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Early Voices in SamulNori's Historical Record

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Early Voices in SamulNori's Historical Record

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Encounters

With the enduring success and legacy of SamulNori/*samul nori* now firmly in place, it is often easy to forget that such a future was not preordained, or even imaginable by many, at its humble beginnings. While I had already missed its genesis by nearly fifteen years when I arrived in Korea in 1993 for the first time to begin research on Korean percussion music, it was still an exciting time to be involved in the *samul nori* world, as its history was still in a process of unfolding. Many, if not most, of its creative and institutional personnel were still alive and very much active, and so over the years I began to conduct interviews with as many of them as I could to construct an account of the historical record before their memories faded. I was also interested in the more personal side of these individuals' stories, narratives that generally didn't make their way into the standard textbooks on traditional music.

This paper focuses on three of the movement's key proponents and their initial impressions of the burgeoning genre as it impacted upon their lives: 1) Kang Chunhyök, director of the Space Theater (Konggan Sarang) in Seoul at SamulNori's beginning in the late 1970s and co-founder of the experimental theater group and arts promotional society METAA; 2) Ch'oe Pyöngsam, drumming prodigy and member of the touring group Little Angels who joined the revamped National Center Samulnori team in 1986; and 3) Kim Dong-won (Tongwön), past Director of Education for SamulNori (Nanjang Cultures) from 1990 to 2004 and currently Silk Road member with Yo Yo Ma. Each of these men helped me at key stages in my research on Korean percussion, and all have continued to contribute their insights and expertise over the years. I would like to think that the sharing of their stories serves as one means of repaying their kindness.

Transcripts of the interviews conducted with these individuals make up the bulk of this presentation, providing valuable insights into SamulNori's/*samul nori*'s historical record as well as facets of its early reception history. These are accounts that I was able to sample in my recent book-length study of the topic (Hesselink 2012), though space did not allow for the entire conversations as I have provided here. All interviews were conducted by myself; Ch'oe's meeting was conducted in Korean, then later translated, while Kang and Kim were comfortable speaking to me in English.

“Sometimes I feel God gave me only one talent, through which I can recognize something valuable in advance”: Kang Chunhyök (Seoul, METAA Studio, 21 June 2003)

For those who have worked with SamulNori “behind the scenes” in the capacity of sponsorship, direction, and/or promotion, Kang Chunhyök holds a place of great esteem within its pantheon. Director of the Space Theater (Konggan Sarang) in Seoul at its beginning in the late 1970s — the hall where SamulNori made its debut — and co-founder of the experimental theater group and arts promotional society METAA (Metabolic Evolution through Art and Architecture), Kang has been resolute in his support and admiration of SamulNori. At the time of this interview Kang’s office was still located directly above SamulNori’s studio in the same building (in Hyehwa-dong), and he and SamulNori co-founder Kim Duk Soo could frequently be seen sharing a drink or conversation in spaces their overlapping areas shared. As the text that follows will clearly show, Kang considers himself an un-official founding member of SamulNori, an evaluation shared by every member of the quartet I have met over the years (and reinforced in the academic literature; see, for example, Kim Hönsön 1995:121-29). By 2008 Kang had moved away from concert organizing and promotion, taking up high profile academic and administrative positions within the Arts Council of Korea and the Graduate School of Arts Management and Cultural Studies at Sönggonghoe University. In 2003 during the month of June, however, he was in the throes of producing a collaborative work with Kim Duk Soo and SamulNori titled “Ult’arigut,” something the two men had participated in off and on since 1985. In 2009 Kang published more formal ruminations on his involvement with SamulNori (Kang Chunhyök 2009).

I was director of the Konggan Sarang, or “Space Theater” in English. In Korean, the formal name was Sogükchang (Small Theater) Konggan Sarang. And that was, I think, the first small theater that could contain all kinds of performances. Because at that time, we had two small theaters already, but they belonged to the drama troupes. So for music or for dancing that was the first theater — a private one.

The founder of the theater was a very famous architect named Kim Sugŭn, and he passed away in 1986 (I believe). I was asked to manage the theater from the beginning. I had worked for the Space Theater from January of 1977 and I prepared many things for the opening. On April 22nd, 1977 we opened the theater and the spirit of that space was very interesting. That is, we tried to discover the value of the traditional, and at the same time we didn’t want to lose our modern values. I tried to organize many things from the traditional performing arts and many things avant-garde, all at the same time.

