The Quest for Authenticity and Innovation: Diasporic Korean Drumming in the United States

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Korean drumming is a significant performance type that demonstrates a variety of Korean American identities. Korean drumming is a synthetized concept that includes *p’ungmul*, a traditional percussion genre, and its newly modified and invented form, *samullori* (also known as *samulnori*). Korean percussion ensembles in the United States are shaped by cultural policy in South Korea and by professional musicians who migrate to the United States, both of which are elements of the continuous bilateral exchange between the home and host countries. The means by which Korean drumming is learned and taught has extended beyond traditional oral transmission to include the involvement of digital media such as performance recordings found on YouTube. In this article, I examine the ways in which Korean Americans perform contrasting ideas of traditional versus modern, old versus new, Korea versus United States—ideas that are in constant flux. The history of Korean drumming in the United States is characterized by continuous transnational circulation of Korean performance genres and their adaptation in the host society. Analyzing ideas about authenticity and innovation embedded in the various Korean percussion performance styles in the United States, I reveal the negotiable, flexible, and complex constitution of cultural identities of Korean Americans through their drumming.

Keywords: Korean American, cultural identity, diaspora, Korean drumming, *p’ungmul*, *samullori*
Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say that the sound of Korean drumming is never absent at Korean American cultural events. As one of the most significant and emblematic Korean performance types, Korean percussion has played a pivotal role in the evocation and expression of cultural identity among South Korean migrants to new lands. There are diverse Korean drumming ensembles in the United States. They perform at a variety of events such as the annual Korean harvest festival (ch’usŏk) and Lunar New Year celebrations. Drumming ensembles are affiliated with college clubs, traditional Korean music and dance institutes, Korean American organizations, and hobby clubs.

This article examines how Korean Americans construct cultural identity through Korean drumming. As noted by Krüger and Trandafoiu (2014:16), “music becomes the conduit through which difference begins to be articulated and hybridity begins to be accepted.” For Korean drumming practitioners in the United States, drumming is understood as a means of shaping and affirming identities of displaced people. Korean drumming is a synthetized concept that includes the related genres of p’ungmul and samullori. P’ungmul is a traditional genre involving music, theatre, dance, and ritual, and samullori is a modified version of p’ungmul that focuses especially on its musical aspects. I pay particular attention to Korean drumming in New York and its neighboring states, especially New Jersey. In this article, I use the word “tri-state area” to refer to New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. This is because many performers who live in New Jersey and Connecticut participate in cultural events in New York, and vice versa. The large Korean immigrant communities in the tri-state area have acted as driving forces in the formation and structuring of performance styles and contexts of traditional Korean performing arts throughout their migration history. These communities operate performing arts institutes, cultural organizations, and Korean cultural centers. Moreover, with the rapid development of technology, transportation, and digital media, it is now very easy for these migrants to maintain a connection with their country of origin. Arjun Appadurai (1996) shows that technological developments in media and communications have brought about change in individual local subjectivities among those who left their country of origin.

How, then, do Korean American performers manifest their cultural identity in their host county in today’s densely connected world? As material cultures become resources that allow migrants to remain connected to the country they have left behind, the ways in which
Korean drumming is transmitted and performed in the tri-state area expose the limitations of concepts such as hybridity, assimilation, and acculturation, which have provided an important theoretical orientation for migrant studies over the past few decades. This article builds on the concept of hybridity with a focus on cultural processes and not just cultural products. I pay special attention to the trajectories, movements, processes, and circulation of music that shape and influence ideas of authenticity and innovation. Christine Yano and Frederick Lau (2018) consider music as a process, not as a cultural product, suggesting that cultural identities are unstable and fluid. Yano and Lau (2018:3) view “music as a thing-in-motion, connecting not only people but their very ideas of who they might be, framed as part of sonic identities,” using the notion of “making waves” to place the focus on the routes and movements of music that travels that affect cultural identity formation. Katherine In-Young Lee (2018) uses the idea of circulation to examine samullori as a framework for the construction of politics of innovation and tradition. She demonstrates that audiovisual recordings, scores, and media platforms like YouTube facilitated the circulation of samullori’s rhythmic form throughout the world. As demonstrated in the field of migrant/diaspora studies and transnationalism, music becomes a site of negotiation that brings up contrasting yet interwoven ideas about authenticity and innovation.

I make the claim that multilateral trajectories between South Korea and the United States in the way Korean drumming is performed manifest a negotiable, flexible, and complex constitution of cultural identity among Korean Americans. As displaced people visit their homelands and obtain cultural goods and up-to-date knowledge on cultural products, their identity formation processes become more complicated. Cultural identity is not explicitly presented, nor is it pre-inscribed. It is “a particular positionality” chosen by performers (Taylor, 2015:320). This turns our attention from what is combined with, removed, or newly added to how performers interpret their own performances, and why performers do not all take the same approach to a performance genre.

Considering that migrants’ transnational circumstances are ongoing, it is necessary to examine migrant identity under a revised analytical framework. Martin Stokes (2001:390) points out, “While earlier migration literature tended to the before-and-after of assimilation and acculturation in accordance with modernization theory, contemporary theories of music in diaspora elaborate cultural ambivalences of return, subalternity in host societies, and the forging of transnational strategic alliances.” Stokes’ remark suggests that for music in diaspora there can be no a clear-cut
distinction between pre-migration in the homeland and post-adaptation in the host country. Su Zheng (2010:14) proposed a more specific concept, “triangular motion,” for this transnational network of immigrants that emphasizes the host country, the immigrants’ ethnic society there—in her case Chinese American communities—and the homeland. Such a new perspective on migrants’ relationship with the homeland reflects the input of technological progress into migrants’ formation of affinity with their real or imagined home (Krüger and Trandafoiu, 2014:23).

