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Korean percussion band music-making has been through a number of transformative phases over the course of the 20th Century. The diagrams below represent these successive phases, visually encapsulating a seemingly widespread conception that was first articulated to me by the folk music scholar Yi Pohyŏng in 1999. The filled circles denote communities with bands.

In pre-industrial Korea (point 1 above), many communities maintained bands, to encourage and celebrate communal living, provide rhythm for agricultural working, accompany rituals ensuring the gods’ protection and banishing negative forces, and so on. Then, during the decades of Japanese rule and Park Chunghee’s dictatorship, as farming methods, artistic preferences, and belief-systems were modernised, percussion bands became increasingly the preserve of marginal enclaves of traditional culture (point 2). Next, under the influence of the people’s culture movement, when people were searching for arts that could represent ‘the Korean people’, bands were rediscovered during a folk revival. Influential innovators/preservers took marginal forms and revivified them in the cultural/economic centres (point 3, with darker shading indicating the revised musical forms). Finally, the revised folk arts spread back out from the centres – new converts taking the music back out to the communities that had previously fostered them (point 4). So now, once again, percussion bands are widespread throughout Korea. This four-part history could be regarded as an example of the so-called “pizza effect”, an oft-occurring type of cultural re-enculturation that was explained by Agehananda Bharati in 1970 through allusion to the way in which pizza-like dishes were taken from rural Italy to America by Italian emigres, developed into modern pizzas in the new urban centres, and then returned to Italy, thereafter spreading
Throughout the land (Bharati 1970: 267–287). This paper focuses on the final part of the process: the re-establishment of percussion bands in local communities, considering the contributions of the individuals who have made this happen – what they have done and why they have done it.

Some communities have found themselves less well-disposed to respond to the percussion band revival than others – particularly those places that lost their original traditions a long time ago and which are located far from the cultural hotspots, the “scenes” of musical activity. In these places, people have often had to go to great lengths to reinstate percussion band music-making, overcoming a variety of practical, economic, geographical, and cultural obstacles. In this paper, I am going to focus exclusively on one such locality: Ulleungdo. This fairly small island, roughly 11km across at its broadest point and with a population of around 10,000, is the most remote Korean territory apart from the contested rocks of Dokdo. Research conducted in the island with Sunghee Park¹ reveals that two people in particular have been at the forefront of initiatives to promote percussion band music-making on Ulleungdo. I describe them here as “local heroes” but it is not just me who regards them as such.

Allusions to the film “Local Hero” are not accidental. Ulleungdo’s little communities are reminiscent of Ferness (the film’s fictional Scottish coastal village) in a number of ways: everybody seems to know everybody; it is relatively safe and secure (so people often don’t lock their doors); everyone is used to undertaking contrasting roles as and when necessary (for example, we know a policeman who works nights cooking fried chicken in his wife’s fast food place); and people see stark divisions between inside and outside, small community and big city – and, of course, between island and mainland in the case of Ulleungdo. But the common feature that is especially highlighted in this paper (and is a primary focus in “Local Hero”) is factionalism. It is evident that factionalism has actually played a positive role in advancing the re-establishment of percussion bands on Ulleungdo, which I shall return to later.

Although Ulleungdo is quite well-known by mainlanders for its fishing industry – especially for its highly regarded cuttle-fish – these days the islanders make much more money from the gathering of wild mountain vegetables,

¹ Research was conducted on Ulleungdo from 28/8/10 to 4/9/10 and 20/4/11 to 16/5/11.
particularly wild-garlic known locally as “myŏngi” meaning “life”. And, in the past, when connections with the mainland were much less effective and the islanders had to be self-sufficient, many devoted their lives to farming. A crucial piece of evidence that was used to attract the first shipment of 54 colonists in 1883 was the following map (below left, from Song Pyŏnggi 2010: 177). This map shows a deceptively large open plain in the centre of the island, which, in reality, is rather small – roughly corresponding to the shaded area of Nari on the modern map (below right).

The earliest arrivals settled here but other communities quickly grew around the perimeter of the island – not only granting close proximity to the sea but also less mountainous terrain, suitable for building homes on and for cultivating farmland.

Old photos provide evidence of wide-spread farming on Ulleungdo, on a far bigger scale than today. For example, One old photograph (below left) shows field farming at the top end of Todong, the island’s administrative centre. This is far away from the harbour and fishermen’s houses. According to Yun Sŏkch’an, an 80-year old shop owner who we interviewed, a small farming community remained here until the early 1970s when it “quickly disappeared without trace” (p.c. 15/5/2011). He recalled that they played p’ungmul. At certain times of the year, groups of 15 or so would come down into the town and perform for entertainment and ritual.

T’aeha, in the remote northwest, also had a large farming community, which was relatively late to modernise. Older residents told of how, until around 1970, the houses were made out of bamboo and, with no electricity, they had to rely on oil-lamps to see at night. One man remembered struggling to complete his homework before the lamp burned out (p.c. 12/5/2011). The following photo (below left) is from a few years later but there are still some thatched houses and fields stretching into the distance – now all gone. In interview, Yi Haeu (born in 1916, below right) spoke emotionally about the loss of the farmland in T’aeha and also about the loss of p’ungmul.

