

# **The Roots and Routes of *P'ungmul* in the United States**

(Originally published in *Umakgwa Munhwa* [Music and Culture] No. 5, 2001)

By Donna Lee Kwon  
University of California at Berkeley

## Abstract:

In this article, I will endeavor to trace the roots of *p'ungmul* (Korean rural percussion band music and dance) in the United States. These roots have stretched across the Pacific Ocean to be nourished in cities as distant as Honolulu, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. From the fieldwork and research that I have conducted over the past year and from my experience being involved in *p'ungmul* in the US over the past 10 years, it is evident that *p'ungmul* activity in the United States is rather diverse, transnational, interconnected and significant. Though only a small fraction of the million or more Koreans that live in the United States express themselves through *p'ungmul*, this practice has managed to persevere over the past 15 years and is a ubiquitous component of Korean cultural events across the nation. Tracing the roots of *p'ungmul* in the US is not only an exploration of past origins, it is a mapping of its routes: the journeys of people, instruments, recordings, videos, books and ideas, all of which have helped to nourish a full-fledged *p'ungmul* movement in the United States. Given that the *p'ungmul* movement in the United States is constantly in a state of change and development, the objectives of this article are to: i) present a historical perspective of *p'ungmul* in the US; ii) report on the current state of *p'ungmul* groups, introducing types of organizations and repertoire and lastly; iii) explore *p'ungmul's* role in the process of defining Korean American communities and identities. In general, it is my goal to stress not only the important connections that have been forged within the United States but also the vital transnational ties that have been developed between South Korea and the US.

# **The Roots and Routes of *P'ungmul* in the United States**

(Originally published in *Umakgwa Munhwa* [Music and Culture] No. 5, 2001)

By Donna Lee Kwon

University of California at Berkeley

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually *identities* are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being...They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself...not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our 'routes' (Stuart Hall 1996:4).

At *Ch'ongmunwon* we can hear our rhythms, to the owners of this land,  
let's open our hearts and become one in joy and sadness,  
In this land where our roots are being laid, let's walk together until that day  
(original verse developed by the Hanin *Ch'ongnyon Munhwawon* [Korean Youth Cultural Center, *Ch'ongmunwon* in Korean shorthand, KYCC in English] to the tune of *Jowangkut Ekmegi*)

## ***Introduction***

In this article, I will endeavor to trace the roots of *p'ungmul* (Korean rural percussion band music and dance) in the United States. These roots have stretched across the Pacific Ocean to be nourished in cities as distant as Honolulu, Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. The presence of *p'ungmul* or *nongak* (lit., "farmer's music") activity in the US has been explained primarily as a means of connecting to, preserving, symbolizing or expressing Korean or Korean American identity (Kim Mi-yon 1993:84, Kim Myo-sin 2000:14, Dilling 1992:1).<sup>1</sup> As Stuart Hall suggests, I take the position that there is no singular Korean or Korean American identity, at best, there are only identities. Because of this, I believe it is more productive to shift this inquiry towards looking at how *p'ungmul* is involved in the process of defining and creating new identities, be they individual, generational, Korean, Korean American or otherwise. In this sense, I see *p'ungmul* as a locus where communities can draw "on the resources of history, language

and culture in the process of becoming rather than being" (Hall 1996:4). Tracing the “roots” of *p’ungmul* in the US is not only an exploration of past origins, it is a mapping of its “routes”: the journeys of people, instruments, recordings, videos, books and ideas, all of which have helped to nourish a full-fledged *p’ungmul* movement in the United States.

From the fieldwork and research that I have conducted over the past year and from my experience being involved in *p’ungmul* in the US over the past 10 years, it is evident that this movement is rather diverse, transnational, interconnected and significant. Though only a small fraction of the million or more Koreans that live in the United States express themselves through *p’ungmul*, it has managed to persevere over the past 15 years, and is a ubiquitous component of Korean cultural events across the nation.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing there are at least 35 active *p’ungmul* groups, many of which are clustered in the metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Boston and Washington D.C.<sup>3</sup> In New York state alone, there are at least ten groups. Though a good majority of groups are based on college campuses, there are also several community-based organizations, political activist groups, church-related groups, high school clubs, senior citizen gatherings and other special-interest clubs. Many of these groups are loosely networked through what is called the *Jõnmi P’ungmul Yõnhap* or National *P’ungmul* Network, which was established and organized by the Korean Youth Cultural Center or *Hanin Ch’õngnyõn Munhwawon* (hereafter referred to as KYCC) in Oakland in 1998. Another network of *p’ungmul* groups is connected through the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (hereafter referred to as NAKASEC). NAKASEC's affiliate locations in Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York all have cultural divisions in which *p’ungmul* plays a primary role.

Given that the *p'unngmul* movement in the United States is constantly in a state of change and development, the objectives of this article are to: i) present a historical perspective of *p'unngmul* in the US; ii) report on the current state of *p'unngmul* groups, introducing types of organizations and repertoire and lastly; iii) explore *p'unngmul's* role in the process of defining Korean American communities and identities. In general, it is my goal to stress not only the important connections that have been forged within the United States but also the vital transnational ties that have been developed between South Korea and the US. In the age of increased mobility and high-speed internet communication, I have discovered that *p'unngmul* in the US is very much a story of how much impact a single person or group of people can make.

