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# *Pungmul*, Politics, and Protest

## – Drumming During South Korea’s Democratization Movement –

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### I. Introduction

On August 22, 1987, during the height of the democratization movement in South Korea, a young laborer was struck and killed by an exploding tear gas canister used by riot police to quell a massive demonstration. 21-year old Seok-kyu Lee was just one of 2000 employees at the Daewoo Shipbuilding Company on Geoje Island who participated in a protest demanding labor reforms.<sup>2)</sup> Lee’s tragic death sparked a national mourning, and soon led to demonstrations throughout the country. A few days later, in northern Seoul, over 3000 laborers and students gathered to protest the wrongful death while chanting “destroy the military dictatorship that tramples on workers.”<sup>3)</sup> And a memorial service and demonstration for the fallen laborer was organized on Geoje Island as well as on August 26. Video footage archived by the Munhwa Broadcasting Company (MBC) documented some of the salient moments of this large-scale event, including a funerary procession for Lee. At the head of the procession were four young adults clad in white attire, playing Korean drums and gongs.<sup>4)</sup> The

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2) Mal, “Yi Seok-Kyu Yŏlsa Samangseo Janrye Kkaji [Martyr Lee Seok-kyu, From his Death to the Funeral Ceremony] *Mal*, Vol. 13 (1987) 66쪽.

3) Spencer Sherman, “Korean Workers Take Control of Factory,” United Press International, August 23, 1987, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.

4) “1987nyon, 7.8.9 Nodongja Taetujaeng - Yi Seok-kyu Chumosik” [1987 Laborers’ Struggle The Memorial Ritual for Lee Seok-kyu] VHS. MBC Video, 1987.

musicians played solemnly and with a touch of awkwardness, almost as if they were a bit overwhelmed by the entire event. Their position at the head of the line was significant as they led, in ways both musical and ritual, the hundreds of laborers who gathered together to memorialize their fallen coworker.

What might rustic drums and gongs have to do with labor protests or demonstrations against a dictatorial government in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea? And how did the sounds of *pungmul*, a percussion genre associated with rural peasants and pre-modern Korea, become a sonic marker of dissent during the 1980s in South Korea? These questions, as I've discovered during the course of this research project, are not so easily answered. While studies of the "resistance theater" (or *madanggeuk*) genres and protest songs have added an important dimension to the scholarship on the South Korean democratization period, the aspect of *pungmul* performance has been overlooked in historical studies of this period.<sup>5)</sup> Why might this be the case? On one hand, music accompanied by text is an artifact, an evidentiary piece that is open to interpretation. Music without text or notation, however, is less easily sourced and explained, and therefore an elusive area of inquiry for many scholars of historical research.

I begin this paper by showing the video footage of Seok-kyu Lee's memorial service to direct your attention to the unmistakable presence (both sonic and visual) of percussion music at this event. This is just one example of many that I found in my survey of archival video footage —where drumming accompanied scenes of protest or memorial demonstrations. In this paper, I explore how political meaning was ascribed to the percussive sounds of *pungmul* in a number of ways. Given that there were many musical genres (both Korean and foreign) that could have been selected as anthems of resistance in these kinds of protests, I argue that it was precisely the multiple meanings ascribed to the text-less *pungmul* genre that made it an ideal mode to articulate dissent. And more broadly, I also aim to demonstrate that an ethnomusicological analytical

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5) See Namhee Lee and Yi Yeongmi.

approach can yield important new insights into the historical research on South Korea's democratization period.

## II. Terminology

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify some terms for discussion. In this paper, I use the word *pungmul* to refer to two things: 1) the genre of percussion music and dance traditionally performed by farmers in Korea's agrarian society and 2) based on the former definition, the music and instruments picked up for use by university students (and also, laborers) during South Korea's democratization movement. I will forgo a basic introduction to the *pungmul* genre and instruments in deference to the illustrious gathering of senior Korean music specialists seated here before me. Instead, I will draw your attention to the well-known fact that the sounds of the four percussion instruments (*janggu*, *buk*, *jing*, and *kkwaenggwari*) played together that have audible resonances that carry over long distances. In short, the music played on these four instruments is loud, and it is this clamorous sound effect that became one source of appeal for the university students mentioned previously.