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2 Ulleungdo has not had a settled population for long. From 1438 until 1883, the Korean government enforced an ‘empty island policy’, judging it too remote and insignificant to govern (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 75, 290-291).
Yi Haeu was once the leader of the village’s p’ungmul group and remembers how it used to perform chishin palpki (literally, “treading the earth spirits”), the village’s biggest performance event that happened on the first full-moon of the lunar calendar. About 15 of the farmers would congregate with their instruments at the community’s central meeting place (a shrine commemorating the village’s first inhabitants). They would then process from house to house, followed by an entourage of locals – particularly children, some playing saucepan lids in emulation – playing outside and inside the homes, shouting out rhythmic chants such as “Aerua chishina!” In this way, they cleansed the whole community of residual bad forces and, in gratitude, each household would leave money for them in a bowl of rice (p.c. 13/5/2011). In all respects, the procedures recollected by Yi and others match the traditional chishin palpki practices on the mainland (see, for example, Yi Kyŏngyŏp et al. 2007: 95-96).

From the 1960s, farming declined in Ulleungdo. Vegetables could be imported more cheaply and easily and so islanders turned their attentions more to fishing and gathering wild mountain vegetables. While the decline of communal farming culture was prompting the decline of p’ungmul, at the same time, the accelerated spread of Christianity was making people question the efficacy of practices like chishin palpki. And, by the early 1970s, mass media had become available everywhere – even in places like T’aeha –, broadcasting upbeat modern music to motivate the masses (see Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 55–58). Interviews with elderly islanders suggest that the island’s p’ungmul bands had all disappeared by the late 1970s, T’aeha being the last community to perform chishin palpki in 1976. P’ungmul had become a musical form associated with the recently-superseded “old Ulleungdo”, with its hard winters, poverty, and “superstition”.

Yi Ch’ungsŏng, a government officer and native of Ulleungdo, was single-handedly responsible for bringing percussion band music-making back to the island in the mid-1990s. He was appointed as manager of Ulleungdo’s Cultural Division in 1995 with the remit of setting-up the island’s first ever annual festival – the Usan Cultural Festival. From the early 80s, the island’s tourist industry had been growing enormously and this festival was intended to boost the industry further; but as well as provide tourists with high quality entertainment by professionals from the mainland, Yi explained that he was keen to involve the islanders too – both as performers and participants, showcasing Ulleungdo culture and benefiting from the experience. So he travelled the length and breadth of the island looking for groups

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only to discover that “there was not a single performance group... not one”. There were a small number of church choirs, but these could sing only hymns – hardly suitable for a festival. He explained: “I realised suddenly that we had no music... we had no culture of our own....” (p.c. 11/5/2011). Following the vast improvements in communications technologies in the 1970s and 1980s, the islanders had become dependent on the mainland for so much in their lives and music, like vegetables, could be imported, mainland musicians visiting to perform and mainland mass-media being played in the home and in the many karaoke venues that sprung up all over the island.

Despite his never having been involved in music-making since his school days, Yi became resolved to “bring music to Ulleungdo” himself, choosing samullori as the starting point. He pinpointed familiar motivations: “It’s uplifting for the spirit – gets you moving; it’s easy to learn – and has a teaching method that is well-established and easy to learn; it's ‘traditional’ but also fashionable” By this point, of course, samullori was far from new; but the island’s geographical location has often engendered a certain lag in cultural dissemination. So, in 1995 and 1998, Yi used up his precious holidays in travelling to the mainland for week-long intensive courses – in Kim Duksoo’s Cultural Centre (Munhwawŏn) in Puyŏ and Onnuri Kugak Yesuldan in Ch’ŏngdo. Each time, he brought back notations, books, and CDs so that he could continue to progress by himself, alone in Ulleungdo (p.c. 11/5/2011).

By the end of 1998, Yi had learnt the samullori piece “Yŏngnam Nongak” – a piece that he thought well-suited to represent Ulleungdo, being derived from patterns collected in the neighbouring mainland Kyŏngsang provinces. He was ready to transmit the piece to others and, being involved in local government, was in an ideal position to get funds to buy drums and gongs. He named the new group “Yongorŭm” (Dragon Rising), after a dramatic and rare variety of tornado which occurs in that part of the East Sea rather more frequently than elsewhere. There were originally six members – all Yi’s fellow office workers – but the ranks soon swelled to engage islanders of more varied backgrounds, and the group went on to perform at the island’s festivals up until 2004. The same mission statement was repeatedly printed on programmes and webpages: “This group was founded to establish a musical tradition and create local culture”. Eventually though, the group fizzled out. Yi admitted that he’d been frustrated from the outset by obstacles relating to the island’s unusual predicament: there were no suitable places for practice and storage, there were no experts to guide the group into new repertoire, and there was no stable membership. Yongorŭm was mainly composed of middle-ranking government officers, stationed in Ulleungdo only on a temporary basis. As people came and left, Yi found that he was repeatedly reintroducing the same material, eventually alienating the small core of long-term dedicated members (p.c. 11/5/2011). Today, those instruments are locked away in a basement room in the island’s Cultural Centre – never played and gathering dust.