## ***I. The Roots of P'unngmul in the United States from a Historical Perspective***

### ***A. Beginning Phase (1985-1989) - Korean American Cultural Activism***

*P'unngmul* groups began forming in an organized fashion in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, Chicago, New York/Flushing and San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland between the years 1985 and 1989. Many of the founders of these groups were involved in or sympathetic with political struggles in Korea and were specifically interested in developing a meaningful and uniquely Korean American activist movement in the United States through cultural activities such as *p'unngmul*. Because of this, the history of *p'unngmul* in the US is inevitably intertwined with the history of Korean American activism. Besides *p'unngmul*, it was also common for these groups to develop other Korean expressive traditions such as *t'alch'um* (mask dance drama), *minyo* (folksong), *undong kayo* (movement songs) and *madang-gŭk* (*madang*-theater, based on Korean folk forms like mask dance. It is important to note that all of these Korean expressive forms were prominent in the extremely influential *Minjung Munhwa* (lit., the “culture of the

common people”) movement that swept South Korean college campuses and activist political and labor organizations in the 1970's and 80's. Because the central focus of this article is *p'ungmul*, I cannot devote as much attention to groups that focus mainly on the related genre, *samulnori*, though it is worth noting that many *p'ungmul* groups also practice this more stage-oriented drumming genre.

Many of the earliest *p'ungmul* groups either formed as a cultural division of a larger organizational (usually political) entity or became part of one, shortly after establishment. In 1985, *Binari* in New York was established and *Sori*, formed on the University of California at Berkeley. *Binari* functions as the cultural division of the *Young Korean American Service and Education Center* in Flushing, NY, an organization that now operates under the NAKASEC consortium. *Sori* was also formed in the environment of Korean American activist struggles. In part due to factional splits in the Korean activist community, some members of *Sori* created a new group called *Hanmadang* in 1986. *Sori* soon disbanded while *Hanmadang* became a part of KYCC in Oakland, California in 1987 (Nam Jangwoo, personal communication). In Los Angeles, the *Minjung Munhwa Yonguso* formed in 1986, re-forming as *Uri Munhwa Kongdongche* in 1992. *Il-kwa-Nori* of the Korean American Resource and Cultural Center in Chicago, also an affiliate of NAKASEC, formed in 1988. Also in New York, it is worth mentioning that in addition to *Binari*, two other groups formed prior to 1990: *Jǒng Chǒng* in 1986-87 (exact date unknown) and *Shinmyǒngpae* in 1989. *Shinmyǒngpae* later became part of the community organization *Uri Munhwa Chatkihwe* in 1990 (Choe Hyundon, personal communication). Though to a certain extent *p'ungmul* groups are always in a state of transition, due to the influence of political turmoil in South Korea in the late 80's this period is

characterized by a high degree of turnover, shuffling, name changes and struggles to even stay in existence.<sup>4</sup>

Though the majority of the members active during this period are Korean foreign students and immigrants (mostly first and 1.5 generation), one cannot underestimate the impact and influence of certain Korean individuals that made extended visits to the US.<sup>5</sup> These key individuals toured major cities to help groups become established by teaching *p'ungmul* and instilling its philosophy. One such individual was Kim Bong Jun, a Korean artist well-known for his folk-inspired drawings and prints. He is said to have visited eight cities with extended stays with the *Minjung Munhwa Yonguso* in Los Angeles and *Hanmadang* in San Francisco, among others (Park Jeanmann, interview, Nam Jangwoo, personal communication). The transnational nature of these interactions is not only evident in the flow of people and ideas to and forth between South Korea and the US but is reflected in the very issues that mobilized these organizations. For example, issues such as reunification and education about the Kwangju Uprising in particular, challenged people to reevaluate Korea-US relations and their unique role as American citizens within this relationship.

#### *B. Second Phase (1990-present) - Proliferation of Student and other Special Interest Groups*

Another figure, whose visit to the US in 1990-91, many long-time *p'ungmul* practitioners cite as significant, is Yi Jǒng-hun, now a practicing minister in Korea (Nam Jangwoo, Gloria Park, personal communication, Park Jeanmann, interview, Bussell 1997:47-48). Though Kim Bongjun focussed on transmitting the philosophy of village-style *p'ungmul*, Yi Jǒng-hun worked on improving a group's technical foundation and rhythmic knowledge while emphasizing a broader perspective on *p'ungmul*, *minyŏ* and *t'alch'um*. He also held discussion sessions where he asked members to think about *p'ungmul's* relevance to Korean American life (Park Jeanmann,

interview, Gloria Park, interview, Bussell 1997:47-48). Yi Jöng-hun played a particularly important role in the formation of the group *Kutkori* at Harvard University, though he also visited groups in Los Angeles, New York, and KYCC in Oakland, California. He also provided much-needed reading and teaching materials on *p'ungmul*, *minyo*, and movement songs.

