tradition” in late modernity have been constructed, experienced, and reinforced through and around the consumption of distinctive goods and services. Broadly speaking, the chapters on the colonial period describe Japanese gazing a quaintly historicized Korea while Koreans in colonial cities gazed a modernity constructed to showcase Japanese accomplishments (G. Shin and Robinson 1999b; Robinson 2007). Se-Mi Oh has described colonial Seoul’s spectacular modernity, replete with electric lights, streetcars, impressive architecture, and a fashionable promenade, as an instrument for the creation of desiring colonial subjects (2008). In Oh’s recounting, the colonial city was a place of doubled mimicry, its most fashionable Honmachi District evoked Tokyo’s Ginza, itself an approximation of Western urban spectacle. In this setting Koreans’ early encounters with new forms of commoditized goods and services incubated the experiences and apparatuses of a modern consumer society to come, but through circumstances that would retrospectively link the loss of an imagined rural authenticity to the loss of Korea itself.

South Korea in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a fundamentally different place, a strong nation-state and techno-giant that has mastered all manner of modern forms from one of the world’s largest megamalls to the hugely successful production of pop culture for a global market. At the same time, and in a manner everywhere conducive to nostalgia, South Koreans express anxiety over the corrupting influence of new wealth (Abelmann 2002, 2003; Nelson 2000, 2006; Kendall 2008). On
such ground, traditional things become desirable commodities, and a nostal-
gagic embrace of tradition — in modern commodity form — constitutes
one South Korean response to the flux and contradiction associated with

About tradition and consumption

Traditions serve national, local, or ethnic communities’ self-imagining as
the claimed link to a common past experience, to that which is invoked as
a common “culture.” A quarter century ago, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence
Ranger (1983) put forth the then radical claim that many seemingly ven-
erable traditions were the conscious products of modern state formation
and were not very old at all. At the same time, modernities have produced
within themselves the idea of vanishing and consequently precious “tradi-
tions” as the primordial stuff of us-ness newly recognized in theretofore
quotidian acts of celebration, veneration, dress, cuisine, handicraft, or fea-
tures of a rural landscape (de Certeau 1984; Handler and Linnekin 1984;
Handler 1988; Ivy 1995). Kosaku Yoshino suggests that consumption,
broadly defined as a meaningful engagement with the material world, be-
comes handmaiden to this process via objects, landscapes, museums, and
monuments (1999). As “heritage,” tradition has a positive global currency
that now includes the complex cultural politics attending UNESCO’s
World Heritage designation of a given nation’s natural and historic sites
and the “intangible heritage” of its festivals and performing arts (Kirshen-
blatt-Gimblett 2006). The evocation of tradition assumes both nostalgic
conjurations of lost worlds and the possibility of selective nonremembering
(e.g., Anagnost 1994, 231; Pemberton 1994; Robertson 1988, 503).

What then do we mean by “tradition” in the context of contemporary
South Korea? If the consumption of “Korean tradition” takes place in in-
finity replicable commodity form, does “commodity” necessarily mean
“artifice”? Are invented traditions necessarily hollow, void of meaning?
Is the “simulacrum” always a fake; can it sometimes be regarded as a sig-
nificant work of cultural production in its own right? Can commodified
encounters with artful simulacra be meaningful and culturally resonant,
as Joy Hendry suggests for Japanese theme parks (Hendry 2000b)? Our
own debt to Hobsbawm may seem obvious but requires some position-
ing. In the quarter century since the publication of The Invention of Tradi-
tion, its critics have highlighted the difficulty of distinguishing the living
and potentially mutable stuff of grassroots custom from the “traditions” Hobsbawm characterized as recent and artificial. While both the patriotic traditions fostered by elites and the counterhegemonic practices of popular resistance were arguably “invented,” they have borrowed an aura of legitimacy from prior custom at least as often as they were cut from whole cloth (Chakrabarty 1998; Comaroff 1985; Vlastos 1998). South Korea offers abundant examples of resonant invention, from President Park Chunghee’s annual photo op — planting of the year’s first rice shoot and sharing cups of rice wine with the farmers — to the drums, gongs, and shamanic protest theater of the Popular Culture Movement. As Stephen Vlastos argues, “the primary value of the invention of tradition to the critical study of culture is heuristic rather than theoretical; it raises new and important historical questions” (1998, 5). Hobsbawm’s formulation thus encourages us to consider when and why specific traditions become visible and important, to be cognizant of their particular historical, social, political, and economic contexts. This kind of analysis, often identified with cultural studies, is now widely used across the social sciences. Vlastos further surmises that invented tradition may have as much to do with the emergence of capitalism as with the rise of the nation-state (p. 9), a tacit acknowledgment of the link between tradition and consumption that we will be exploring in this volume.