At the end of 1977 I had met a person who was a folklorist named Shim Usöng. At that time he was the chairman of the *namsadang* troupe, because he had reformed the *namsadang* for a governmental agency. He registered them in the capacity as their chairman. And he asked me if I could help a very young traditional musicians’ group called the Minsogakhoe Shinawi. And he explained how he helped them at their beginning in many ways. I think, in fact, he was the spiritual leader of that group.

And so I said “Yes, I can offer the Space Theater for the Minsogakhoe Shinawi once a month. And also, I will support some of the expenses for publicity, pamphlets, and such things for the concerts.” Our first concert together was held February of 1978, for two days on the 22nd and the 23rd. And the repertoire of the concert was very, very special because the Minsogakhoe Shinawi didn't have a good chance to show their energy to the audiences at that time. So they tried to show a very formal *shinawi* ensemble in the public theater, and at the same time they wanted to show something newly created. One dance song — a male dancer, I remember, Ch'oe Hüiwan — he danced with *shinawi* music, and the dance was completely improvised, I believe. And we had, perhaps, a solo piece in the middle, and the last piece was titled “Uttari p'ungmul anjünban.” *Uttari p'ungmul* means *p'ungmul* of the central part of Korea, and *anjünban* means from a seated position. That was, in fact, the first SamulNori concert in Korea. In the world! [laughs]

The small gong (*kkwaenggwari*) player was Kim Yongbae — he's now passed away. The hourglass drum (*changgo*) player was the very famous Kim Duk Soo [Kim Töksu], and the barrel drum (*puk*) was played by Yi Chongdae. I believe Yi is now a member of the Seoul Metropolitan Traditional Music Orchestra. And Ch'oe T'aehyön played the *ching* — he's now at the university. The music was really great. All the audience was truly surprised at the sounds and the music itself. And even the artists — they didn't expect such a great result from their music, because they thought that before that that *p'ungmul* was performed all over at that time with dance, and that the musical elements were just sounds for the movement. That was the first time we could concentrate on the sounds only, not losing the energy through the visual elements.

It was really great! After the concert, we talked about many things related to *p'ungmul*, and later we had another concert. Perhaps many people remember the “first” members of SamuNori — Yi Kwangsu, Kim Yongbae, Ch'oe Chongshil, and Kim Duk Soo — but this group was formed later. And after that, through the year, we had more chances to make the same kind of seated performances; not only “Uttari p'ungmul,” but also the rhythms from the Kyöngsang area or the Honam (Chölla) area. And after that we thought we needed professional percussionists, because Ch'oe T'aehyön was a *haegüm* player (though a very accomplished one), and Yi Chongdae was a better *taegüm* player. Ch'oe and Yi recommended having percussionists other than themselves, so we thought of who would be the new members. Around a year later — you know, today I just found another tape, a concert performed on March 1st of 1979 by three of the “original” members, plus an extra one: Kim Duk Soo, Kim Yongbae, Ch'oe Chongshil, and Ch'oe Chongsök. Chongsök is the older brother of Ch'oe Chongshil. At the time Ch'oe Chongsök was a professional *kkwaenggwari* player in the Kyöngnam (South Kyöngsang province) area. It was called Samch'önp'o Shibich'a Nongak. It's a *munhwajae* [cultural asset] troupe.

So for the Kyöngsang province rhythms Ch'oe Chongsök played the *kkwaenggwari*, but soon thereafter Yi Kwangsu replaced him. They discussed the idea of changing positions [instruments] every time, but in the end they ruled against it. So they taught Yi Kwangsu the Kyöngsang rhythms and the Uttari rhythms (and so on). Kim Yongbae did this — he would play all the different places' rhythms. [pause]

Anyway, later he committed suicide. I feel the Kungnip Kugagwŏn (National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts) treated him very badly, very badly. As you know, the Kungnip Kugagwŏn at that time insisted on only court music. Nowadays it has changed very much, but I still think they look down upon their folk musicians.