## III. Context

During the military regimes of Park Chung Hee (1961~1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1980~1988), a tremendous welling of dissident acts of protest and violence organized primarily by university students occurred. It was during the second half of the Park regime (1970s) that a counterculture of opposition to the state began to emerge.<sup>6)</sup> In response to Park's policies such as the Yusin constitution (that essentially declared himself president for life) and strict military repression, university students employed various tactics in their acts of opposition, from

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6) Carter J. Eckert et al, *Korea Old and New - A History* (Seoul : Ilchokak, 1990), p. 368.

organizing various campus clubs that were hubs for political activity to staging subversive plays and demonstrations.

Following the aftermath of the Kwangju Uprising (May 1980), South Korean university students took their protests to heightened levels of organization, amplitude, and resistance during the 1980s. Student-led movements began to forge strong alliances with labor unions and other sectors of Korean society. By the summer of 1987, massive street demonstrations and fierce opposition against the Chun Doo Hwan regime culminated in a deafening dissonance that ultimately led to the first democratic elections at the close of 1987 – several months before South Korea hosted the 1988 Summer Olympics. While demonstrations were to continue throughout the end of the 1980s, 1987 in particular, marked a significant year in the history of resistance movements in Korea.

#### IV. Politicizing *Pungmul*

In a section I call “politicizing *pungmul*” I now turn to one of the ways in which political meaning was given to this form of drumming. The concept known as “*minjung*” is a formative part of this discussion, and the student movements of the 1970s and 1980s were inextricably linked with the *minjung* idea. Commonly rendered in English as “the masses,” *minjung* is a flexible concept that can connote a range of meanings contingent upon its respective interpretive framework. In the words of scholar Nancy Abelmann, the trope of *minjung* served as “both a political prism and the regnant narrative of dissent.”<sup>7)</sup> Although *minjung* existed as a term of discourse since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was during the 1970s and 1980s that the term acquired politicized meanings and entered into contemporary parlance and praxis.

In their studies on Korean social movements, Abelmann and Namhee Lee both speak to how reworked conceptualizations of *minjung* invoked memories,

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7) Nancy Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California press, 1996) p. 7.

histories, and historiographies. Various resistance movements throughout Korean history, for instance, were reexamined and defined as pivotal moments by *minjung* adherents in re-inscribed historiographies. With memories of the distant past applied onto the alternative narratives of dissent, new protagonists emerged in the drama – the downtrodden masses of Korea’s fraught history.<sup>8)</sup> In the new narratives, students imagined the oppressed as the “subjects of history” who were situated in opposition to various oppressors. And in the new narratives, students themselves took on the role of the oppressed. This was both a discursive and a performative strategy.

As a conceptual tool, *minjung* also served as a unifying force. Abelmann states that “in the South Korean community of dissent, memory was imagined as a personal resource or collective repository that could mobilize people.”<sup>9)</sup> The notion of the historicized *minjung* or “common people” was an effective galvanizing mechanism in the student movements of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>10)</sup>

## V. Performing Minjung – Invoke the Folk

One way of enabling the minjung ethos was to perform it. This was done by embracing the musical traditions of the “common people” of Korean history. The “folk,” in particular had a cachet in what has been called the “*minjung* cultural movement.” By reviving folk traditions that were associated with the peasants and the farmers, Korean students invoked history and in some instances, reenacted it in staged performances (e.g. *madanggeuk*). *Pungmul* was one of the traditions that students began to think of as emblematic of the “folk.”<sup>11)</sup> As the representative musical genre of the farmers, *pungmul* aligned well with the protagonists in

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8) Kenneth Wells, “The Cultural Construction of History,” in *South Korea’s Minjung Movement*, Kenneth Wells, ed., (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 1995) p. 12.

9) Abelmann, p. 21.

10) Namhee Lee accurately notes that this phenomenon is not uncommon in other social movements throughout history (e.g. the French Revolution and the notion of “le people”).

11) Namhee Lee, 2003:563.

their *minjung* historiography. When performed, *pungmul* became a manifestation of the communal spirit that once characterized traditional Korean lifestyles.<sup>12)</sup>

In the minds of the university students who held a romanticized view of folk culture, *pungmul* represented and fulfilled the ethos of the farmers and their communal lifestyle. The concepts of *ture* (collective labor unit) and *gongdongchae* (community), much like the trope of *minjung*, became attractive ones for students to ascribe meaning to in their search for authentic symbols from folk culture. Student groups began to give themselves names such as *Ture* (“Collective Labor Unit”) and *Norimaul* (“Village Play”), and also began to adopt the traditional white dress of the farmers.