In general, the majority of college-based groups formed from the early 1990's forward. Some of the groups that started in the early 90's include *HanUllim* (University of California/Los Angeles), *Karakmadang* (University of Illinois), *Hansori* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), *NyuRi* (New York University), *DongDukKungYi* (State University of New York/Stonybrook), *Loose Roots* (University of Chicago), *Hwimori* (Stanford University), *HanöI* (University of California/Santa Barbara) and *Sorimori* (State University of New York/Buffalo). Because of the transitory nature of college settings, these groups consist of people who were constantly on the move. Though the high turnover in membership made continuity a challenge, in many senses, the movement of people -- including the knowledge, skills, and material resources carried with them -- also served to insure the survival of the group. During school breaks, members (Korean foreign students and Korean Americans) were able to visit Korea and bring instruments, costumes, recordings and other resources. Some were even able to receive lessons in Korea, coming back to pass down what they had learned to the group. Many members were so committed to *p'ungmul* that they did not quit after graduation. In fact many groups, like Stanford's *Hwimori*, Cornell's *Shimtah*, and University of Chicago's *Loose Roots* were founded by individuals who were part of other groups previously but had to re-locate for graduate school or other reasons. Because of limited resources and space, the average size of a typical college *p'ungmul* group is between 15-20 members, though some groups have managed to survive with fewer than 10 and as many as 30 to 35 members.

In addition to college groups, other types of special-interest groups have formed, lending an increased diversity to the *p'ungmul* community in the US. For example, groups have been formed by and for Korean American adoptees, activist women, senior citizens, elementary, junior high and high school students, Catholic Church members, as well as middle-age men and women. These types of groups will be discussed more in detail in the next section.

Many of the changes that developed in this second phase were directly connected to Korean American community interests and significant historical events. In general, the Korean American community tends to be divided according to age, religion, occupation and political affiliation. Also, throughout the 1980's, many Korean political organizations were concerned primarily with Korean issues (Bussell 1997:33). One event that challenged these tendencies was the April 29, 1992 Los Angeles "riots" that occurred in the wake of the Rodney King verdict or what most Koreans have preferred to call *Sa-i-gu* (in Korean, the date "4-19"). Situated at the front lines of a fiery upheaval, Koreatown bore the brunt of what has been estimated at \$850 million in material losses (Elaine Kim 1993:215). In light of this, many Korean community and cultural groups felt that it was more urgent to focus on Korean American domestic issues (Abelmann and Lie 1995:185). Also, different factions of the Korean community were challenged to put aside their differences and work together. For *p'ungmul* groups in particular, educating the larger community about Korean culture became more of a priority, some groups even making an effort to do more cross-cultural and multi-cultural events. At the same time, in the near decade that has passed since *Sa-i-gu*, services for Korean Americans have been broadened and as a result more channels have opened up for different sectors of the Korean American community to have access to cultural activities like *p'ungmul*. In addition, more thought has gone into making *p'ungmul* meaningful as a distinctly Korean American practice.



## ***II. Current State of P'ungmul, Types of Organizations, What is Being Played***

*P'ungmul* is still very much in a stage of growth with new groups forming every year. Recently formed groups include the University of California/Berkeley EGO *p'ungmulpae* (2000), *Uri* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1999), *Shimtah* at Cornell University (1999) and Philadelphia's *Sorimori* (1998).<sup>6</sup> To varying extents, all *p'ungmul* groups in the US share the added responsibility of representing "Korean culture," not only to their own communities but to the larger mainstream society, in which they are often misunderstood or at best, underrepresented. A common trait among all the different types of *p'ungmul* groups is that they operate upon a volunteer membership basis with goals that are more social and community-minded. Though there are a handful of *samulnori*-oriented groups, whose goals are more professional and artistic in nature, it still remains to be seen whether their members have been completely successful at making it the source of their economic livelihood. Despite the growing diversity of *p'ungmul* groups however, it is possible to categorize them into three basic types: 1) community/cultural organizations 2) college-based clubs and 3) special interest groups. In the following section, I will discuss membership, organizational structure, and repertoire. I will also provide a sense of what types of issues or concerns mobilize these groups, drawing on examples of each.

### **Community/Cultural Organizations**

At the time of writing, there are currently six *p'ungmul* groups that operate as a Korean American cultural/community organization or as a significant division of one. These include *Hanpan* in Baltimore, *Uri Munhwa Nanumtuh* in Virginia, *Binari/Young Korean American Service & Education Center* and *Hanul/Service and Education for Korean Americans* in

Flushing, New York, *Il-kwa-Nori/Korean American Resource & Cultural Center* in Chicago, and KYCC in Oakland, California. Beyond being a space where members can learn *p'unngmul* and get to know each other and their heritage, most of these groups have developed mission statements that are oriented towards making things better for the larger Korean American community in their areas.

These groups are distinguished from college and other special interest groups in that they have their own office and/or rehearsal spaces and therefore must in some way find the funds or resources to pay or help pay rent, or in the exceptional case procure a building. One way that groups are able to support themselves is through mandatory monthly membership dues that range from \$10 to \$50 dollars a month. Other requirements of being a member may include attendance at meetings and going through a formal or informal training period. Almost all of these organizations also elect officers and in some cases are able to hire staff to manage the office. In many cases, these *p'unngmul* groups are able to operate through the staff of their larger affiliate organization. Another source of support comes from the networks of alumni or advisory boards that make donations as well as provide guidance and advice. Lastly, many of these organizations thrive on mutual collaboration with local and national organizations of similar agendas.