Perhaps several months later after their premiere, I got together with members of SamulNori — I remember Kim Duk Soo and Kim Yongbae were there — and we talked about the title of the group with Shim Usŏng. Shim Usŏng proposed “SamulNori” because there is a similar *samul* (quartet) found in Buddhist temples — the Buddhist *samul* includes two gongs, a drum, and a wooden fish. So we put the name SamulNori to that group of musicians; nowadays it's become a general noun (*samul nori*). And in the beginning we thought about many other options, such as *p'ungmul* or *nongak*, but we didn't like *nongak* because it means “farmers' music” and it was given to us by the Japanese. We think Korean *p'ungmul* is the music and dance not of farmers, but of horse riding people. Perhaps you remember their costumes and hats? They are the costumes of the Mongolian People's Army. And the terminology, like *chwau ch'igi* and *p'uri chin* [*p'ungmul* ground formation names], is army terminology.

At the beginning of the 1980s we didn't have any real critical attention, but perhaps from the mid-1980s some traditional musicians began to criticize SamulNori. I advised them not to make it so fast! Sometimes they made some special part of the piece longer than before. That means they re-formed the traditional rhythmic structure, especially its speed. They became faster and faster. Sometimes I can understand this, because when you are playing the instruments with movement, you cannot play so fast because of the physical limitations. But when SamulNori began playing the rhythms separate from the dance in a seated position, they could make it very fast. So, I think that's the reason they did it.

The Konggan Sarang is now closed. I don't remember when that was — around 1989 I think. They tried to keep it alive, but it wasn't possible. After that it was used as a school for architecture. We then moved the office here [the METAA Studio]. In 1982 SamulNori was invited to Dallas for some kind of percussion conference. It was the biggest international meeting of percussionists — not folklore percussionists, but mainly percussionists like timpanists. I remember that that was their first concert ever in the United States. In 1983 they were invited by the Asia Society in New York, and after the concert the Asia Society proposed — the audience was so glad to listen to SamulNori's sounds — they proposed to the audience members that they collect some money for a recording. So they recorded SamulNori in New York before returning to Korea. After that, the Asia Society made a contract with the Warner Company, and their first record was issued by Warner through the Nonesuch Label.

It is strange, but I knew back then. I knew from the very beginning how great SamulNori would become. That is the nature of my work. Sometimes I feel God gave me only one talent, through which I can recognize something valuable in advance.

“I believe that the combination of my upbringing and this valuable touring experience gave me the tools I needed to become the person I am today”: Ch’oe Pyöngsam (Seoul, Kungnip Kugagwön, 8 August 1996)

Ch’oe Pyöngsam was my first samul nori teacher back in 1993 when I first attended the foreigner program at the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (Kungnip Kugagwön) in Seoul. Although I did not realize it at the time, he had already distinguished himself as one the premiere practitioners of the art form, excelling in the realms of performance, theory, pedagogy, and, later, composition. Like many first- and second-generation samul nori performers, Ch’oe grew up in a nongak family accustomed to life on the road. A native of Kyöngsang province in the southeastern part of the peninsula, he followed a similar trajectory to that of Kim Duk Soo, gaining valuable experience from an early age as a member of touring percussion groups as well as the Little Angels. In 1986 he joined the revamped National Center team with his close friend, the namsadang changgo player Nam Kimun, and together over the years they have slowly taken over the group’s administrative and creative reins. Ch’oe was part of a research team from the National Center to publish the first complete performance transcriptions of all the core samul nori pieces in Western notation (Ch’oe Pyöngsam et al 1992), and in 2000 he solo authored the highly venerated textbook Learning Samul nori: From Principles to Performance (Ch’oe 2000). That same year he founded and became artistic director of Samulnori Ullimteo [Ullimt’ö], a traditional arts performance society that began with samul nori instruction and concertizing but expanded to include vocal and other instrumental genres. In 2002 he composed “Samul-kwa puk modüm” (The Gathering of Samul nori and Barrel Drums), the only new addition to the core repertoire to make it into the regular rotation at the National Center. And to bring the tradition full circle, Ch’oe has more recently been performing with the nationally designated namsadang team in Seoul as a training artist (chönsuja) under the cultural asset system.