Scholar Heui-wan Chae surveyed several written accounts by students who were involved with the minjung cultural movement during the 1970s. One student’s entry is telling:

By playing *pungmul* and learning the movements and the rhythms of our nation, our people, and our farmers, we become them. Or rather, we find ourselves. Through the blood of our ancestors embodied within us, natural body movements and instinctive rhythms are expressed. It is most natural, and it must be so because it is not artificial, not foreign, but our own beats and our own drumming (Ewha Womens’ University Folk Festival, May 1976).<sup>13)</sup>

Another student in the Seoul National University Agricultural College *pungmul* group expressed the need to develop “historical consciousness to properly understand and feel the elements that existed in the lives of our ancestors.”<sup>14)</sup> The playing of *pungmul* thus became a means of activating this connection. The unattributed voices in Chae’s transcripts tell of the sentiments that *pungmul* aroused, ranging from the emotional and filial to the more political.

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12) Haetsal, “Olbareun Norimunhwau Geonseoleul Wihayeo [Understanding “Nori” Culture],” *Haetsal* Vol. 9 (1989) p. 91.

13) Hui-wan Chae, “70nyeondae ui munhwa undong” in *Munhwa Wa Tongchi* (Seoul : Min-jung Sa, 1982), p. 173.

14) Chae, p. 181.

One challenge presented itself in this strategy to “invoke the folk,” however. Before the students could connect with the “masses” and their music, the students had to first learn the basic rhythms and playing styles of *pungmul*. As many university students were the children of Seoul’s well-to-do, drumming associated with Korea’s rural past was certainly was not a tradition that they nor their parents were familiar with.<sup>15)</sup> Thus, folklore research clubs developed on university campuses during the 1970s and served as important sites for research, learning, and transmission.<sup>16)</sup> Some of the clubs (*dongari*) also periodically organized excursions to the countryside. Through *nonghwal* (“farm-life”) and *jeonsu* (“transmission”) retreats, students received instruction in the basic rhythms of *pungmul* while also helping out on farms.<sup>17)</sup>

## VI. *Pungmul*, Politics, and Protest

How did this politicized *pungmul* become linked with protest, then? Unlike the *madanggeuk* or resistance theatre plays that enacted historical narratives of dissent or featured scripts that commented directly or indirectly on the Chun Doo Hwan governments, aspects of dissent are harder to read between *pungmul* and protest. An analysis of a variety of source material (newspaper articles, underground publications, photographs and audiovisual footage from the period) informs this next part of my paper.

By the mid-1980s, student-led street demonstrations had become a common occurrence on campuses. This generation of university students, later dubbed

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15) Namhee Lee, 2003: 563.

16) *ibid.*

17) MeSook Ko attended one of these retreats in 1986. In a conversation I had with Ko on November 25, 2006, she recounted to me that the brief excursion was well-organized, and that the group traveled by bus from village to village in the Jeolla province of Korea. The students learned the basic rhythmic patterns from appointed “teachers.” Reflecting upon the experience, Ko expressed some ambivalence over the extractive quality of the learning process and wondered if the students truly assisted the villagers or temporarily took the farmers away from their duties.

by the press as the “386 generation” came to be known more for their activities outside (rather than inside) the classroom.<sup>18)</sup> The Korean press was under heavy censorship at the time, and was not at liberty to report on the extensive details of student protests or demonstrations against the Chun Doo Hwan government. Rather it is the foreign press that provides a snapshot into the prevailing soundscape of dissidence. Wire transcripts from the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) during the tumultuous year of 1987 made frequent reports of students “banging drums and gongs” while participating in street demonstrations. Often, as in this example, simple but incendiary slogans accompanied the rhythms played on drums: “Waves of students beating drums and shouting “Revolution!” pelted riot police with bricks and firebombs in Seoul and other cities Tuesday, the seventh day of violent anti-government protest. Growing numbers of people showed support for the protesters, booing the outnumbered police and sometimes joining in the attacks.”<sup>19)</sup> The AP and UPI reports and supporting audiovisual materials from the period serve to illustrate the conflation of *pungmul* drumming with dissident acts of political confrontation.<sup>20)</sup>

But these reports don’t tell the complete story, as would be expected. At this point I would like to introduce three excerpted accounts that add considerable depth to the news briefs and to this argument that I posit before you. In a recent archival research trip to the University of California at Berkeley, I had the pleasure of viewing several boxes in the Margaret Walker Dilling Collection housed at the Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library. The ethnomusicologist Marnie Dilling (1937–1997) is perhaps best remembered for her pioneering work on the

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18) The “386 generation” refers to students who were in the 30s during the 1990s, attended university during the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s.