The next renaissance began a few years later when the island’s administration decided to re-introduce an annual Festival marking the first full-moon of the lunar calendar: the Sadong Talmaji (“Receiving the moon”) Festival. The first of these was scheduled to happen in 2008 – geared towards fostering local community
rather than the tourist industry. Knowing that local p’ungmul performance had traditionally been a crucial element of local New Year celebrations (with people like the aged farmer Yi Haeu still remembering details of chishin palpki), the authorities were keen to have a local p’ungmul ensemble created – and were willing to finance the group’s tuition. The head of the Ulleung district office teamed up with his friend Kim Ch’ongsu – a prominent resident of Sadong – to work out a strategy and a simple internet search led them to Ch’asang Nongak, a particularly vigorous and incessantly fast-paced style with headquarters located fairly nearby on the mainland in Ch’ŏngdo, near Daegu. With admirable intrepidation, a group of 11 islanders – mainly residents of Sadong, all over 50 years old, and with no previous traditional percussion experience – then travelled all the way there for a week-long workshop. Knowing they only had limited access to expertise, they played non-stop, continuing long into the night after the classes had finished; several remember how they came to perceive all rhythmic sounds in terms of drum and gong patterns – the swish of car windscreen wipers or the patter of rain. After their first triumphant performance the group, which adopted the name “Changhŭng Nongak”, was granted funds for another week on the mainland prior to the next year’s Festival. But then, the same old obstacles reappeared: How to carry on improving without local expertise? (The county refused to finance a third trip to the mainland). And where to practice and store the instruments? (A colony of rare black pigeons was nesting close to the only readily available venue in Sadong and, needless to say, the pigeons did not like the noise). But, early in 2011, they found an ideal (albeit temporary) solution: over a bridge on the outskirts of Sadong, past a sign saying “Changhŭng Nongak Training Centre”, there is an abandoned house which they now use for practicing (p.c. 1/9/2010, 12/5/2011).

But that is not the end of the story. In 2009, there was a change of policy regarding the Talmaji Festival, which appears inadvertently to have boosted the island’s percussion band culture. It was decided that, from 2010 onwards, the Festival would be hosted by a different part of the village each year. Like many villages in Korea, Sadong is divided into a number of distinctive separate communities – Sadong 1, Sadong 2, and Sadong 3 – which are clearly delineated by geography, status, familial connections, and many other factors. In 2010, Sadong 2 – also known as Okch’ŏn (Jade Stream) – would be the hosts. The introduction of this new policy immediately brought old loyalties and rivalries to the fore (– and here I am returning to the theme of small-community factionalism, which is so artfully represented in the film “Local Hero”). Because the Changhŭng Nongak group was almost entirely composed of people from Sadong 1 and 3, they were unwilling to play at the forthcoming event hosted by their neighbours. And so the inhabitants of Sadong 2 responded by creating their own group – Okch’ŏn Nongak (see below) – calling on the skills of Yi Ch’ungsŏng to teach them the old samullori favourite “Yŏngnam Nongak” and a few simple patterns to play while standing or processing. In turn, Okch’ŏn Nongak’s performance was good enough to motivate Changhŭng Nongak to redouble their efforts: in preparation for the 2011 Festival, with no more funding from the administration, the members pooled their own resources to pay for a third workshop on the mainland.

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In interview, members from the two groups were keen to highlight the qualities that put their group above their rivals. Several Okch’ŏn Nongak members explained: “They were created by the authorities but we are a real community group: created by us for us”. On the other side, Changhŭng Nongak members have often pointed out: “They play samullori but we play p’ungmul”, going on to explain how p’ungmul is the “real, original” form of percussion-band music, far better suited to community celebration. So the age-old samullori versus pungmul debate goes on, now even being articulated and acted out on the remote island of Ulleungdo.

In this paper, I have hopefully communicated a certain admiration for the amateur musicians who have devoted so much of their time and energy to bringing percussion band music back to Ulleungdo – most obviously, Yi Ch’ungsŏng and Kim Chŏngsu. Because of Ulleungdo’s particular predicament of being situated far from cultural hotspots and yet dependent on the mainland for so much, these “local heroes” have had to contend with a variety of obstacles to bring the “pizza effect” to fruition – re-establishing percussion band music on Ulleungdo, not in its original format (as remembered by some elderly islanders) but rather in the revivified format sanctioned by the cultural authorities. The rewards are obvious: many who are now involved in the island’s new bands stressed – with justifiable satisfaction – that, through their music-making, they were not only granting pleasure for themselves in the present moment but also going some way towards creating enduring tradition that will benefit the community well into the future. And now that there is dialogue, competition, and even a light rivalry between multiple percussion groups – rather than a single solitary operation – perhaps there is sufficient fuel to sustain this music-making for the longer term and even, perhaps, generate some more groups?

References

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