My father, Ch’oe Sangt’aek, was born in a small village — which has now become the larger city of Kumi — in Ch’önsan county, North Kyöngsang province. His hometown was extremely well known throughout Korea in the 1950s and ’60s for its *nongak* (*p’ungmul*). At that time, every county had *nongak* activity because it was linked to farming, the primary occupation of the area. Players weren’t professional but were rather amateurs. My father was also a farmer, but from a very early age showed considerable talent in drumming.

After the Korean War was over in 1953, he moved south to Pusan to look for work. He quickly went through his savings because of trouble finding a job, but during this period he met two men who were also really good *nongak* performers who wanted to start up a new group. And so my father, along with Yi Myöngch’öl and Yu Sangyong, formed Ami Nongak, one of the most famous ensembles of the time and one that is still known today as Pusan Nongak [a regional cultural asset]. Ami Nongak made money through ritual fund-raising activities such as *chishin palpki* early each year (according to the lunar calendar), though they also made the circuit of national *nongak* and folklore competitions.

I was born in 1957 just as Ami Nongak was starting to become famous. As long as I can remember I wanted to play *nongak*, just like my father. When local groups visited our neighborhood I even skipped elementary school and would follow them around all day. At first my father wasn't happy about this at all and he tried to forbid me from playing. But he couldn't break my will! And so finally he bought me a spinning-tasseled hat (*sangmo*) when I was 10, and also an hourglass drum (*changgo*) to practice on my own. He taught me the rhythm *kutkōri* (a dance rhythm) as a kind of test, to see how I would do. Because I worked so hard, he invited me to join Ami Nongak to participate the next January in a fund-raising performance. At first I was only paid 20% of an adult's income, but that rate slowly grew to 30%, then 40%, and eventually to the full rate. Soon thereafter in 1968, Ami Nongak was invited to a national folk arts competition in Taegu (North Kyōngsang province) where I performed as a *sangmo* dancer. In the audience was a recruiter from the Little Angels youth performance team based in Seoul, and he asked me right there if I would join. And so from 1970 I began to perform and tour with the Little Angels all over Korea and the world. And I believe that the combination of my upbringing and this valuable touring experience gave me the tools I needed to become the person I am today.

If someone asked me "Who were your teachers?", I would probably respond that I didn't have any. What I mean is that as a child I learned on my own by imitating the players and performers that I admired. But to give you specific names: with the Little Angels there was a great *changgo* player from the Chōlla provinces named Yi Chōngbōm. He was from Chōngūp county and was the same generation as other *changgo* greats Kim Pyōngsōp (a teacher of Kim Duk Soo) and Chōn Sasōp, the father of Chōn Sudōk (the original *changgo* player with our Kungnip Kugagwōn Samulnori). Even though I learned a lot of my *changgo* technique and repertoire from Yi Chōngbōm, as a member of Little Angels my main specialty was acrobatics with the *sangmo*.

After I graduated from high school and completed my military service [required of all Korean males], I began to look for work as a *nongak* performer. It was difficult back then, because there was still no SamulNori and the opportunities for professional *nongak* players were slim. Even after Kim Duk Soo and Kim Yongbae started the quartet in 1978, I mostly found myself performing with traditional dance companies as background music. This all changed in 1986 when I was recruited by Kim Yongbae to join the National Center *samul nori* team (Kungnip Kugagwōn Samulnori). Back then there were very few players of *samul nori*, but their performance skills and artistic quality were very high. This is because most of us came from *nongak* backgrounds and had developed our skills over a long period of time in close contact with many different masters. We learned by imitation and through a sense of breath and timing (*hohūp*) that came directly from dance and movement. We were also encouraged at every stage to be able to improvise, to place our personal touch on everything we did. Today it seems like the opposite: so many *samul nori* players everywhere, but many without this rooted sense of timing and the ability to improvise. And many just try to learn everything very quickly in a school setting, and don't really put in the time required.

When I joined the National Center team in 1986, we were still trying to figure out how to translate the character of each province's music within each of the core *samul nori* pieces. In the case of "Honam udo kut," the tradition you're now researching in the countryside with Iri Nongak, the area has very subtle yet complicated rhythms. Not only does it have the *udo* ("right side") and *chwado* ("left side") styles of *nongak*, but also from village to village and area to area there are small differences in content and approach. And even though the *Honam udo* style has, of course, recognizable rhythms with main beats, to properly bring them to life you have to add more complicated variations on these basic forms, a skill that makes the playing of this music very difficult.

