

Korea



Nathan Hesselink. *P'ungmul: South Korean Drumming and Dance*

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OVER THE years the image of colorfully dressed Korean drummers with spinning-tasselled hats dancing to the sound of drums and an oboe has become one of Korea's strongest folk icons. Even in the West, the image has become fairly common, but as in Korea, there may still be much confusion over what it entails. Few people will be able to easily define this form of entertainment, which is partly because of the popularity of three terms that are associated with it: *p'ungmul*, *nongak*, and *samul nori*. In *P'ungmul: South Korean Drumming and Dance*, the terms are carefully deliberated. While the term *nongak* (farming/farmers' music) has been in use at least since the late nineteenth century and is commonly used to distinguish a type of folk music from other forms of music, Hesselink points out it may wrongly suggest that performances involved only farmers (15–16). The urbanized, seated four-piece ensemble variant of this genre called *samul nori* (four-piece play) has further blurred the concept. Although this form has served to attract Korean urbanites to Korean folk music since the late 1970s, it is much more limited in scope than the traditions it bears upon (224). The term *p'ungmul* was only recently re-introduced along with studies that focus on its heritage. The acrobatics, drumming patterns, and choreography are complex, and yet performers often manage to make it look deceptively easy. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that some of them complain about the negative effect of the association with *samul nori*, since the latter's highly stylized, almost exclusively musical approach somewhat obscures the enormous complexity of its *p'ungmul* roots.

Hesselink's study offers, however, much more than a mere discussion of the realm of *p'ungmul*. Although grounded in a thorough study of the literature available,

it is also a participating observer's account of how *p'ungmul* has been transmitted and preserved in recent years, with a special focus on the traditions from North Ch'olla province and their protagonists. Hesselink relies considerably on fieldwork he conducted in 1995 and 1996, but he has continuously updated his data since. The book is divided into six chapters. In the first, "Assets and Contexts," the author describes how the genre has come to be preserved as a national Important Intangible Cultural Property since 1966. The first part of this chapter is comprised of a translation of the official field report that led to the nomination of the tradition from North Ch'olla province. Whereas only those passages that "specifically address social contexts accompanied by the performance of *p'ungmul*" (17) are selected, they in fact comprise nearly the entire report (13). Because they are dense with detail and ritual terminology, I couldn't help but wonder whether Hesselink's own words would not have been more entertaining to read, even though the passages provide a general introduction to important *p'ungmul* groups from the area. In the interviews with his two main drumming mentors that make up the remainder of this chapter, Hesselink does not return to the claims made in the report, but instead asks them to relate how they came to study the art and what practical issues they encountered. This section provides interesting details on the performers' background—information the official report omits—and the first interview with Kim Hyöngsun reveals that he invested several million *wön* in order to convince the scrutinising committee members of his commitment (41).

In the ensuing chapter, "Historical Traces," Hesselink describes the various group formations and looks into the history and use of the instruments, costumes, and flags. Tables and pictures add valuable detail and are chosen well. As elsewhere, useful personal anecdotes are added while important recent scholarship is also taken into account. The various aspects of the performances reveal considerable influence from Buddhism, shamanism and Neo-Confucianism. Although these factors are not—and should not be—given separate consideration here, they are witness to the rich heritage and flexibility of the art form. The chapter "By and For 'The People'" comprises translations of two *minjung*-inspired texts Hesselink's informants have drawn on in defining and conceptualizing their art. The strong influence that the populist *minjung* movement had on traditional performing arts, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, is given some attention (91), but it is to the author's credit that he is not drawn into adding to the vast literature of discussions thereof, focusing instead on what the readings selected by his two mentors tell us about who and what the art represents. Hesselink finds that the first text, by Kim Inu, argues, among other things, that the ultimate goal of a performance is not "a beautiful performance...but rather the generation of energy and a common spirit through the joint activity of all the participants" (104).

In the fourth chapter, "Transmitted by Mouth, Taken in by Heart," Hesselink describes the practice of rote learning: it is a very personal account of how the art was transmitted to him and his fellow students, and how group performances were arranged around different events in practical terms. Recorded here are, among other things, daily schedules, and a list of comments by his other mentor Yi Sangbaek on the two different styles of performance, left (*chwado*) and right (*udo*).

Apart from food and a sense of duty, humor is also shown to be an essential element, as attested by the following quote: “if you play *chmado*, your IQ will improve (said a bit tongue-in-cheek)” (135). The chapter that follows, “The Repertoire,” describes what pieces comprise the music of North Chölla’s *p’ungmul* today and which are performed on what occasion. Hesselink describes the different rhythmic patterns and recounts how the group played them during his fieldwork years. Further to observations made in the second chapter (for example, 52–53, 58, 62) he raises the issue of the male and female connotations of instruments, which, he finds, remain arbitrary (157). In the final, sixth chapter, “Timely Reflections,” Hesselink transcribes the interviews he held with three pivotal performers, focusing on central issues regarding the transmission of the genre: the importance of skill, the place of *p’ungmul* in contemporary life, and the aesthetics of specific regional styles.

P’ungmul: South Korean Drumming and Dance is a great achievement. It is written in a very accessible style and offers a wealth of unique insights and accounts regarding the tradition and practice of *p’ungmul* in contemporary Korean society. Even though the chapters are very much interrelated and perhaps not that useful for discussion on their own, the excellent English-Korean index allows one to easily find specific terms and topics across different sections. A lot of effort has also clearly gone into the editing and design, and on the organization of the many pictures and tables. The editing is immaculate—I found only one minor error on page 77 where the article “a” is placed in front of “such a”—and the use of the now unofficial McCune-Reischauer system supports the readability of the text. While the research is thorough, Hesselink manages to maintain an engaging narrative that incorporates many interesting (and often funny) anecdotes. He is very clear about the conditions under which he collected his information, which not only adds important possible caveats to their interpretation, but also very much enlivens his account. In describing the various experiences, he shows his informants to be very driven yet sensible people. He relates important aspects of their work, including the venues and the food and alcohol, and recounts how people from different generations and backgrounds interacted with each other and with the author himself, the “hairy giant” (133). I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the work of professional performers of Korean folk music today, as well as to those looking for both a lively and detailed study of Korean percussion bands in particular.

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