19) Barry Renfrew, “Students Battle Riot Police in Week-Old Street Violence,” *Associated Press*, June 16, 1987, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>

20) “1987nyon, 7.8.9 Nodongja Taetujaeng - Yi Seok-kyu Chumosik” [1987 Laborers’ Struggle - The Memorial Ritual for Lee Seok-kyu] VHS, MBC Video, 1987; “Yeoksa Dasi Bogi - Saet, 6weol Minju Hangjeng” [“Revisiting History - Part 6, The June Democratic Uprising”] VHS, MBC Video, Distributed by the Korean Democracy Foundation, 2003; “The Pacific Century: Fight for Democracy” VHS, The Pacific Basin Institute at Pomona College, 1992.



role that music played in the elaborate productions of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Ceremonies. It is perhaps less well known that Dilling also conducted extensive field research on four student *pungmul* groups in Korea during the mid to late 1980s. Dilling's collection of fieldnotes, interviews, programs, and video and audio recordings displays both scholarly rigor and breadth. Although she never formally published on the topic, her interviews with former student activists and video footage from protests are a rich primary resource for analysis.

Dilling's interview with the *sangsoe* (musical leader) of the Korea University *Pungmul* group, for instance, brings into relief some of the students' underlying motivations for selecting *pungmul* as a rallying force in protests: "We don't just play Poongmoor [sp] but using Poongmoor as a tool to let the society know of all the discrepancies, to be able to fix some of the wrong existence of our society. In other words as a method for [the] student movement...when there are a lot of people [we] try to concentrate the will of the people and be able to show power."<sup>21</sup>) The interviewee, Park Yong-deok, goes on to say that the music of *pungmul* is appealing on an aesthetic level, but can be used as an effective vehicle to "reflect and hold our ideology and practicing content."<sup>22</sup>)

Secondly, I turn to an interview that I conducted with the musician Dong-won Kim that brings us back to the opening vignette and to the year 1987.<sup>23</sup>) Kim was a former member of a Korean music study group active in political protests and he was one of the many participants in the Seoul-based memorial services for the aforementioned Seok-kyu Lee. After news of Seok-kyu Lee's death spread, Kim was asked to play the small gong at a memorial protest near the Yeongdeungpo train station in Seoul. But before he could actually play, he was apprehended by the police and then imprisoned for three months. The

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21) Margaret Walker Dilling Collection at the University of California, Berkeley. Folder VI-3 (Korea University Nongaktae, Soe: Park Yongdeok), transcribed interview, p.6, May 22, 1989.

22) Ibid.

23) Dong-won Kim, phone interview, November 30, 2006.

incriminating evidence was the small gong found in Kim's bag. The account demonstrates, in a powerful way, the extent to which *pungmul* and protest had become so intertwined that even the mere sight of a *kkwaenggwari* instigated the following series of events:

Kim Dong-won: So I told them that I came to play for the memorial service for the worker who died so pitifully. I came to provide musical accompaniment...Oh, so this is one of the bad ones. And then I got beat up pretty badly.

KL: Do you think it was because of the *kkwaenggwari* you had?

Kim Dong-won: (pause) yep...that was the biggest reason.

KL: Do you think that people who play *kkwaenggwari* are seen as the leaders of *dongari* [clubs]? Or *undongkweon dongari* [political-oriented clubs]?

Kim Dong-won: So they suspected that because I had a *kkwaenggwari*, I was somehow directly connected with the organizers of the memorial protest event.

KL: Ohhh...

Kim Dong-won: Yes, of course this was. So, there was a direct reason for as to how I ended up there in the first place. They would ask me who was involved, who was involved, while they dealt blows.<sup>24)</sup>

Lastly, even ordinary citizens and expatriates had grown accustomed to the soundscape of this turbulent era of modern Korean history. Suzanna Samstag, a Peace Corps worker-turned expatriate who arrived in Korea in 1980, similarly expressed to me the political identifications that *pungmul* had acquired during

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24) Ibid.

the decade. To many citizens, the sounds of drums and gongs signaled that a protest was taking place somewhere in the vicinity. Samstag recalled going to Hanyang University in Seoul to watch a semi-professional *pungmul* group perform on campus:

“They got all set up and were ready to begin when someone from the school administration came running over and said that they couldn’t play their instruments. The reason given was that the students would be ‘incited’ to riot if they heard the drums. Well, since without music there’s not much to a Namsadan performance, they just packed up and left, much to my disappointment.”<sup>25)</sup>

Samstag’s recollection is significant because it reveals that the mere sounds of percussion music had become synonymous with dissent during the 1980s. Despite the fact that the planned appearance by the Namsadang was not a staged protest, the sonic potency of traditional Korean drums had accrued political meanings that were perceived not just by student protestors, but also by school officials.