Focusing on the development of Korean drumming in the tri-state area, this article examines how this continuous connection between South Korea and the United States affects Korean Americans’ construction of cultural identity. This study does not “minimize the impact of the home country on immigrants’ lives and cultural expressions while emphasizing only the processes of becoming citizens of the New World in one kind of melting pot or another” (Zheng, 2010:10). Rather, it takes into consideration continuous movements and exchange of cultural goods, performance practices, and knowledge about traditional performing arts between the United States and South Korea, specifically through the immigrant community in the tri-state area. Previous studies focused on the cultural products of migrants and on concepts of hybridity, assimilation, and acculturation. In this article, I emphasize the processes underlying Korean Americans’ performance of Korean drumming. These processes can be articulated through the history of Korean drumming in the tri-state area and the ways in which performance knowledge is transmitted in this genre, which affect how Korean American performers conceptualize their performance activities.

Addressing the transnational and global circulation of taiko, a drumming genre that originated in Japan, Angela Ahlgren (2018) argues that the affirmation of identity through taiko is not a straightforward issue, as taiko is performed not only by Japanese Americans but also by people of various other ethnic heritages. Deborah Wong (2019) shows the complexities and fluidity of Asian Americans’ cultural politics seen through taiko. Similar to their work, the present study is also reflective of the broader Asian American experience. Keith Howard (2015:159) points out that most drummers performing Korean drumming outside Korea are of Korean heritage. This is true of Korean drumming in the tri-state area, where I found only a few non-Korean performers in Korean drumming ensembles. I locate this research in Asian American studies because the performers express themselves not just as Korean Americans but as Asian Americans through their resonating drum sounds. This resonance signals
the presence of groups who may be different from mainstream Americans but are still part of United States. When a specific ethnic origin is invoked in terms of a group of people, it highlights cultural identity as something derived from a fixed ethnicity. Positioned as a study of the Asian American experience, this article addresses how Korean Americans make themselves both visible and heard in their new society through their drumming.

Korean migration history to the United States goes back a little more than 100 years. Previous studies on Korean Americans developed various themes: the early history of Korean American immigrants (Choy, 1979; Patterson, 1988), characteristics of recent immigrants (Yoon, 2004), and Korean small business entities and racial conflicts (Abelmann and Lie, 1995; Park, 1997). As studies on Korean American communities have increased, there has been a growing body of scholarly works on Korean American music cultures since the mid-1980s. Pioneering works were produced in the 1980s on Korean immigrants’ musical activities, particularly in Los Angeles and Hawai’i (Riddle, 1985; Sutton, 1987). Peggy Myo-Yong Choy (1995) went beyond these areas to include the Midwest, New York, and New Jersey. Maria Kongju Seo (2001) introduced remarkable musicians that are relatively unacknowledged in Korea, such as Gregory Pai, Earl Kim, and Donald Sur.

Scholarly attention on Korean drumming has given rise to a number of works on identity construction through musical performance. Among them, Jennifer Bussell (1997) and Donna Lee Kwon (2001) provide meaningful starting points for this article in examining continuous movement between South Korea and the United States. Sung Youn Sonya Gwak (2006, 2008) and Youngmin Yu (2007) delve into the various roles played by p’*ungmul’ in the construction of cultural identity, particularly by looking at p’*ungmul’ as a means of cultural activism. These studies all treat the terms p’*ungmul and samullori as distinct and separate. In this article, I use the term Korean drumming to include both p’*ungmul and samullori. I use these terms in the way the performers use them as illustrations of the different ways they classify performance genres according to their own perspectives.

This research was conducted over a time span of over a decade. For this article, I use ethnographic information collected between 2006 and 2008 for my PhD dissertation and data collected from face-to-face interviews between 2006 and 2008 and email correspondence in 2018 and 2019. I conducted participant observation with Korean drumming practitioners who were in their twenties to early seventies. Some performers first learned Korean drumming while in high school or
university and maintained their involvement in the Korean drumming scene in the tri-state area. A small number of performers were trained in Korean drumming while attending university in South Korea. While the term “migrant” is often applied to the first generation of migrants and “Korean American” to the following generations, I use the terms “Korean American” and “Korean migrant” interchangeably. The majority of the performers I met came to the United States with their family as teenagers. The drumming practitioners are part of the immigrant community in the tri-state area, where various cultural resources are easily accessible, and they consistently struggle with their own positionality in their host society. As noted by Lee (2018), there are a few Korean drumming groups in the United States that are non-Korean affinity groups. However, I mainly focused Korean-American-affiliated groups in the tri-state area. Data collected from interviews with their members are important resources in constructing a history of Korean drumming in this area. Although I refer to performance troupes by their real names in order to historicize Korean drumming in the area, for the drumming practitioners I have mostly used pseudonyms, only using actual names for professional performers with public visibility, such as Kim Duk Soo. This is because many performers in the tri-state area, even those who played leading roles in their groups, have left the Korean drumming music scene for work, study, and other personal reasons in the past decade. Because of the long period of observation, this research was able to trace vital changes in the leading performance troupes, their memberships, and the major events that feature Korean drumming.