Some citations of tradition arrive bearing powerful sensate associations in visual images, sounds, tastes, or fragrances (E. Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips, et al. 2006a, 2006b) and as embodied memory experienced in performance (Connerton 1989) — consider the enlivening percussion of drum and gong in samul nori music, the pungent odor and spicy tang of kimchi, or the nostalgia induced by the country breakfast that Okpyo Moon describes (in this volume). Others are hollow memorializations devoid of significant memory (cf. Nora 1989), as described in Keith Howard’s discussion of how limited the market really is for “authentic” classical Korean music (in this volume). Tradition becomes most valued when it is seen to be both rare and endangered, but as the government-subsidized perpetuation of classical Korean music suggests, such value does not necessarily create a mass market appeal.

Anthropologists of Japan have described a late twentieth-century middle-class nostalgia for a vanished village world as desire for an imagined cultural authenticity in the face of seemingly pervasive Westernization. They relate how such anxieties have been addressed through the
merchandising and mass-marketing of the lost home village (furusato) as tourism, cultural performances, media, mass-marketed local products, folklore, music, and handicrafts (Creighton 1997; Robertson 1988, 1998; Ivy 1988, 1995; Kelly 1986; Moeran 1984, 1997; Moon 1997b; Yano 2002). At a basic level of comparison, South Korea offers ready parallels in its rapid industrial transformation and accompanying loss of rural bearings in the 1960s and 1970s, followed, a generation later, by a nostalgic consumption of those foods, drinks, goods, performances, and experiences associated with a vanished rural way of life. Government patronage enabled the restoration of rural sites (Kwang-ok Kim 1988) and the revival of folk performances and festivals (Howard 1989; J. Yang 2003), projects that took commodity form as tourist draws that begat subsidiary service industries or became ticketed, broadcast, or recorded performances. The nostalgia market makes a felicitous meeting of popular and entrepreneurial imagination in “traditional” restaurants and drinking establishments, the adaptation of traditional Korean clothing for contemporary wear (Ruhlen 2003), the Korean Folk Village theme park (Tangherlini 2008; Hendry 2000b, 97–98), and a market in popular books on Korean folklore. As in Japan, a new middle class has become potential consumers of tradition on the basis of their disposable incomes, leisure, automobile mobility, and appetites for both family entertainment and artistic connoisseurship, but they consume Korean tradition in a distinctive South Korean flavor.

There is a critical difference between South Korea and Japan. Korea experienced early modernity as colonial modernity crafted in and through the Japanese Empire. An independent South Korea subsequently industrialized under a cold-war military dictatorship with a draconian transformation of urban and rural life that critics now describe as slavish Westernization. In South Korean nostalgia talk, the rural past was not so much “lost” as taken away by someone else, and an undercurrent of patriotism ripples through the conversation. Consider the runaway success of Im Kwon-taek’s 1993 film, Sŏp’yŏnje, the story of a vagabond family of p’ansori singers, performers of traditional ballad opera, who wander a decaying but still picturesque countryside accompanied by Kim Soochul’s fusion rendering of traditional music. The little band struggles against a dwindling audience for their art, undermined by the popular Japanese enka music of the colonial period and, in the postwar, by Western pop tunes. While the daughter sings her heart out in the marketplace, her spectators are seduced and literally carried away by a brass band belting out the 1940s hit
song “Bésame Mucho.” Even despite its controversial plot premise — the father blinds his daughter to better preserve her tragic and innately Korean sense of song — the film inspired a revival of popular interest in p’ansori, already subsidized as intangible heritage. Sŏp’yŏnjje was widely praised as evoking a joyful sense of self-recovery, a lost Koreanness (Cho Hae-joang 1998, 81–84).

If the consumption of Korean tradition aims at shoring up an “authentic” national identity, it does so in relation to significant Others. Colonial products — postcards, souvenirs, tourist sites — exoticized Koreans (Pai in this volume; Gwon 2005, 2007), as colonial regimes so often shape an inventory of traditional objects, sites, and images of the colonized (Cohn 1996). The idea that the colonial period nearly erased indigenous Korean traditions adds a particular luster to the traditionalist revival of performing arts, rituals, and village festivals (C. Choi 1995, 111).