Two examples of such organizations are *Hanul* at the *Service and Education for Korean Americans* (hereafter referred to as SEKA) and the Korean Youth Cultural Center (KYCC). What links these two organizations is that *Hanul/SEKA* was the most recent host of the 2001 National *P'unngmul* Network (hereafter referred to as NPN) gathering while KYCC was the host and initiator of the first NPN in 1999. In addition, both organizations have come to work together over the past three years by co-hosting Korean teachers from the *P'ilbong P'unngmulgut* tradition.<sup>7</sup> What makes *Hanul* interesting is that most of its members are high school students.

Working in a creative collaboration with SEKA's governing board, called the *Handūt Yöllin Madang*, *Hanul* is also connected to an outside group of middle-age and seniors called the *P'ilbong P'ungmulgut Donghohwe*. Situated in the closely-knit Korean American community of Flushing, SEKA's building also houses programs for voter registration and youth education. Of all the *p'ungmul* groups in the United States, *Hanul* has worked the most closely and extensively with teachers from *P'ilbong* and therefore what they play follows very much in the *P'ilbong P'ungmulgut* tradition. However, prior to developing their relationship with *P'ilbong*, their members played *samulnori* repertoire and *p'ungmul* in the *Udo* style (Yi Jonghwan, interview). The strength of *Hanul/SEKA* is that they have managed to create a "*Yöllin madang*" that has brought together Koreans of all ages -- high school, older women and seniors alike.

KYCC operates as a more self-contained entity, whose 16 to 20 members form a tightly knit group of young adults between the ages of 18 and 32. Because of its mission to represent a "youth" voice in the community there is an age limit to membership, though there is no exclusivity in terms of ethnic background and there are currently two active non-Korean members. In addition, KYCC provides two to three sessions of classes per year in *p'ungmul*, *minyŏ* and *talchum*. Each session usually contains between 10 to 20 students each. For the past several years, KYCC has been able to pay a staff person/member part-time to answer phones and manage the office. KYCC's members agree collectively how to run the organization under the leadership of those elected or appointed into the positions of President, Administrative Director, Artistic Director, and Program Director. In 2000, KYCC became officially recognized as a non-profit organization and was required to establish a Board, which currently consists of four members.<sup>8</sup> Currently, the *Hanmadang p'ungmulpae* is at the center of activities though there is

also a newly formed *t'alch'um* group called *Urisawi*. KYCC also serves as headquarters for the NPN, holds *p'ungmul* related study sessions and incorporates *minyo* into its programs.

*Hanmadang's p'ungmul, samulnori, talchum* and *minyo* repertoire has been developed through the efforts of visiting teachers and students, Korean foreign students, as well as first, 1.5, and 2nd generation members who have studied in Korea. Like many other organizations, KYCC is heavily reliant on movement back and forth between Korea and the US, not only in terms of instruction but in terms of instruments and other material resources. In addition to Kim Bongjun and Yi Jŏnghun, Ko Jae-ho and his wife Yoon Misuk have been particularly effective in introducing *Kosŏng Ogwangdae* mask dance and other forms of dance to KYCC and other NPN groups. During the first NPN gathering in 1999, KYCC also invited two members from the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts *Samulnori* team, Kim Suyong and Yi Yong-tae, to teach singing and Udo-style *p'an-gut*. During the most recent NPN gathering, 6 members of KYCC went to SEKA in Flushing to learn *P'ilbong p'ungmulgut* drumming.

Like many other groups, once the teachers have left, the knowledge and skills are transmitted loosely through the *sonbae/hubae* system, where older members teach younger or newer members of the group. In some cases, the teachers are members who immigrated to the US and continue to be active within the organization. At KYCC, one such member is Lee Jongsŏk, who grew up playing *p'ungmul* and *samulnori* in high school and the military and introduced the styles of *Miryang Baekjungnori* and *Iri Nongak* to the group. It should be evident from this brief survey that KYCC members have been exposed to many different styles. Though the membership's intentions are important in deciding what to play, it is the needs and characteristics of the local Korean American community that play a critical role in shaping repertoire at KYCC and other similar organizations. In addition to producing two annual events

per year (a themed cultural show in the Fall and Lunar New Year or *Jishinbalbki* in the Winter), KYCC is asked to perform in a wide range of situations, including parades, lecture-demonstrations, and short 15-20 minute performances at Korean, Asian American and other multicultural events. Because of this, KYCC must maintain and develop their repertoire accordingly. For example, though *p'ungmul* is central to the philosophy of the organization, it has been necessary to also practice *samulnori* pieces (such as *uddhari*, *udo-kut*, *youngnam*, *binari* and *solchanggo*), which are more convenient and effective in short community cultural presentations. Also, in order to produce a full-length cultural show every year, KYCC members have worked hard to present other traditions besides *p'ungmul* for variety and depth. Given that working towards a more self-determined Korean and Korean American community is the central premise of KYCC's mission statement, creating a repertoire that truly reflects this community is a high-priority. At community/cultural organizations such as SEKA and KYCC, it is this ability to creatively and flexibly adjust to the needs of the community that is crucial to their success and continued survival despite changing times and limited resources.