Koreans and A New Life in the United States

In the tri-state area, many Korean descendants run businesses such as grocery stores and laundries; the area’s Korean communities also sustain associations and organizations. I especially highlight the large Korean American communities in New York, which were formed much earlier than those in New Jersey and Connecticut. Koreatown in Flushing (Queens) and Korea Way in Manhattan provide good examples of how large Korean migrant communities are structured. While Korea Way has been revitalized since the 2000s, the proportion of Koreans in Flushing’s Koreatown has decreased with an influx of Chinese immigrants. The Korean communities in New York are closely connected with those of New Jersey and Connecticut because of geographical proximity. Although Flushing has the highest in terms of Korean-related material culture,
emerging concentrations of Koreans like those in New Jersey as well as revitalized districts such as Korea Way are important in the development of large and dense Korean American communities in the tri-state area. These districts have become significant performance venues for Korean drumming. For example, Korean drumming groups hold an afterparty for the annual Korean Parade at the entrance of Korea Way, perform Korean traditional rituals around Lunar New Year, and participate in important cultural events in various locations in the tri-state area. Additionally, increasing numbers of cultural events and drumming workshops and classes have been recently apparent in New Jersey and Connecticut. For example, one of the important Korean drumming groups located its office in New Jersey, and Chang U-Chŏl taught Korean drumming at Wesleyan University in Connecticut until 2008, when he handed over the class to Kim Kyŏng-tae, one of the leading drummers among those performers in their twenties and thirties (Chang U-Chŏl, personal communication, July 19, 2008).

There are a number of Korean-language media outlets that provide important services for both new and older immigrants with English-language difficulties. Most cultural events featuring Korean drumming are

Fig. 1. A Korean business complex in Flushing, New York. Photo by the author.
advertised through Korean-language media including daily newspapers and radio and television programs. Internet portals such as HeyKorean also act as sources of information. These portals provide places where Korean drumming clubs, classes, and performance events may be advertised. Commercial-residential centers in the tri-state area support Korean Americans in maintaining their social networks, connecting with other Korean Americans, and retaining Korean cultural practices.

In addition, the Korean Cultural Center (KCC), located at 460 Park Avenue in Manhattan and operated by Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, is active in promoting and supporting traditional Korean performing arts in New York in various ways. For example, it collaborated with the National Gugak Center to host a samullori workshop in New York in 2007. KCC also financially supports Korean drumming in New York, for example by helping purchase instruments for several performance troupes and by sponsoring local practitioners to visit South Korea to study with Korean masters (Chang U-Chŏl, personal communication, July 19, 2008). KCC co-hosts the World Korean Traditional Music Competition annually along with the Traditional Art Society of Korea. The competition aims to generate interest in traditional Korean performing arts among the general public and help Korean American performers find wider popularity in the tri-state area. Aside from traditional performing arts, the KCC maintains a webpage promoting and advertising Korea-related performances, including western classical music performed by Koreans and new works composed by Koreans. This provides a useful means for Korean Americans to obtain information about the latest performance styles and trends popular in Korea. To be sure, KCC’s activities benefit from various degrees of involvement on the part of the Korean government in Korean performing arts, especially traditional genres, in the tri-state area.

**History of Korean Drumming in the Tri-State Area**

*P’ungmul* is a traditional Korean performance genre that was part of life in pre-modern agricultural Korean society. It was performed as part of shamanistic rituals, in agricultural work contexts, and as entertainment at outdoor events; a typical performance might have lasted a few hours. An alternative term for *p’ungmul* is *nongak*—“farmers’ music”—a term that tends to be used among older generations, with the term *p’ungmul* now being in wider use. It is still performed as it was in the past and in new contexts well. While *p’ungmul* encompasses music, dance, and theater,
samullori is a newly invented genre of percussion music that is derived from p’ungmul music and adapted for performance in a concert hall. Samullori is performed on four percussion instruments: changgo (hourglass-shaped drum), puk (barrel-shaped drum), kkwaenggwari (small gong), and ching (large gong). It was first performed in Seoul by Kim Duk Soo and his ensemble in 1978. Much to their surprise, the new genre, dubbed samullori, went on to gain enormous popularity worldwide, and countless samullori ensembles were formed.

Among the terms nongak, p’ungmul, and samullori, performers in the United States are quite deliberate in which they choose to use. This choice signals how particular Korean drumming groups differentiate their activities and identity from those of other such groups. A term may be used as part of the name of a performance group and signals a performance style that is associated with particular ways of learning and teaching the genre. While a performance group illustrates its identity through the term it prefers, each term is also associated with a particular historical phase of Korean drumming in the tri-state area. In this way, the history of Korean drumming in the area is connected through the use of the terms nongak, p’ungmul, and samullori.

It is not easy to trace the history of Korean drumming in the tri-state area as many performance groups have come and gone due to a lack of funding and resources. Despite the difficulties in packaging it as one neat history, it seems clear that it can be divided into four periods or phases: (1) pre-1980; (2) 1980s to 2001; (3) 2001 to 2007; and (4) 2008 to the present. Through these phases can be seen the progression in how groups have identified themselves through the terms they use, and at the same time how the performers view the performance styles associated with these terms in different ways. The phases reflect a shift from nongak to p’ungmul and samullori. Throughout the four phases, drumming troupes have been led by migrants who arrived in the United States as youths and first learned Korean drumming there in their high school or college years. Thus, the language they use at rehearsals is mainly Korean. The first phase saw the foundation of Mi Tongbu Nongakdan (Eastern US Nongak Troupe), one of the first Korean drumming troupes in New York and now the longest running. The troupe was founded in 1976 to perform at a specific event, Independence Day on July 4th. Their debut was successful and brought them unexpected popularity. In 1998, the group changed its name to Pyonghwa Tongil Nongakdan (Peace and Unification Nongak Troupe) in 1998. In spite of the relatively advanced age of the members, this group still actively takes part in various performances and cultural events. The term
Samullori emerged in 1979, only three years after the group’s formation, but the group never adopted it, instead maintaining their identity as a nongak group. This group stands apart in that hardly any group in the tri-state area uses the term nongak. Considering that the founding members are all now over 70 years old, their maintenance of this term suggests that the group emphasizes tradition as central to their identity.