The global marketplace brings its own ironies to the production of consumable tradition. Many “traditional” Korean handicrafts, from souvenir cell-phone dangles of Korean macramé to hempen funeral shrouds and miniaturized changsŭng (village guardian poles), are now made with cheaper Chinese materials and produced with less expensive Chinese labor. Korea’s recent “kimchi wars” disputed Japanese and Chinese claims to produce authentically Korean-tasting pickled cabbage, even as Chinese-made kimchi and kimchi ingredients dominated the South Korean market (Han in this volume). Moon (in this volume) relates how a tradition-oriented Andong lineage, at pains to lure daughters-in-law into rural households, looks to offshore production for a bride from China’s Korean minority.

Gazing the spectacular

Rather than presenting our work in two chronologically designated bundles — the very recent past and the more distant modern past — the chapters in this volume are organized into four topical sections around the themes of spectacle, tourism, material objects, and performance. Modern forms and practices introduced into colonial Korea become apparatuses for the consumption of tradition in more recent times. Modernity has been described as a quintessentially visual experience, an experience of spectacle, the theme of the first section (Berman 1983; Debord 1983). In “Dining Out in the Land of Desire: Colonial Seoul and the Korean Culture of Con-
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summation,” Katarzyna J. Cwiertka illuminates the role of the colonial-era department store in the construction of a novel urban environment, an intensely visual site where modernity could be gazed upon, experienced, and enacted, if sometimes only through the fantasies engendered by commercial display. Here one could buy, or imagine buying, the accoutrements of a stylish embodied modernity of corsets and haberdashery and the furnishings of a modern domestic environment. While a relatively small proportion of the colonial Korean population lived in cities, and even fewer could freely indulge in the fashionable goods and services provided by the department store, entrance was free and, unlike traditional Korean social space, relatively unrestricted by age, class, or gender (although overtly ragged and rural gawkers would probably have been intimidated at the threshold). It was a space where colonized and colonizers mingled, sharing in the common practice of modern consumption and desire. Without compromising their reputations, women promenaded in this public space, gazed the enticing displays of luxury goods inside elegant and well-lit store interiors, ascended in vertigo-inducing elevators (like Virginia Woolf’s Orlando), and dined in chic department store cafés. Dining out in the modern and consequently neutral space of a fashionable department store restaurant or café offered the possibility of new forms of leisure activity contingent upon modern forms of socialization, friendship, and, just possibly, flirtation, courtship, or seduction. The Korean department store, like the early department stores of Paris, Tokyo (their immediate model), and Shanghai, inculcated modernity as an experience of consumption.

In contemporary South Korea, the once spectacular department stores have yielded pride of place to the megamall. Lotte World, the subject of Timothy R. Tangherlini’s chapter, bills itself as the world’s largest indoor amusement park and shopping mall. That at least two other sites contest this claim suggests that the Lotte complex offers not mere mimicry but mastery of a global form offering what Tangherlini describes as “certain extreme visions of both shopping and entertainment.” As the fabulously bloated grandchild of the old colonial department store, the Lotte complex offers a site of fantasy and consumption, a place for the enactment of leisure-time social bonding, but where Cwiertka describes the department store as a common public space, reducing social differences, Tangherlini emphasizes the commercially calibrated specialized uses of different spaces inside Lotte World: “scary” rides in the amusement park for
teens, the pool for moms and kids, big-box-type shopping in the discount store for families, the high-end department store for elegant women. As Tangherlini suggests, the ability to sustain such diversity testifies to the size, buying power, and extensive capacity for leisure consumption of the South Korean middle class. Indeed, he argues that the middle class uses places like Lotte World to enact its social relationships.

Like the radio that contained the possibility of traditional music, the third floor of Lotte World contains a Minsokch’on, or Folk Village, that presents in condensed space the history of Korea from the age of the dinosaurs through the colonial period, replicating in miniature the visual inventories of the National Folk Museum and the Korean Folk Village theme park. The penultimate gallery offers the visitor a panoptic vision of Korean village life in some nineteenth-century never-never land where all manner of cultural activity is performed simultaneously by a multitude of dolls. In Tangherlini’s analysis, this Folk Village claims no more “authenticity” than the rest of the complex, and the visitor, complicit in the artifice, accepts Lotte World’s miniaturization of Korean history as another consumable. Even so, the Lotte Group chairman’s recognition that the existence of some area devoted to “culture” inside the complex would garner positive publicity suggests that a familiar iconography of Korean tradition confers an aura of legitimacy that it is good to gaze upon.