### College Clubs

At the time of writing there are 24 known college-based *p'ungmul* clubs or circles. Most college clubs have the advantage of college affiliation and recognition, which entitles them to meet and rehearse on campus and/or apply for campus funds to hold cultural events or buy instruments. Similar to what happens in the Korean University circles, new members are recruited at the beginning of each semester or year and new leaders are elected. In many cases, these groups start out with, collaborate or later join forces with other Korean American student organizations. College groups outnumber any other type of *p'ungmul* organization, partly because they are the easiest to set up and maintain. In many remote cities like Buffalo, New

York or Madison, Wisconsin, joining a college club is the only option if one wants to play *p'ungmul*. As a result, many of these clubs are open to non-College members and continue to welcome those who have already graduated. Depending on the resources of the university, college clubs typically consist of as few as 8 or 9 members (for example, MIT's *Uri*) and as many as 30 to 35 members (UCLA's *Hanullim*) (Nam Jangwoo, personal communication, Grace Lim, interview).

Because college is typically a time when students begin to reevaluate and further define their identity, the focus of college groups tends to be more internal. These groups spend much of their time developing the social relationships within the group through membership trainings and getting to know one's cultural heritage through playing and learning about *p'ungmul*. Though the majority of college groups categorize themselves as *p'ungmulpae*, many of them enlarge their repertoire by learning *samulnori* pieces. Because *samulnori* recordings are readily available, many groups with limited resources have learned from listening to the recordings, although this method is somewhat controversial. Because *P'ilbong* teachers have performed extended residencies on both the East and West coasts, more and more college groups are being exposed to the *Jwado P'ilbong* style, although prior to this most groups were learning the basic rhythms of *Udo*.<sup>9</sup> What continues to be popular however is the insertion of *Miryang Obukchum* and *Samdo Solchanggo* as *Kaein Nori* in *Pan-gut*. For groups like MIT's *Uri p'ungmulpae*, performances are geared towards on-campus Korean American or Asian American culture nights. Occasionally, groups like Stanford's *Hwimori* or New York University's *NyuRi* may collaborate with other local groups to participate in larger community events like *Jishinbalbki*.

## Special Interest Groups

Special interest groups comprise the minority of *p'ungmul* activity. Currently, I know of only 3 to 4 such groups. However, because these groups tend to be more informal, it is highly possible that there are many more of these types of gatherings than is widely known. Different types of special interest groups include those for women only, those formed within the setting of Church (mostly Catholic), and those formed by seniors. Growing in number are small groups for elementary, middle and highschool Korean American youth. Jennifer Bussell also writes of the existence of groups for Korean adoptees. The *Sejong Samulnori* of Demarest is one such group though from their title, I gather that their focus is more on *samulnori* and not *p'ungmul* (Bussell 1997:39). Korean adoptee and senior groups aside, some of these groups display a remarkable age range. For example, *Jamaesori* of Oakland, California, is comprised solely of women with activist backgrounds between the ages of 25 to over 50. Similarly, *Tuh*, of the Catholic Church in Flushing, has members between the ages of 25 and 60 while the *Hanin Nongakdae* in Hawaii serves high school youth and seniors (Yi Chŏl-sŏn, interview, Kim Myo-sin 2000).

Though *Jamaesori* and *Tuh* practice on opposite coasts of the United States, both have a deep appreciation for *P'ilbong P'ungmulgut*. Taking the advice of friends in Korea, *Jamaesori* decided to cross the Pacific and travel as a group to the Namwon *P'ilbong Jŏnsugwan* the summer of 1999. *Jamaesori* members consider this trip a turning point in their development and continue to practice *P'ilbong P'ungmulgut*, although they are also learning *Uddhari samulnori*. Though they did not perform publicly much before, since their trip to the *P'ilbong Jŏnsugwan*, they have since put on three *P'ilbong*-style events and have performed numerous at rallies and events for various political causes. At *Tuh*, their relationship with *P'ilbong* began when one of their early members taught them this style from their inception in 1996. Unlike other *p'ungmul*

groups, their focus is to promote community within the Church. As a result, they mainly play for 80th year birthday celebrations, church bazaars, festivals and holidays (Yi Chöl-sön, interview). The existence of special interest *p'ungmul* groups indicates that an even broader and more diverse cross-section of Korean Americans in the United States can find a meaningful role for *p'ungmul* in their lives, suggesting many possible directions for growth in the future.

### ***III. The Role of P'ungmul in Developing Korean American Communities and Identities***

It is outside the scope of this paper to cover the myriad roles that *p'ungmul* fulfills in the lives of Korean Americans. However, in this section I will address what many believe to be *p'ungmul's* predominant roles: developing a stronger sense of community and identity among Korean Americans. Along these lines, surveying the list of names of *p'ungmul* groups in *Table 1* reveals an interesting set of interrelated aspirations or themes:

**Becoming "One"** - In the heavy usage of word units such as "*Han*" (one) and "*Uri*" (we) we can see the desire to "become one" or to develop a unified sense of the "we" as Koreans/Korean Americans.