During the second phase, the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of Korean drumming ensembles were founded in the United States. Most of these groups—including some of the most important ones in the country—were formed by people who had participated in the minjung cultural movement in South Korea (Kwon, 2001). This movement occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s and represented a reaffirmation of Korean identity at a time when South Korea was under a political dictatorship. The movement was closely connected to p’ungmul; indeed, the genre became one of its important cultural icons (Lee, 2012). College students learned and performed p’ungmul and traditional mask dances as a way of asserting their political stance and manifesting their Korean identity. Once in the United States, they formed new groups modeled on these activist groups from the minjung movement in South Korea.

In addition to this rise of p’ungmul in the second phase, Kim Duk Soo’s samullori group has made many visits to the United States since the 1980s, many of which were supported by the South Korean government as a way of promoting Korean performing arts abroad. With samullori’s profile increasing around the world, the group has been well received in the United States. However, it is interesting to note that while samullori stimulated the establishment of folk performing genres in cultural institutions and greatly influenced Korean drumming performance styles around the world, the drumming groups in the tri-state area during the second phase were predominantly associated with the minjung cultural movement and its association with p’ungmul. Among regional p’ungmul styles, Imshil Pilbong (P’ilbong) has been greatly influential upon Korean drumming performers in the area. Pilbong p’ungmul was designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset (No. 11-5) in South Korea in 1988 (Kwon, 2005). The connection between the minjung movement and Pilbong p’ungmul was made when the former director of the New York P’ungmul Pojónhoe (P’ilbong P’ungmul Preservation Society in New York) first invited Pilbong performers to New York in 1999 (Kwon, 2001). Since then, Pilbong p’ungmul teachers have visited New York a number of times to provide masterclasses and workshops. Due to the learning experiences with these teachers, a few groups in the tri-state area show a strong attachment to the
P’ilbong style. Among these groups was Hanool, a performance troupe founded in 1997 (Park So-jŏng, personal communication, October 6, 2006). Hanool was affiliated with the organization Service and Education for Korean Americans (SEKA). SEKA emphasized p’ungmul as a politicized activity, as seen in the minjung cultural movement, and Hanool participated in political protests and campaigns. Another group, DDKY (Dŏng Dŏng Kung Yi, named after a samulnori rhythmic pattern), was created in 1996 as a performance troupe out of the State University of New York, Stony Brook. This group was also influenced by the minjung cultural movement in the first phase of Korean drumming in the tri-state area (Kim Kyŏng-t’ae, personal communication, December 23, 2006). The members of Hanool and DDKY, and several other performers who were with college groups involved in Korean drumming in this period, are still recognized as important figures in Korean drumming in the area.

Chang U-Chŏl’s New York P’ungmul Troupe (New York Pungmul-dan) presents a somewhat different case. Chang founded the group in 1989, and it included a few American practitioners (Chang U-Chŏl, personal communication, July 19, 2008). The troupe emphasized virtuosity and flamboyant performance skills and was not involved in political activities. Chang maintained connections with other major Korean drumming groups in the area and eventually played a major role in the formation of New York T’onghap P’ungmuldan (United P’ungmul Troupe of New York), as I detail in the section on the fourth historical phase.

In the third phase, 2001–2007, the connections between groups in the eastern and western United States weakened. During the second phase, camps and workshops had been organized in which Korean drumming troupes from different states could get together and exchange their knowledge on p’ungmul (Kim Kyŏng-t’ae, personal communication, December 23, 2006). However, after the p’ungmul camp in 2001 hosted by Hanool in New York, there were no further active exchanges and connections between p’ungmul groups in different states. This led to the development of different performance styles in different areas. More importantly, the third phase saw a lessening of the influence of the minjung cultural movement on the younger generation of Korean Americans and the emergence of a much greater diversity of Korean drumming troupes. Yi Ch’an-min (personal communication, October 6, 2007) affirmed that many younger practitioners do not want to perform p’ungmul as a political activity. Rather, p’ungmul groups have found their own ways to keep their performances separate from politics and activism. Although the word p’ungmul is retained in troupe names, they perform an expanded range of...
music that also includes *sannilori* repertoire. The leaders of several of the troupes in the tri-state area formed the Korean Cultural Outreach Network (KCON) in 2002. Most of the drumming troupes, particularly college groups, in the tri-state area affiliated themselves with KCON. KCON’s aim is to support Korean drumming ensembles. At the time KCON offered various leadership and membership training sessions and hosted *p’ungmul* camps. The purpose of these was to provide opportunities for performers from different groups to build friendships while increasing their knowledge of traditional Korean performing arts. KCON also created its own webpage, www.poongmul.com (no longer available), to provide historical and other information about traditional Korean performing arts. While KCON does not organize public cultural events, the association still organizes a *p’ungmul* group to participate in New York City’s annual Korean Parade.

The fourth phase, 2008 to the present, has seen three important developments. One is that in 2008, KCON, Pyŏngwha T’ongil Nongakdan, and New York P’ungmuldan come together to create New York T’onghap P’ungmuldan (Yim Sang-hun, personal communication, July 18, 2018). New York T’onghap P’ungmuldan thus became the largest *p’ungmul*

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*Fig. 2. P’ungmul parade led by KCON in New York, 2006. Photo by the author.*
organization in the eastern United States. Second, Hanool formally disassociated itself from its sociopolitical affiliations in 2007, with its members agreeing to keep their performance troupe apart from any political issues and activities. Though they recognized that participants in the *minjung* cultural movement had been integral in the formation of Hanool and in maintaining its relatively stable status, they now favored *p’ungmul* purely as a means of artistic expression rather than of engagement with political issues. Around 2012, many members, including the leader, Park So-jông, left the group to study, get married, or relocate, and the group disbanded (Yim Sang-hun, personal communication, July 18, 2018).