The tourist gaze

In “Travel Guides to the Empire: The Production of Tourist Images in Colonial Korea,” Hyung Il Pai describes how Japanese interests mimicked the already well-established devices of late nineteenth-century European tourism to market the Korean peninsula as a destination for both Japanese and European travelers. Facilitated by the Chosen Government Railway’s links to China and Europe, tourism in the Korean colony generated familiar amenities in the form of hotels, restaurants, excursion tour packages, guidebooks, souvenirs, maps, brochures, and postcards. Pai describes how tourist promotion followed a predictable iconography of exotic women, picturesque ruins and landscapes, and quaint natives. Tourism had an imperial subtext where ancient sites were appropriated into a (spurious) narrative of early Japanese hegemony on the peninsula, and promotion material placed an iconic emphasis on modern colonial buildings and institutions — banks, post offices, steel bridges — as testimony to the pos-
itive transformation wrought by the empire upon the otherwise exotically bedraggled “Hermit Kingdom.”

By the end of the twentieth century, tourism had become a global and mass phenomenon, and South Koreans, once the subjects of colonial gazing, were now among the groups of middle-class Asian tourists who descended from air-conditioned tour buses all over the world, Korean-language tour patter competing with Japanese and Taiwan-accented Chinese (Graburn 1997). In his study of The Tourist, Dean MacCannell (1999) describes how, by this period, in a manner equivalent to the drabness attending many formerly magnificent department stores, the term “tourist” had taken on a derisive quality among those seeking more “authentic” experiences in their travels. John Urry (1990) describes such quests as markers of class distinction to which global and domestic tourist industries have readily responded, as they have for the Korean middle-class traveler. But unlike MacCannell’s hypothetical authenticity-seeker who craves backstage encounters with “the natives,” and having more in common with the middle-class urban Japanese seeker of a nostalgic rural furusato, or “old home village,” experience, the domestic tourists in the chapters by Okpyo Moon and Robert Oppenheim seek time-machine encounters with Korean us-ness.

In “Guests of Lineage Houses: Tourist Commoditization of Confucian Cultural Heritage in Korea,” Moon describes a seemingly fortuitous encounter between the heirs of venerable lineages of the former yangban nobility, strapped for cash to maintain their ancestral homes as heritage sites, and the domestic and overseas Korean visitors who seek connection with Confucian tradition. The promotion of these sites and the tourists’ own understanding of their experiences conflate an essential “Korea” with the traditions of a historical social class and a particular region. As Moon aptly demonstrates, such encounters also require significant compromises with some fundamental principles of yangban behavior. Lineage heirs become innkeepers, taking strangers into their homes for a fee, whereas the yangban of old famously shunned commerce. When an entrepreneurial yangban heir invites outsiders to observe and learn from his family’s ancestral rites, he allows his visitors to breach a proprietary boundary that excludes women and non-kin. Rites become tourist performance in which, as Moon notes, this same heir choreographs his ritual with pauses for the benefit of the spectators’ cameras. In the end, authenticity in the conservative Andong countryside proves as chimerical as authenticity in the quests
of MacCannell’s European and American tourists, but visitors describe a meaningful connection to Confucian tradition even so.

In “Crafting the Consumability of Place,” Robert Oppenheim considers two seemingly contradictory middle-class South Korean travel genres that gained popularity in the 1990s. Tapsa, or tapsa yŏhaeng — field-study travel — is a sort of domestic heritage tourism that purports to “survey” or “study” historic monuments in the Korean landscape, an enterprise of scholars, amateur antiquarians, and folklore buffs but now offered to a broader market through organized tours. Paenang yŏhaeng describes foreign backpack travel by an individual or small group seeking meaningful encounters “off the beaten track.” At face value, tapsa suggests a self-conscious consumer nationalist return to “Korean things” while paenang yŏhaeng embraces the global and foreign, but Oppenheim’s analysis suggests significant points of commonality, drawing on debates within economic anthropology to suggest that the tapsa aficionado and the international backpacker share a common transactional frame such that the traveler invests in an experience without undue encumbrance or commitment.