**Sharing/Gathering** - From the presence of the word units "*Nanum*" (sharing), "*Uri*" (we) and "*Mori*" (to gather) there is a strong sense of the gathering or sharing of a common culture.

**Creating a Space** - Spatial word units such as "*Madang*" (traditional village courtyard), "*Tuh*" (space) and "*P'an*" (open field) seem to indicate the need to create a nourishing space or occasion to develop Korean American culture.

**Culture/Sound/Spirit** - The powerful and evocative word units of "*Munhwa*" (culture), "*Sori*" (sound), "*Ullim*" (ringing), "*Shin*" (spirit), and "*Öl*" (spirit) speak to the aspiration to connect with and participate in a vibrant, transcendent and uniquely Korean cultural expression.

Though the use of these words is no doubt influenced by the names of *p'ungmul* organizations in Korea, their meanings have a special resonance and urgency in the context of the United States. For one, there are significantly fewer opportunities and resources available in the US (human, material, cultural) to fulfill any of the above aspirations. To add to this, according to sociologist



Eui-Young Yu, the Korean American community is "quicker than other Asian Americans to disperse themselves across the United States...also evident in local areas," making the desire to "gather" or "become one" all the more pressing (Eui-Young Yu 1993:144). Many other factors also contribute to a feeling of disconnectedness and division among Korean Americans, often stemming from generational, cultural, and language differences that develop within the family, which are then amplified by the challenges of immigrant life (Ibid. 1993:148).

Having commented upon some the reasons why a stronger sense of community and identity may be needed and desired by Korean American *p'ungmul* practitioners, I believe it will be fruitful to illuminate some of the creative efforts, practices, adaptations, and methods that have been employed in this direction. Perhaps one of the largest projects undertaken by *p'ungmul* practitioners in the US is the creation and continuation of the aforementioned National *P'ungmul* Network or NPN. The NPN was initiated by KYCC in 1998. Its founding principle was to strengthen the national *p'ungmul* community by increasing communication between groups (through email, internet, and face-to-face contact) and providing better learning opportunities by inviting master teachers from Korea. Currently, KYCC continues to serve as headquarters although it is understood that hosts will rotate for the national gatherings that occur every other year. In the off years, KYCC has been organizing NPN trips to go to *p'ungmul* and mask dance transmission centers in Korea. NPN is still in its infancy and has far from reached its potential efficacy. Outreach and advance planning could be much improved and closer relationships between organizations need to be further developed, especially with the challenges of working with different hosts every other year.

In addition to activities organized through the NPN, there are other projects that many *p'ungmul* groups share in common. One uniquely Korean American development is the

adaptation of village Lunar New Year or *Jishinbalbki* rituals to the setting of "Koreatowns" all over the United States. Currently, *Jishinbalbki* is practiced in the Korean business districts of Los Angeles, San Francisco/Oakland/Berkeley/San Jose, Chicago, New York City, Flushing, the Baltimore/Washington D.C. areas, and sometimes Philadelphia.<sup>10</sup> These *Jishinbalbkis* usually consist of informal street parades, traveling from one Korean business to another. Depending on the wishes of the business owner, the group offers *dōkdam* or stylized chants, traditional alcoholic spirits such as *makkoli*, *p'ungmul* and folksongs to appease the spirits and wish the owner good fortune in the coming year. Because donations are encouraged, *Jishinbalbki* can be seen predominantly as a fundraiser, providing an annual source of income for the *p'ungmul* group(s). However, *Jishinbalbki* is not only a means to help to strengthen a group fiscally, it also challenges the group to work with other *p'ungmulpae* in the area as well as interface more directly with the Korean business community.<sup>11</sup> In many of these cities, *Jishinbalbki* has been performed for over a decade and has become a true Korean American tradition in its own rite. It can also be seen as an affirmation and support of the establishment of Korean spaces in America (markets, departments stores, restaurants, dry cleaners), spaces that provide basic services for Korean Americans and the larger community.

Ways of developing a stronger sense of community and identity can also be found within the philosophy and transmission of *p'ungmul* itself. One aspect of this philosophy that has been emphasized in many groups is the concept of *kongdongch'e*. This translates into fostering a heightened communal awareness, not only through the playing instruments but through daily life activities such as eating and cooking together and sharing in a variety of organizational duties. In performances, there has been an effort on the part of many groups to create a more open "*madang*" (open village courtyard) as opposed to "*mudae*" (stage) atmosphere, where audience

members are encouraged to contribute their spirited movements (*okkae chum*) and voices (*chuiimsae*). *P'ungmul's* emphasis on the body also takes a meaningful role in expressing a stronger and more visceral sense of Korean culture and identity. Seung-jin Jung, leader of *Binari*, feels that "the brain cannot understand the essence of culture - one must feel the culture, understand it by utilizing the body, and playing *p'ungmul* is the perfect way to do this" (quoted in Bussell 1993:41). Through the emphasis of the voice, coordinated *hohŭp* (breathing) and *ogŭm* (bending of the knees while moving) and other stylized movements, *p'ungmul* can be an effective vehicle for the intense performative embodiment of one's individual or ethnic identity.