Third, the New York Korean Traditional Marching Band (NYKTMB) was founded in 2008. It has since been an important part of traditional Korean musicscapes in the tri-state area. NYKTMB hosts annual workshops and summer camps in various kinds of Korean drumming, mainly for performers in the tri-state area. It has participated in performances alongside professional performers from South Korea, including Kim Duk Soo, and from other areas for various occasions, such as the New York Korean Music Festival. For example, Kong Sŏng-min, a professional performer who resides in Maryland, is often invited to perform with NYKTMB (Kong Sŏng-min, personal communication, May 21, 2019). The troupe also recruited a Hanool performer when the group folded in 2012. NYKTMB incorporates *samulnor* into its performances, and as the group has high visibility in the tri-state area’s performing arts scene, this has had the effect of increasing the influence of *samulnor* on Korean drumming in the area.

In this period a few leading troupes, including Hanool, were dissolved. While some groups still exist, they do not hold rehearsals or performances on a regular basis. For example, KCON no longer hosts its annual *p’ungmul* camp and only participates in the Korean Parade for the Korean Festival every October (Yim Sang-hun, personal communication, July 18, 2018). New York T’onghap P’ungmuldan has become inactive, and collaborative performances and events among the community are now rare. There is no specific date as to when the organization ceased its activities. Some practitioners from disbanded groups found new groups to perform with.

The fourth phase illustrates two things. First, as major figures left the scene, attempts at creating different regional performance styles and new repertoire have waned. Second, Korean American players’ shift away from political interests to focus solely on musical interests has been maintained since the third phase. This dissociation of performance activities from political activity and the *minjung* movement has recontextualized these
activities as something that is different from the homeland. While there are social-political organizations that have their own drumming groups, the majority of the groups I met do not collaborate with them. The increased emphasis on musical considerations is connected to how Korean drumming is transmitted, and more importantly, the way it is performed and transmitted reflects changing ideas about authenticity and innovation.

In the next section, I elaborate on how drumming practitioners teach and learn Korean drumming. The ways that drummers in the tri-state area pass on knowledge are linked with the characteristics of large Korean immigrant communities in the age of the Internet.

From Oral to Digital Heritage: Transmission Modes and Their Influence on Ideas of Authenticity and Innovation

In the contemporary world, music that is orally transmitted faces change in how it is learned and taught. Scores, notations, audiovisual recordings, and YouTube are all now useful resources for budding performers. The pedagogical methods for music that is traditionally orally transmitted have extended to include written means and digital resources in the United States (Wong, 2005, 2019; Zheng, 2010; Ahlgren, 2018). Various transmission modes enable Korean drumming to be widely disseminated outside South Korea (Howard, 2015; Lee, 2018). As demonstrated by Yano and Lau (2018), Korean American drummers’ endeavors to learn drumming are structured through a continuous movement of people, resources, recordings, and files between the United States and South Korea. This back-and-forth results in drumming sounds and sonic events that are not merely a product but rather a process that reflects fluid identity formation. In the United States, senior troupe members take charge of teaching new members, deploying a variety of methods in doing so. Korean Americans’ ideas about authenticity and innovation are signified and implied in the transmission and learning methods they prefer. Authenticity and innovation are not contradictory but rather co-exist in mutual support.

One means of transmitting Korean drumming knowledge is through karakbo, which literally means a notation of rhythmic patterns. The term is used to refer to the written form of a set of mnemonic rhythm syllables used to represent instrumental sounds. Many Korean American drumming ensembles use karakbo for training and at rehearsals. Hanool distributed karakbo transcriptions to newly joined members and posted them on an online bulletin board. Ensembles that do not provide karakbo printouts
write rhythm syllables on a board at their rehearsals and/or allow members to write them down on paper. *Karakbo* does not convey any actual sounds, so audiovisual recordings of performances are used to capture sounds and visuals in performance. Members of KCON made a number of recordings of performances: various *samullori* performances, the P'ilbong *p'ungmul* performance for the 55th anniversary of Korean Independence Day, Kim Duk Soo’s *samullori* troupe, and Seoul P’ungmuldan, to name a few. I found that enthusiastic performers kept VHS cassettes, DVDs, and CDs of Korean professional performers obtained from Korea or from music shops in the United States.

More recently, audio and video files found on the Internet, such as YouTube videos, have also been useful resources that Korean American performers may refer to when they want to extend their repertoires or acquire new stage design ideas or get new ideas for arrangements or stage design. A wide variety of videos can be found on blogs, social media networks, and online communities. At the P'ilbong *p'ungmul* workshop held in New York in 2008, which I attended, Yang Chin-hwan strongly encouraged attendees to search for videos of his performance through Daum, a South Korean web portal. In recent years, YouTube has been very influential as a vehicle for sharing audiovisual files with people around the world (Kang Min-u, personal communication, July 22, 2008). Hanool posted video clips of some of its *p'ungmul* and *samullori* performances. Most were of the troupe’s P'ilbong *p'ungmul* performances, including at the P'ilbong P’ungmul Festival in 2005 and the Full Moon Festival in 2003. The group also posted a video recording of a *p’an’gut* (entertainment-focused *p'ungmul* performance) given by a P’ilbong performer, Yang Chin-sung.

The recordings are used as “models” for new musical materials and also become important aids for “correction and improvement” and “points of reference” during rehearsals (Zheng, 2010:213). Likewise, recordings shared among Korean American performers are helpful in learning a performance style. They are also useful for troupes to cultivate new skills, such as the use of space and body movements. Drummers can imitate professional performers’ gestures, body movements, and even facial expressions that cannot be learned from the recitation of mnemonic syllables or paper notation. Thus, performers in the tri-state area can learn up-to-date performance styles from South Korea as long as they have access to notation transcripts, CD/DVD recordings, and/or audiovisual files. Occasional opportunities to learn Korean drumming with professional teachers face-to-face have influenced ideas about authenticity and innovation. Korean American performers’ experiences studying with
such professionals visiting from South Korea familiarize them with what they view as authentic performance styles. This “nostalgia for authenticity” (Wong, 2019:108) leads drummers in the tri-state area to participate enthusiastically in sessions with Korean masters that are offered from time to time.