Oppenheim’s argument reinforces a central theme of this volume; “tradition” gets consumed in modern, often globally recognizable commodity forms and is restructured by them. Tourists who overnight in the tile-roofed houses of the former yangban elite, hobbyists who comb Kyŏngju’s historic landscape on tapsa day-trips, and Korean backpack travelers in Europe all share in MacCannell’s characterization of the alternative tourist, motivated to see and experience deeply, beyond the artifice of the package tour (1999, 94), and as Urry would expect, their needs are being met through specialized tour opportunities and a proliferation of websites and publications. At the same time, as Oppenheim here and Moon in another context (1997b) affirm, any but a superficial understanding of these otherwise broadly recognizable experiences enjoyed by broadly recognizable middle-class people begs cognizance of South Korean nuance.

Both Moon and Oppenheim cite the 1990s media encouragement for domestic South Korean tourism as a counterweight to globalization. These activities might also be understood as a midlife and more temperate extension of the populist nationalist enthusiasms of students in the 1980s. In particular, Moon and Oppenheim cite the popularity of history professor Yu Hong-jun, whose early 1990s publications describing rambling odysseys to then little-known Korean sites encouraged South Koreans to look
at the remnants of their ancient past with fresh eyes, to seek “the presence of ordinary and innocent truth and beauty” that had been washed out of the museum presentations and school trips through which South Koreans normally encountered the material remains of their history (quoted in Oppenheim 2008b, 90, 84). Some cognoscenti subsequently claimed that Yu’s best-selling books “ruined” formerly isolated sites by encouraging hordes of tourists and attendant concessions on an itinerary that had once been the distinction of scholars and art connoisseurs. Such criticism evidences the willingness of many ordinary South Koreans to at least give lip service to Yu’s message, to seek out Korean things and engage them with newly awakened Korean eyes through distinctive modes of travel.

Korean icons

The runaway success of Yu’s publications suggests a particularly receptive 1990s moment, with South Koreans perceiving Korea in new ways. It also represents the successful fruition of other, equally idealistic projects from twenty years earlier that similarly encouraged South Koreans to make emotional as well as intellectual contact with their own living history by viewing its material fragments. Alain Delissen (2001) has described how architect Kim Sugun used the journal Konggan (Space) to create a visual repertory of “Korean things,” training the reader’s eye to recognize an innately Korean sensibility or aesthetic in an array of cultural fragments from roof shapes and tile patterns to shamanic ritual and mask dance. The 1970s literary journal Ppurigip’ŭn namu (Deep-rooted tree) and its 1980s successor volume Saemigip’ŭn mul (Water from a deep spring) embraced a similar visual repertory in their illustrations. Also in the 1970s, the passionate collector Zozayong (Cho Cha-yong) encouraged Koreans to see their own spirit in the tigers and magpies of a theretofore unappreciated folk art, images that now, like the work of French expressionist painters, appear on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and drink coasters.

These renderings of quotidian or once little-valued things into visual icons of Koreanness occurred through the work of mechanical reproduction in the publication of books, glossy magazines, art books, postcards, and illustrated magazines and the manufacture of kitsch (cf. Benjamin 1969). Likewise, in the colonial period, similar technologies had been deployed to mass-produce visual images of Korean quaintness in postcards and souvenirs (Gwon 2005, 2007; Pai in this volume). A reinvigorated
Anthropology of material culture encourages us to examine how things take on new representational forms and meanings (Appadurai 1986a, 1986b; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1995a) and how they construct social identities and communicate cultural differences between individuals and groups (Myers 2001a, 2001b; Weiner 1992). Commodity consumption is very much a part of this conversation (Appadurai 1986a; Miller 1994, 1998, 2002a), which we join, with two Korean examples, in Part III.

In “The Changsŭng Defanged: The Curious Recent History of a Korean Cultural Symbol,” I focus on a single iconic Korean image embodied in a work of handicraft and follow it across a century of Korean modernity. The village guardian pole has been read through multiple gazes over the course of the twentieth century and has had cameo roles in some of the other stories told in this volume. Roughly carved out of tree trunks or hewn of stone, changsŭng with bulging eyes and fanged grins once guarded the entrances to Korean villages from malevolent forces. Japanese photographers reproduced them as ethnographic curiosities in books and on postcards for the developing tourist market. Miniaturized changsŭng were sold as tourist souvenirs. Since the 1980s, the changsŭng has been reinvested as a “Korean thing,” erected in folk village theme parks, including Lotte World, made the subject of tapsa excursions, given photographic representation in nostalgia-inducing rural settings, and produced as high-end handicraft and gallery art and is said to be best appreciated by a discerning Korean eye.