When we play "Honam udo kut" this feeling or ability to expand upon and change the basic music is very important; it makes the piece the most difficult of them all. The idea of maintaining interest within rhythms that repeat so many times, holding the listener's interest through the proper balance of tension (*kinjang*) and release (*iwan*), is a part of this feeling. The most important thing is that a performance you heard of this piece a year ago should sound quite different from one that is played today.

"Everything in this universe is connected with me": Kim Dong-won [Tongwŏn]
(Seoul, Coffee House Near HyeHwa Station, 27 May 2004)

A native of South Kyŏngsang province like Ch'oe Pyŏngsam, Kim Dong-won is best known within the Korean percussion world as having served as Director of Education for SamulNori (Nanjang Cultures) from 1990 to 2004. During his tenure he compiled an impressive list of accomplishments as an educator, including a treatise on rhythm and music theory (Kim Tongwŏn 1998), a samul nori textbook in English (Kim, Duk Soo et al 1999), Korean liner notes to Kim Duk Soo's shaman music collection Spirit of Nature (2001), a children's "fairy tale" involving samul nori instruments (Kwak Yŏnggwŏn and Kim Tongwŏn 2001, later translated into English [Kwak, Young-kwon and Kim, Dong-won 2003]), two samul nori workbooks for Korean school children (Kim Tongwŏn 2002, 2003), and music and commentary for accompanying recordings to two Korean traditional picture-books (Yi Hyŏnsun et al 2003a, 2003b). In 1994 Kim began a samul nori institute in Basel, Switzerland, where he spends part of every summer (it is still running and active), and in 2002 he joined Yo Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble as a regular performing and touring member. At the time of this interview, Kim had just left SamulNori to pursue more performance opportunities, though he would continue to help Kim Duk Soo with research (he co-wrote the liner notes to Kim Duk Soo's 50th anniversary CD release [Kim Tongwŏn and Chu Chaeyŏn 2007]).

When I met with Kim again in 2006 he had just moved from Seoul to the nearby countryside to escape what he termed the "dehumanizing" aspects of the city, but this in no way implied any respite from his commitment to Korean percussion and traditional culture. That same year he joined the faculty at Wonkwang Digital University (online instruction), and in addition to work with Yo Yo Ma as well as his institute in Basel, Kim released a solo CD in 2008 (Kil-ül kara/On the Road) around the same time he joined p'ansori singer Bae Il Tong [Pae Iltong] to form the hybrid

traditional group Daorum [Taorŭm]. When I last met with Kim in early 2011, he felt that as he looked back on his life that his true gifts lied in teaching, rather than performing. But for those of us who have had the privilege and honor to hear him play, it is impossible to compartmentalize the life of this remarkable artist and human being.

I grew up in Pusan, the biggest harbor in Korea. I was a normal schoolboy until high school, when I then fell in love with machines. I loved machines! And that's why my major in university was technical engineering. But I radically changed — I fell in love with another — and it was Korean traditional drumming and dance. It was 1984, and I had a year left to finish my military duty. But even when I was doing my duty, I could not forget the strange feeling and energy — the love — for Korean traditional music and dance. I then decided to drop out of university and move to Chŏlla province. It was December of 1986; I stayed the whole winter in Chŏlla province studying music and practicing. And then fortunately I found I could get a job as a teacher in Seoul. I taught *chwado p'ungmul* ("left side" *p'ungmul* from the Chŏlla provinces) on Taehangno [a street famous for student activity]. But I didn't want to be a teacher, because there were still so many things to learn — it was very early in my life as a musician.