Perhaps the most powerful component of *p'ungmul* that really speaks to Korean Americans and others who play *p'ungmul* is its effect of releasing tension. This is done through the actual playing of instruments or yelling of *ch'uimsae* (shouts of encouragement) and is felt through the process of building and releasing tension within the rhythmic cycle itself or within the overall structure of the event or *p'angut*. Korean Americans are not the only ones to experience the stresses of life in America. However, the life of Korean Americans, no matter what generation one is, can be full of burdens that stem from the hardships of immigrant life and in particular the discrepancies of language, expectations, and cultural values that one may encounter in America. Of his experience with the P'ilbong teachers at the 2001 NPN camp, KYCC member Stefan Kang writes:

It struck me as amazing that the teacher, through his corrections of my flaws, could in essence see who I am. He kept urging me to *Him Pejwo* ["release the tension"], stop playing so tense, to release the weight I was carrying in my shoulders, somehow seeing the burdens, the baggage I carry from my daily life (Kang, NPN website).

Also, the aforementioned *kongdongch'e* (community) philosophy of *p'ungmul* also increases opportunities for Korean Americans to gather, eat together, have *dwipuri* or "after-parties, go on

retreats, and hold meetings during which people can share their joys, frustrations, and feelings. With the individualism that permeates American society, these opportunities are sometimes hard to come by. The Korean Broadcasting Station's coverage of the 2001 NPN on the show *Hyônjang Rûpo Joe3Jidae* [3<sup>rd</sup> Scene Report], "P'ilbong goes to New York" was particularly effective in capturing the outpouring of emotion that occurred near the end of the gathering.

Irregardless of internal organizational intentions, *p'ungmul* groups in the United States are automatically seen externally as representatives of "authentic" Korean culture. This can be a heavy responsibility because most groups feel the pressure to represent Korean culture in the best light possible, even though they may lack the skills or professional orientation to do so. Not only do these groups get called upon to represent Korean culture to mainstream American society, but more often they are asked to positively represent Korean culture to first, 1.5 and second generation Korean immigrants who often have lost touch with or have negative associations and misconceptions of Korean folk culture. As a result, the question of how to best represent Korean culture and serve the Korean American community at the same time is often the source of much concern for *p'ungmul* groups in the United States.

To summarize, it has been my goal to demonstrate that the proliferation of *p'ungmul* in the United States cannot be interpreted solely as a "return to roots," or a search for "authentic" Korean identity. Rather, these groups have been fashioned from a complex network of transnational "routes" -- the efforts of people moving back and forth between South Korea and the United States and from one city to another -- developing into a full-fledged movement with its own uniquely Korean American tradition. This article does not attempt to be an all-encompassing account of *p'ungmul* in the United States but is intended to be more of an introductory entry point. In particular, I have not gone into much depth about the controversies,

challenges and difficulties that *p'ungmul* groups face but I hope that further research will illuminate this and other aspects of *p'ungmul* activity in the United States.

**Table 1: Chart of *P'ungmul* Groups in the United States**

Start date	Name	Affiliations	City/State
1985	<i>Binari</i> CO	Young Korean Americans Service and Education Center or Han Chŏng, affiliate of Young Koreans United, later an affiliate of the NAKASEC consortium	Flushing, New York
1985 ad	<i>Sori</i> * CG	University of California at Berkeley	Berkeley, California
1986 ad	<i>Hanmadang</i> CG	University of California at Berkeley Became part of the <i>Hanin Chôngnyun Munhwawon</i>	Berkeley, California
1986	<i>Minjung Munhwa Yonguso</i> * CO		Los Angeles, California
1987	<i>Hanin Chôngnyŏn Munhwawon</i> CO ( <i>Korean Youth Cultural Center, KYCC</i> )	<i>Hanmadang</i> University of California at Berkeley	Oakland, California
1987 ad	<i>Jung Chung</i> *		New York, New York
1988	<i>Il-kwa-Nori</i> CO	Korean American Resource and Cultural Center, an affiliate of NAKASEC	Chicago, Illinois
1989	<i>Shinmyŏngpae</i> *	Became part of <i>Uri Munhwa Chatkihwe</i> or the Center of Korean American Culture in 1990.	New York, New York
1990	<i>Uri Munhwa Chatkihwe</i> * CO ( <i>Center for Korean American Culture</i> )	<i>Shinmyŏngpae</i>	New York, New York
1990	<i>Kutkori</i> CG	Harvard University, later became Korean Culture Group	Cambridge, Massachusetts
1990 ad	<i>HanUllim</i> CG	University of California at Los Angeles	Los Angeles, California
1991	<i>Karak Madang</i> CG	University of Illinois	Champaign-Urbana, Illinois
1991	<i>Jamaesori</i> SI	Did not have a name until 1996.	Oakland, California
1992	<i>Uri Munhwa Kongdongche</i> * CO ( <i>Center for Korean Youth Culture</i> )	Some connection to the earlier <i>Minjung Munhwa Yongusŏ</i> and the <i>Minjung Munhwa Yesulche</i>	Los Angeles, California
1992 ad	<i>Hansori</i> CG	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Cambridge, Massachusetts
1992 ad	<i>Nyuri</i> CG	New York University	New York, New York
1993	<i>DongDukKungYi (DDKY)</i> CG	State University of New York, Stonybrook	Stonybrook, New York
1993	<i>Loose Roots</i> CG	University of Chicago	Chicago, Illinois
1993 ad	<i>Uri Munhwa Nanumtuh</i> CO ( <i>Korean American Cultural Center</i> )	<i>Uriyul P'ungmulpae</i>	Annandale, Virginia
1993 ad	<i>Hwimori</i> CG	Stanford University	Stanford, California
1993 ad	<i>Hanŏl</i> CG	University of California/ Santa Barbara	Santa Barbara, California
1996	<i>Sorimori</i> CG	State University of New York at Buffalo	Buffalo, New York
1996	<i>Hanin Nongakdae</i> SI	Korean Catholic Church	Honolulu, Hawaii
1996	<i>Tuh</i> SI	Flushing Catholic Church	Flushing, New York
1997	<i>HanPan</i> CO	Was <i>DongBangBolPae</i>	Baltimore, Maryland
1997	<i>Hanul</i> CO	Service and Education for Korean	Flushing, New York