The notion of a “Korean eye” can itself be considered a modernist notion, insofar as modernity privileges sight over other senses (E. Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006a). Nostalgia, however, is multisensate, as suggested in Moon’s evocation of sleeping on the heated floor of an old yangban house, waking to the rural cries of birds and chickens, and savoring an abundant Korean country breakfast. Kyung-Koo Han’s discussion of kimchi, the spicy fermented vegetables that constitute an inevitable item of Korean cuisine, brings taste and odor into the mix. As a staple of Korean cuisine, kimchi is more widely and literally consumed than are changsŭng, but in common with the changsŭng, kimchi has been an object of multiple and shifting value.

While Koreans commonly describe kimchi as essential to nearly any meal consumed with chopsticks and to some others besides, they do so in cognizance that many non-Koreans consider kimchi smelly and unhygienic. Han observes how, in the era of underdevelopment, Koreans were themselves encouraged to regard kimchi and other traditional foods
as nonnutritious, perceptions that have made a 180-degree turn as experts extol the healthful properties of traditional cuisine over the rich Western foods South Koreans now widely consume. As a repository of sentiment, kimchi carries associations of mother love, family kitchens, and networks of female kin and neighbors working together to produce a winter supply. In other words, the kimchi of memory is anything but a commodity; its investments are familial and emotionally resonant. Not so the kimchi most South Koreans eat today; the lifestyle of a modern housewife, apartment living, and the social isolation of urban households opt against its laborious preparation and make kimchi talk simultaneously nostalgia talk.

Han argues that while domestic kimchi production has been shrinking and South Koreans now eat less kimchi than in the past, discursive valuations of kimchi as the quintessential national food have been increasing. This ironic situation provides essential background for two incidents that the South Korean press dubbed the “Kimchi Wars” (kimchi chŏnjaeng). In 2004, Japanese manufacturers aggressively pursued the international kimchi market and registered traditional organisms used in the fermentation process as their own, stoking vehement protest. In the fall of 2005, reports of parasite eggs in Chinese-produced kimchi fueled awareness that much of the kimchi consumed in Korea was a Chinese import or otherwise factory produced, sparking emotional reflections on the decline of homemade kimchi, a measure of how much South Korean life had changed in a few short decades.

Performing tradition

There are those who regard kimchi making and changsŭng carving as endangered national heritage (although they are not officially designated as such). The two chapters in this final section concern another domain of precarious cultural practice, Korean performing arts. In the 1960s, when all manner of traditional handicraft, music, song, dance, and theater appeared to be melting into air, committed folklore scholars encouraged the government to establish a system for designating a growing inventory of “intangible heritage,” to be perpetuated by carefully vetted exemplars who trained promising students (J. Yang 2003). There are those who argue that such interventions are innately artificial; some critics characterize staged performances of folkloric ritual and dance as “taxidermy” (C. Choi 1991,
Arguments over the authenticity of performance forms and disputes between purists and those who would adapt their art to a changing performance milieu long predate the South Korean intangible heritage system. Judy Van Zile profiles the work of Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi, who began her dance career and quickly escalated to stardom during colonial times. Initially inspired to study Western-style modern dance by Japanese modern dancer Ishii Baku, Ch’oe was subsequently encouraged to return to her Korean roots. Her brief study with a Korean dance master led to an interest in developing a new kind of dance that drew on older and recognizably Korean forms. Ch’oe was controversial in her day. She had a successful career in Korea and Japan and toured internationally, but she was also criticized, initially because her dance was more “exotic” than recognizably “Korean,” and later because her choreographing of Korean dance forms was judged “inauthentic.” Ironically, Ch’oe’s creative work inspired what is performed today as a standard stage repertoire of “traditional Korean dance.”