Performers in this area enjoy far more opportunity to participate in masterclasses and workshops with Korean professional performers than do those in other Korean migrant communities, because such workshops tend to be held in large cities. In addition to attending such workshops in the United States, Korean American performers visit South Korea to study with Korean masters there. Performers can acquire proficiency in a range of regional styles on these trips. Some attend camps or workshops held at chŏnsugwan (intensive training centers) in rural areas; others take lessons at various institutes. For example, Kang Min-u first learned Korean drumming when he was a freshman at Syracuse University. He said that during his college years he visited South Korea every summer break, each time studying drumming with masters and acquiring new skills. A few performance troupes have visited South Korea together as a group (Kang Min-u, personal communication, July 22, 2008). Members of Shimtah, a college troupe from Cornell University, visited the Piilbong Intensive Training Center multiple times over many consecutive years. Its leaders still encourage their members to participate in intensive camps if they go to South Korea during their summer or winter break (Lee Chi-min, personal communication, May 21, 2019).

Those who have frequently participated in masterclasses and workshops with Korean professional performers may then serve as teachers in a group. After consecutive years of learning with Korean masters in South Korea, Kang began to teach sangmo (a dance performed wearing a hat with a long ribbon to drum and percussion accompaniment). His intensive training in Korea not only has enlarged his own repertoire but also has attracted many new sangmo practitioners learning from him in the tri-state area. The p’ungmul camp in May 2008, which I attended, accommodated its highest number of sangmo practitioners yet. This led to the largest ever group of sangmo performers in the front line for the Korean Parade in October 2008. Training with Korean professionals becomes a means of distinguishing one group or performer from another, with those with long and intensive experience with Korean masters linking their practice with notions of authenticity or tradition.

Park So-jŏng and Yi Ch’an-min, renowned as two of the best changgo players in the tri-state area, are often invited to give solo performances at
cultural events for their incomparable skills. Their fellow performers learn on the experience they have acquired studying with Korean masters. This legitimates their performance styles as traditional and authentic. At the same time, their extensive knowledge of performance styles and techniques becomes a source of creativity as it affords them space to adapt what they have learned. Performers like Park and Yi encourage their fellow performers and students to make alterations to the rhythmic patterns they practice. Yi explained:

When I teach new rhythmic patterns to college groups, I recommend that they change the patterns according to the characteristics and atmosphere of their groups; a few years later, I notice that each group presents their rhythmic patterns slightly differently and their pieces have a different feel, even though I have taught them the same thing. (Yi Ch’an-min, personal communication, October 6, 2007)

Students are asked to memorize the given rhythmic patterns first, and are told that only once they have mastered them should they make changes to them; indeed, they are encouraged to do so, as well as add their own color. Korean drumming practitioners in the tri-state area emphasize that...
traditional cultural practices are always in a process of change. For them, tradition is not something fixed but rather something that has been subject to a process of gradual change over a long period. While performers conceive of tradition as something that can be modified and changed, these drummers hold a variety of views on samullori. On the one hand, some Korean American performers do not consider samullori as part of tradition. A similar view is also held in South Korea. As stated earlier, samullori was invented in 1978. Although a growing body of practitioners see samullori and p’ungmul as “interchangeable designations” and college drumming practitioners have blended their rhythms and approaches “into something not entirely one or the other” (Hesselink, 2004:432), samullori tends to be viewed as a non-traditional, invented, and innovative genre, while p’ungmul is associated with tradition and continuity (Hesselink, 2004; Howard, 2015). Most practitioners who first learned Korean drumming from teachers who had been strongly influenced by p’ungmul’s political engagement or by the P’ilbong p’ungmul practice prefer to use the term p’ungmul over samullori when they refer to the genre they perform and to introduce their performance troupe as a p’ungmul troupe. The performers view samullori as “not the authentic form”; as Park said: “Samullori does not have a long history and does not reflect the ideas and spirit of the past due to its exclusive emphasis on the musical aspects of the performance” (Park, personal communication, October 6, 2006). Other performers, on the other hand, label their drumming as samullori or use p’ungmul as an inclusive term. Those practitioners emphasize performance skills and virtuosity requiring hard training. Kong Sŏng-min, who studied samullori with Kim Duk Soo in South Korea, described his performance style as samullori (Kong, personal communication, July 9, 2008; May 20, 2019); Chang focused on highly developed performance techniques, using p’ungmul as inclusive term (Chang, personal communication, July 19, 2008). Paradoxically, most drumming troupes in the tri-state area perform samullori pieces while emphasizing the term p’ungmul to describe their practice. Because samullori is dramatic and vigorous, it is an audience-pleaser and thus considered essential to their repertoire. As Kim Kyŏng-t’ae (personal communication, December 23, 2006) explained, pieces from samullori are employed to generate “instant reactions from the audience.” This shows that the practitioners strategically present a drumming sound they think the audience will prefer to hear, which is not necessarily what they would prefer to play themselves. More importantly, the way Korean drumming is transmitted and ideas of traditional and authentic are constructed demonstrate complicated processes of cultural identity formation.
Performing, Transcending, and Moving between Authenticity and Innovation

Korean drumming groups are invited to perform for cultural occasions as well as organizing and hosting special events themselves. Where, when, why, how, and for whom they perform shows that the drumming practitioners in the tri-state area oscillate within a dichotomy of authentic versus innovative. In this section, I first give examples of different cultural events where these ideas have been strategically counterposed. I elaborate on costumes and instrumentation to show how Korean American performers constitute their performance practices according to their condition as migrants. Lastly, I show how Korean drumming has changed over the past decade.