During those days I became involved in a cultural movement *tongari*. It's a kind of club made up of traditional artists who are also very interested in changing this country's political situation. In Korean it was called the *munhwa undong* (cultural movement). At that time, there was a laborer who was killed by a policeman. He was part of a group of laborers who formed a demonstration, like a strike, but it was prohibited at that time. And he was killed by a gas gun, and we wanted to make a funeral ceremony. But the ceremony was interrupted and blocked by policemen and I was arrested, and I was a prisoner for more than 70 days, punished and tortured. My room — I was alone in the room — the room was smaller than our two seats here. But fortunately there was a toilet [laughs]! And then my soul and body was quite damaged. But I was very lucky, because I had a chance to forgive all the faces that punished me. One day I read a book of great traditional oriental philosophy. One sentence said: "Everything in this universe is connected with me." And that sentence hit me — boom! It means that I'm connected or engaged with my enemies. How can I live with them, how can I make harmony with them, and how can I live in this tough world with my small hand and shoulder?

After that I accepted everything. I decided to improve my musical ability, because it would become my weapon. So I started *p'ansori* drumming and other styles of percussion. Under the influence of the *munhwa undong*, I actually thought that *samul nori* was a kind of "fake" music. Some students today still think so! You know, *samul nori* is a very professional, percussive music that was played by only four people, but for a revolution we needed more people. So *samul nori* didn't fit our concept. We thought then that *samul nori* had screwed up the origins of *p'ungmul*. We really thought so. And the main "axis of evil" was Kim Duk Soo! But it's because at that time my friends and I didn't know that the main root of the music was different. The origins of *samul nori* didn't come from *p'ungmul*. Musically it's similar,

but the musicians' backgrounds came from the *namsadang*, you know, like a professional or gypsy artistic group. So the musical background was different. But to make my weapon stronger and sharper, I tried to figure out *samul nori* music. I made notation — all the *samul nori* rhythms, by myself alone. Page after page it really impressed me — I was really touched by the professionalism of the music, and how it was very beautiful. All by itself it was beautiful. No political way of thinking, just beautiful. And then after that I decided to respect them and their music. And that's why I joined Kim Duk Soo in 1990.

It was January, and there was a *samul nori* workshop at the Chungang Cultural Center in front of Piwŏn [one of the royal palaces in downtown Seoul]. They didn't expect me to join. I took two of their workshops, one in January and one in the summer. During the workshops they watched me how I played, how I reacted to their instructions. And then one day I visited them after a workshop and I said, "I really want to be your student." They asked, "Why?" [he laughs] Because everyone knows it's a really tough life to live as a traditional Korean musician. And I said, "I think if I'm a good musician, I think I could see the brightness of life, the completeness of life." Like a Buddhist monk: Buddhist monks chant and pray and meditate — I can make chant and meditating with my music, my drumming — I thought so.

And then Mr. Kim Duk Soo said, "From now on, we will consider you a member of our family." Not his actual family, of course, but the SamulNori family. And after that I visited their studio every day. Every morning I cleaned up the studio, and I began to learn how to relax my body and mind during *samul nori* playing. As you know, it's very fast and tough. But as we play, we need a really peaceful energy, something like giving medicine. But after a couple of months the main staff of SamulNori decided to go to London to study more. So Mr. Kim Duk Soo needed a new staff member. And the member who was supposed to go to London came to me one day and said, "Why don't you join us as a staff member?" Because at the top of the building there was a small office, and just underneath was a studio. "So if you want to, you can do both," he said. I shouldn't have accepted! [laughs] But you know, I could learn extremely beautiful music from them, but I was very poor so I couldn't give any kind of lesson money to Mr. Kim. And actually he didn't want it. But I wanted to be able to provide somehow, with my small ability. So I decided that if I helped my teacher, it would be my honor — I told Mr. Kim that. And my work as an office assistant started like that.

Before joining Mr. Kim Duk Soo, I had a long experience with *p'ungmul* teaching on Taehangno — more than three years. And I could make some notation. And that's why my title became "Member of Research and Education." At that time, the director was Mr. Im Tongch'ang. He's a pianist and composer — many things, really. I could learn a lot from him. You know, actually, basically all traditional musicians can play brilliantly and beautifully, but they explain themselves awfully. [laughs] You know that. They just want to give everything to the student. Not one by one, not in order. But Mr. Im Tongch'ang — he opened my eyes for the music. How can I catch the soul of the music and its art? How can I read and lead the music? It was a beautiful moment. I still keep in touch with him.