Keith Howard explores a contemporary contestation between performing arts purists and innovators and the mixed blessing of official patronage. Howard argues that kugak, traditional Korean music, sustained by the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts, abides as a hermetic circular network of students who form the core audience for recitals by their teachers, graduates who populate ensembles and orchestras, performers who commission composers, and composers who are university teachers. Kugak has failed to create a mass audience, for lack of any necessity to do so, and most Koreans who have not been trained in the form are not attracted to it. Kugak fusion, on the other hand, appeals to a broader audience by combining elements of the kugak tradition and instrumentation with elements of jazz, pop, rap, hip-hop, or Western classical music and, predictably, incurs the enmity of kugak purists for not being sufficiently Korean. More accessible than traditional kugak, some kugak fusion experiments have been hugely successful. Kim Soochul’s soundtrack for the film Sŏp’yŏnje, which framed traditional Korean flute melodies and p’ansori songs with synthesizer harmonies, sold a million copies. At the same time, Howard observes, Korean music is a precarious enterprise, competing for a domestic share in a global music market. Kugak fusion, as a flexible and evolving genre, has managed to create a broad South Korean audience for artists who play kugak instruments or sing kugak songs.
Conclusion

As a central premise of this volume, traditions, so named, become accessible through a variety of modern forms that enable their contemporary consumption. Chapters on the colonial period help us understand the early Korean histories of the forms themselves. Traditions assume value as a consequence of contemporary concerns, needs, and imaginings. The traditions we describe for South Korea today have as their recent history perceptions of near loss during the rapid industrialization and urban transformation of the 1960s and 1970s, the various official and individual preservationist projects that took shape in response to this specter of vanishing, and the popularization of vernacular cultural forms in association with political protest in the 1980s. By the 1990s, South Korea had gained political stability, and a broad middle class enjoyed new forms of consumption and leisure, but South Koreans also expressed anxiety about what it meant to be Korean in a country replete with foreign commodities and cultural imports. The sum of these experiences valorized an inventory of tradition as broadly recognizable Korean ways of being, seeing, listening, and eating distinct from a “Western” or “Japanese” habitus. These self-conscious traditions are now widely apprehended, accessed, and consumed through modern commercial forms, many of which can be traced to the early twentieth century.

Tradition in commodity form distills the local and the particular into something more broadly embraced as “Korean.” The lineage houses in Andong and the Silla ruins in Kyŏngju come to stand for a broadly Korean cultural experience, regionally distinctive changsŭng become national icons, kimchi flavors particular to individual kitchens meld in the commercial production of a uniform kimchi taste, Lotte World miniaturizes a traditional inventory of local and ritual practices in near entirety. To retain an aura of legitimacy, producers of consumable tradition necessarily assert that what they have to offer is more than “just a commodity.” Advertisements describe processed kimchi as an expression of mother love, producers of changsŭng guardian posts explicitly deny their product’s commodity status by reasserting its spiritual and artistic meaning, lineage households that accommodate tourists take pains to distinguish themselves from commercial inns, and participants in organized tapsa tours of the Kyŏngju countryside see themselves as engaged in a form of
culture work and therefore superior to conventional tourists on the standard Kyŏngju tour course.

If the traditions we describe here have been selectively adapted to modern forms of consumption, then we might also speculate as to the mutability of these same contemporary arrangements. If the valorization of tradition in South Korea appeals to a sense of loss, part nostalgia, part anxiety over the fate of a distinctive Korean identity, is this the particular impasse of a particular moment in time? In her conference paper, Eun Mee Kim described South Korean responses to the Korean wave (hallyu) phenomenon, the unprecedented international popularity of Korean pop music and soap operas. She described South Koreans who had chafed under their self-perception as the sometimes reluctant consumers of other people’s culture and who are now encouraged by both government and media to see themselves as major producers in a global culture industry. Will this experience afford sufficient national self-confidence to overcome fears of a vanishing Korean identity? Will the consumption of tradition, in some of the forms described here, lose its motivating sense of urgency? Will South Korean anxieties over an influx of guest workers and foreign spouses and the relentless risks of global capitalism foster a more strident nativist response than the innocent pleasures we have been describing? Alternatively, will the idea of “Korea” admit ethnic and cultural diversity to its notion of “our things”? Our accounts of South Korean life in the years immediately before and after the turn of the millennium encourage another look, a decade or so hence.

Note

1. A now aging cohort’s nostalgia for its own youth in those same difficult years is manifest in such things as soap operas recalling the period (Abelmann 2002, 2003), the unexpected success of the War Museum’s re-creation of an urban squatter village in its 2005 exhibition “Oh! Mother” (Ah! Ōmōni), and the designation of Seoul’s Pukchon neighborhood as a historic site. This gritty urban nostalgia is worthy of its own volume.