## VII. Conclusion

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James Scott discusses the use of various cultural forms as a subversive mode expressing dissent. He reflects on the various “manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript.”<sup>26)</sup> The “collective representations of culture” that Scott discusses refers to aspects of popular culture (as opposed to elite) that “come to embody meanings that potentially undercut if not contradict their official interpretation.”<sup>27)</sup> Scott’s theorizations

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25) Suzanna Samstag, e-mail correspondence, Nov. 30, 2006.

26) James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1990), 136.

27) Scott, 157

of a “hidden transcript” provide a useful lens in viewing the incorporation of *pungmul* into the democratization movement in Korea.

*Pungmul*, as a representation of folk culture, came to acquire a range of political identifications that sometimes drew on, appropriated, and manipulated its “official interpretations.” The concept of *gongdongchae* (or “community”), for instance, was originally associated with agricultural life, but was reconfigured by students to tap into the *minjung* ideology. And in the early years of the student resistance movements, *pungmul* was deemed less explicitly political than resistance theatre genres since *pungmul* was an instrumental genre without text.<sup>28)</sup> In the eyes of authorities, practitioners of *pungmul* were initially thought to be reviving a quaint folk tradition – little could officials have suspected that the clashing beats of drums and gongs would gradually come to signify dissonances of dissent in the public transcript.

From festive village rituals to the subversive sounds of protest, *pungmul* has shown both its adaptability and its adoptability by various sectors of Korean society. As the push for democratization began to appeal to broader sectors of Korean society (e.g. labor to middle class) by the late 1980s, *pungmul* likewise shifted to incorporate new protagonists and performers in the dramatic struggle for democracy. It is therefore not surprising, then, that in the video footage from Seok-kyu Lee’s memorial protest that we see a convergence of the newly forged alliances of students, laborers, and the residents of Geoje Island. The performance of *pungmul* at this event fulfilled many of its intended meanings – from the ritual and the romanticization of the folk to the embodiment of “*minjung*” and the strength summoned by the masses. It is thus perhaps the *malleability* of *pungmul* – as music for the commoners, the students, and finally – the “masses” – that therein lied its potency as an *instrument* of dissent.

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28) Park, 2000:89.

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〈Abstract〉

## Pungmul, Politics, and Protest

- Drumming During South Korea's Democratization Movement -

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During the height of the democratization movement in South Korea, the sounds of drums and gongs were ubiquitous at scenes of protest. Often armed by university students, instruments drawn from the percussion-based form known as *pungmul* were played at demonstrations and also served as a symbolic means of enacting the *minjung* ethos of the 1980s. Yet unlike the masked dance-dramas and protest songs performed by student and labor resistance groups in the 1970s and 1980s, the performance of *pungmul* at political protests has largely been overlooked in the scholarship on the democratization movement of modern Korean history. While the use of text in performances of song and resistance theater dramas can illuminate subversive or explicit political stances and critiques against the government, text-less performances of music and dance genres, such as *pungmul*, can take on political meaning as well. Indeed, the greater degree of ambiguity in the performance of *pungmul* became one of its greatest assets and expressive tools.

In my paper, I explore this elusive area of inquiry through an analysis of the role that *pungmul* played in political protests held during the mid to late 1980s in South Korea. Based on the careful study of archival documents, historic audiovisual footage, and recently viewed items in the Margaret Walker Dilling Collection at the University of California at Berkeley, this paper examines how political meaning was aligned with the percussive sounds of *pungmul* in a number of ways. I argue that it was precisely the multiple meanings ascribed to *pungmul* that made it an ideal expressive mode to articulate dissent. This research reflects an attempt to introduce

another dimension into the scholarship on the South Korean democratization movement; namely, the significant role that music played in political protests.

Keywords : *Pungmul*, Politics, Protest, democratization, gongs, drums

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