In 2006, I attended two cultural events: the Christmas P’ungmul Party and the Korean Festival. These showed contrasting approaches in their curation of performance repertoire. Both events featured the same drumming groups and their representative figures. It is not easy to find an example of remarkably different performance styles presented by the same performers in the same year. These two events had different performance contexts, which raise specific questions: For whom were they performing? How did they tailor their performances? These questions were critical to the shape and form each of these performances took.

Korean drumming performances at the Korean Festival took place in two contexts: P’ungmul groups as part of the Korean parade and a P’ungmul parade afterparty. These were both public events. On Saturday morning, October 7, 2006, in the middle of the street on Broadway in Manhattan, a percussive sound was getting louder and louder. A long parade line including Korean drumming and percussion ensembles was approaching Korea Way. The ensembles played while marching and making brief stops along Broadway. When the parade stopped, partially closed traffic was allowed to pass, and when it started up again the street was re-closed. The parade passed through Broadway and the ensembles finished playing upon arriving at 23rd Street. That day Broadway was full of tourists and passersby wearing backpacks, holding cameras, and taking pictures of the parade and the drumming groups. The P’ungmul parade afterparty was held after lunch in front of a branch of a Korean bank, Woori Bank, located at the entrance to Korea Way. There are always many passersby in the area and that day was no exception. For this event, different Korean drumming groups performed in turns. There was also a collaborative piece where they all performed together. Both samulnori and P’ungmul pieces were performed,
both designed to create a fast-paced, high-energy, dramatic atmosphere. The performances were given on the street and there was no fixed audience—anyone passing by could stop to see what was going on. Thus, for the performers it was necessary to quickly draw in their audience. *Samullori* pieces in particular are very effective in capturing the attention of an anonymous audience in such a context, as they have fast rhythmic patterns that demand virtuosic technique and feature dramatic physical movements, particularly hand and head movements. Examples of *samullori* were thus selected for this event because of their ability to elicit instant reactions from a transitory audience. Similarly, Yi Ch’an-min’s solo performance featured splendid *changgo* rhythmic patterns and spectacular and acrobatic body movements, accentuated by his wearing *sangmo*. Not just sonic but also visual features were thus important components in staging Korean drumming for the *p’ungmul* afterparty.

While the Korean Festival aimed to present and represent traditional Korean cultural practices for an anonymous audience as a way of making the voices of Korean/Asian Americans heard, the Christmas *P’ungmul* Party, a private event oriented towards the Korean American community, revolved around the enjoyment of being together and building friendships. It was held on December 22, 2006, at the Friends of Grace Seniors Community Center in New Jersey. Before the performance the attendees enjoyed dinner, including *kimbab* (rice rolled in dried laver seaweed), *chapch’e* (Korean chop suey), and other dishes commonly served at Korean feasts. There were also various kinds of drinks and liquor, including some imported from Korea. A few colorful balloons hung on the wall, along with a large flag with an image of a *tokkaebi* (Korean goblin) on a white background. At this event, the attendees were free of the burden of having to present traditional Korean cultural practices to the general public, and the performers were able to play innovative and experimental pieces. The Korean drumming performances at the Christmas *P’ungmul* Party were thus different from those seen at other Korean events. The party had a two-hour program—about twice as long as is typical of events featuring Korea drumming—and the performances were comparatively long too, with each piece lasting approximately 20 minutes. Performers also approached the pieces innovatively. They were able to perform pieces that they would not do for public events due to their length and the format. For example, they performed *pinari*, a style in-between song and speech originally used to express a wish, chase bad spirits away, and bring good fortune. The fact that it features text in Korean is a barrier to its performance for general American audiences. Along with Korean language
proficiency, “cultural fluency” is also required for the performance of* pinari* as well as for audiences to appreciate it, and thus it is often left out of concert programs in the United States (Lee, 2018:123). For the Christmas party, there was no language barrier. Because* pinari*’s long passages are not easy to memorize, in the past performers had played the instruments along with professional CD recordings of the text played over speakers. For this event they also performed the text and thus did not need the aid of audio recordings. They also played a few newly rearranged pieces they had not previously performed; the composition of the audience enabled such experimentation in regards to performance duration and repertoire selection. Approximately, 50 people attended the Christmas P’ungmul Party and the main language in use was Korean. The majority of the audience and performers were KCON members or their friends, and as people mostly knew each other well, they were open to appreciating these rearrangements of pieces. Thus, this opened the door to more flexibility. The Christmas P’ungmul Party demonstrated that different audiences and purposes of events resulted in completely different performance formats.

Although the Christmas P’ungmul Party is no longer held, the Korean parade and afterparty continue to take place every year. The parade and its afterparty demonstrate how Korean drumming has changed in the past ten years. The most visible change is seen in troupe membership. Howard (2015) notes that in comparison with* taiko*, performed by people from a variety of ethnic groups,* samullori* is performed largely by Korean migrants, and groups have a frequent turnover of membership, as most were originally college groups. Two leading members provide their views on this change:

I think they all got busy with their own lives, jobs, and families. But I also observed that they never really improved or enhanced their skills. By doing this, I believe that they got bored of it and more and more uninterested. (Kong Sŏng-min, personal communication, May 21, 2019)

I guess that because many amateur Korean drumming groups have dissolved, the general public’s interest in Korean drumming has waned. (Yim Sang-hun, personal communication, July 18, 2018)

I posit that the change in membership has been an important aspect of the area’s Korean drumming history and demonstrates why for the past decade instrumentation and costumes have been static. Instrumentation and costumes used for Korean drumming act as signposts for how migrant performers make adjustments according to the conditions in the host
country. Those used for Korean drumming in the tri-state area are generally those typical of samullori, which involves four particular instruments and the specific costume that has been codified for samullori performances. The majority of the groups wear white blouses and trousers and black vests with three-colored sashes over the shoulder and around the waist. This style of costume was introduced by Kim Duk Soo’s samullori group. Unlike traditional p’ungmul performances in Korea, performances in the tri-state area usually do not feature wind instruments. As it is not easy to play the t’aep’yŏngso (a double-reed wind instrument, also called hoyŏk) and it is difficult to find instructors in the United States, very few practitioners know how to play it, and only groups composed of senior performers, like Pyŏngwa T’ongil Nongakdan, include it in their ensemble. This means that most groups in the tri-state area who prefer the term p’ungmul over samullori do not completely follow p’ungmul instrumentation, instead focusing only on the four percussion instruments. In this sense, a t’aep’yŏngso class offered at the Pilbong workshop in New York in 2008 was an unusual opportunity; still, the t’aep’yŏngso is almost never seen in performances by Korean drumming groups in the area.