Ah, I'm a really lucky guy. I have everything — except money! [laughs] — in this world. I have everything. Especially, you know, yesterday was Buddha's birthday. Buddha said that the four most difficult things in this world to get are: first, finding a real teacher; second, getting familiar with a real teacher; third, taking a real lesson from a real teacher; and fourth, doing it myself after the real lesson. For me, I've had the first three, by so many beautiful teachers. Now I'm trying the fourth level. You know it's very, very difficult to find a "real" teacher, but I found so many teachers. And the friendship and relationship between them and me was like a father, grandfather, cousins, and brothers. The first was Mr. Yang Sunyong — as you know [lead *soe* player of Imshil P'ilbong Nongak, deceased] — and Kim Myŏnghwan, the *p'ansori* drummer (he died). And Mr. Kim Duk Soo, and Lee Kwangsu [SamulNori], and Pak Pyŏngch'ŏn [*Chindo ssikkim kut* specialist], and Kim Chŏnghŭi. You know Kim Sŏkch'ul [*t'aep'yŏngso* virtuoso with *Tonghaein pyŏlshin kut*, deceased], yes? That's his nephew. I wrote notation with him. And so many other shamans and *p'ansori* singers really wanted to teach me, to share their beautiful abilities with me. I think that's why I decided to stop my office work at Nanjang.

Binding Themes

In spite of generational and initial occupational differences, all three men interviewed touched upon themes that were common not just to SamulNori/*samul nori*, but also to broader trends of the Korean traditional music world in the mid- to late twentieth century. Historical connections between *samul nori*, *p'ungmul*, and the *namsadang* were clearly in the forefront, as was the gradual professionalization of folk percussion that occurred during this time period. Central to this transformation was the burgeoning concert-hall culture of the metropolis Seoul and the transition it marked for the traditional arts from the countryside to urban spaces. Older contexts for learning the music and dance — largely rural, unstructured, and informal — were either lost or absorbed into formalized, institutional settings. Musically there was a marked move away from improvisation and personal imprints on the repertoire, at the same time that the sounds of the countryside became divorced from their physical manifestation in dance.

An underlying and unifying force to the above observations was the role that modernity, globalization, and the popular would play in changing conceptions of what was deemed "traditional." While *samul nori* would help nurture the growing economic viability of a life in the traditional arts — including influencing other younger traditional musicians who similarly began to expand upon the methods and performing strategies they had inherited from their elders — it nevertheless found itself in the center of heated debates as to whether such practices were "authentically Korean," whether or not its historical connections were real or invented. Early student groups and political movements were quick to ignore, even shun, the activities of the original SamulNori group, and while today *samul nori* as a genre is almost uniformly accepted throughout the South Korean student population, doubts as to the place and appropriateness of innovation within the larger project of cultural preservation consider to linger.

What brings me back to these stories, however, more than just the wealth of historical and personal details that are provided, is the passion for the music and the artists that both tempers and transcends everything that is expressed. It is no mistake that the popularity and fervor with which *samul nori* is now embraced in Korea is equally felt — sometimes even more so — by those living outside of the peninsula, of both Korean and non-Korean heritage. This is in large part due to the fact that all three men interviewed in this paper joined their love and local enthusiasm for *samul nori* to an international outlook. Through the activities of METAA and the various “Ult’arigut” projects, Kang was able to invite foreign artists and troupes to Korean soil, and to send Korean troupes abroad. Ch’oe has taught numerous classes of foreigners as part of the National Center’s summer foreigner program, has toured extensively around the globe with the National Center *samul nori* team, and has been part of educational exchanges with universities in Europe and North America. And in addition to the numerous textbooks and collections of notation he published for foreign students, including his ongoing pedagogical efforts at his various foreign international institutes in Europe and East Asia, Kim continues to add his distinctive Korean presence to Yo Yo Ma’s touring and educational efforts.

The banner of *samul nori* has already been passed on to the next generation of performers, educators, and promoters. With its flag firmly planted in the soil of Korean traditional musical performance, nurtured by the ongoing and dedicated efforts of its practitioners and the pedagogical legacy left behind by such visionaries as Ch’oe Pyöngsam and Kim Dong-won (not to leave out, of course, Kim Duk Soo), it should continue to inform and inspire generations of musicians — both domestically and abroad — for many years to come.

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