Although there has been little change in instrumentation and costumes over the past ten years, there has been a major change in performance styles. Samullori now dominates Korean drumming scenes. Previously there were a few different regional styles, with Pilbong in particular influential in the earlier historical phase. Now this style is rarely found. Along with Hanool, now disbanded, the group Shimtah was known for its very close connection with Pilbong, but even for this group the influence of Pilbong on its performance style has now declined. Lee, one of the leaders of Shimtah, says:

I think we lost the regional characteristics of Pilbong p’ungmul. ( . . . ) Aside from p’an’gut and the standing changgo dance, we are teaching samullori, which brought together different rhythmic patterns from various regions. Our performance style is somewhere in between y’ongnam [an eastern Korean regional style] and honam chwado [a western Korean regional style], but it is actually pretty vague. (Lee Chi-min, personal communication, May 16, 2019)

Thus, the influence of the samullori repertoire has become much stronger while the Pilbong style is now rarely performed. A few performers remain who have had opportunities to learn with Pilbong masters, but they currently perform samullori pieces. I assume this is for several reasons. Hanool no longer exists, and since its dissolution no renowned Pilbong master has visited. However, Kim Duk Soo, the
samullori master, has continuously given performance tours and collaborated with Korean American performers. While samullori’s popularity is maintained due to its master visiting often, a regional p’ungmul style like P’ilbong could not hope for the same. Also, NYKTMB and a few of the current leaders of Korean drumming groups, including Kong, are oriented toward samullori. When Yim, who was strongly influenced by P’ilbong, joined NYKTMB, he was required to study samullori performance styles intensively (Yim Sang-hun, personal communication, July 18, 2018). As seen in the second historical phase, it is the leaders in the drumming scene that determine the preferred performance styles in the tri-state area, and currently the scene is dominated by performers trained in samullori.

Unlike the hybridity and innovation in taiko performance in the United States (see Ahlgren, 2018; Wong, 2019) or the collaboration between Kim Duk Soo’s group and the jazz ensemble Red Sun (Hesselink, 2012), there are few examples of new adaptations of Korean drumming developing in the tri-state area. One of the rare examples of Korean drumming performers extending into other musical genres, such as reggae, was Hanool’s one-off participation in a recording with roots fusion group Brown Rice Family. I met a member of Brown Rice Family—who later married Park, a Hanool leader—at a membership training organized and held by Hanool in 2007, and he introduced me to his songs. Although Korean drumming in the tri-state area has not evolved significantly in terms of stylistic modifications or moves toward hybridity, what groups are doing is engaging in a process of cultural identity construction. Their history and how they transmit drumming knowledge are constituted as a quest for authenticity and innovation. In deploying what is available to them, the drumming groups have selected what they find suitable to them. Defining what is traditional and what is modern is inherent in how the drumming groups present themselves, to whom, and for what purposes. What is considered innovative and what is considered hybrid is not inherent in performance style. The drumming’s resonance is a consolidation of the multiple trajectories, movements, and routes between South Korea and the United States, and the tri-state area in particular.

Epilogue

Since I first contacted Korean American performers in the tri-state area over a decade ago, the Korean drumming scenes there have changed a lot.
Some performers have left the scene; others have continued to build their performance careers and have become important figures in the scene. Performance troupes see frequent changes in membership, and many groups seem to have a life span of one or two decades. Some would argue that it is not possible to write a history of Korean drumming in this area with things changing so quickly. However, even a tiny piece of Korean American performance activity is an integral part of the story, and all these small parts together constitute an entire history that continues into the present. No matter how long performers remain engaged in Korean drumming in the tri-state area or for how long performance troupes exist, all the events and figures involved play an important role in making this history. Indeed, partiality and fragility are characteristic of what history is.

Despite the discontinuities in the history of Korean drumming in the tri-state area, how Korean drumming is performed and staged there is rooted in continuous movement between South Korea and Korean American communities in the tri-state area and in the United States more broadly. Korean American performers are not completely uprooted or isolated from South Korea. Throughout this study, I have demonstrated that due to technological developments in communication and transportation, migrants can easily obtain knowledge and information about their country of origin. This has greatly influenced Korean drumming in the area. It has been continuously structured, constructed, and shaped by close cultural and political relations between the homeland and the host society, by the cultural institutions, cultural policies, and ideologies of contemporary South Korea, and by the various migrant conditions in the host society that translate into insufficient resources to transmit Korean drumming. In other words, the continuous exchange between South Korea and the United States contributes to the construction of Korean drumming in the United States. This study has revealed that looking at transnational connections between the homeland and the host society is important for understanding immigrants’ cultural practices.

Korean American drummers’ performance styles show that they strategically move between ideas about tradition and modernity, and between authenticity and innovation. These dichotomies, which are often viewed as mutually exclusive concepts, are in fact constant flux. As such, cultural identity, manifested through Korean drumming, is not fixed. Rather, it is in a continuous process of strategic recreation, reconstruction, negotiation, and reconfiguration. Korean Americans will continue to express their being and becomingness through their loud and expressive Korean drumming sounds.
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