	(SEKA)	Americans established in 1995-96.	
1998	<i>Sorimori</i> CO	Affiliated with the Korean American Community Center	Philadelphia, PA
1999	<i>Shimtah</i> CG	Cornell University	Ithaca, New York
1999	<i>Uri</i> CG	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	Cambridge, Massachusetts
2000	<i>EGO</i> CG	University of California at Berkeley	Berkeley, California
du	<i>Columbia p'ungmulpae</i> CG	Columbia University	New York , New York
du	<i>Rutgers Korean Cultural Group</i> <i>RKCG</i> CG	Rutgers University	Rutgers, New Jersey
du	<i>HanNuri</i>		Fort Lee, New Jersey
du	<i>Shinparam</i> CG	Syracuse University	Syracuse, New York
du	<i>NYU Rhythmic Impulse (NYURI)</i> CG	New York University	New York, New York
du	<i>Unity – Hansori</i> CG	Yale University	New Haven, CT
du	<i>Hansori</i> CG	University of California at Davis	Davis, California
du	<i>Meck</i> CG	Michigan State University	East Lansing, Michigan
du	<i>Shinaboro</i> CG	University of Michigan	Ann Arbor, Michigan
du	<i>Ulsoo</i> CG	University of Wisconsin	Madison, Wisconsin
du	<i>HanUri</i>	Catholic Church	Sacramento, California

Key:

- ad Approximate Date
- du Date Unknown or Unavailable
- CO Community/Cultural Organization or affiliated with one
- CG College Group
- SI Special Interest Group
- \* Groups no longer exists

## Bibliography

1994. *Minsok Kyoyuk Jaryojip* [A Collection of Resources on Korean Folk Arts]. Seoul: Bongchon Norimadang.
- Abelmann, Nancy and Lie, John. 1995. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Abelmann, Nancy. 1996. *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Bussell, Jennifer L. 1997. *A Life of Sound: Korean Farming Music and its Journey to Modernity*. B.A. Essay, University of Chicago.
- Ch'ae, Huiwan. 1983. "Shinmyŏng as an Artistic Experience in Traditional Korean Group Performance-Plays." In *Korea Journal* 23/5:4-14.
- Cho Hung-youn. 1987. "The Characteristics of Korean *Minjung* Culture." In *Korea Journal* 27/11:4-18.
- Dilling, Margaret Walker. 1992. "Culture, Clubs and Crises: Defining Moments for Korean American Music Makers." In the Margaret Walker Dilling Archive, University of California, Berkeley Music Library.
- Hahn Man-young. 1990. *Kugak: Studies in Korean Traditional Music*, translated and edited by Inok Paek and Keith Howard. Republic of Korea: Tangu Dang Publishing Company.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Hesselink, Nathan. 2001. "'Dance is Played with your Heel': Dance as a Determinant of Rhythmic Construct in Korean Percussion Band Music/Dance." In *Umak kwa Munhwa [Music and Culture]* 4: 99-110.
- . 1999. "Kim Inu's *P'ungmulgut* and Communal Spirit": Edited and Translated with an Introduction and Commentary," *Asian Music* 31/1:1-34.
- . 1996. "Changdan Revisited: Korean Rhythmic Patterns in Theory and Contemporary Performance Practice." In *Han'guk Umak Yŏngu* [Studies in Korean Music] 24:143-155.
- Howard, Keith. 1999. "*Minyo* in Korea: songs of the people and songs for the people." In *Asian Music* 30/2.
- Kim Kwang-ok. 1997. "The Role of *Madangguk* in Contemporary Korea's Popular Culture Movement." In *Korea Journal* 37/3:5-21.
- Kim Miyon. 1993. "Musical Organizations." In *Community of Music: An Ethnographic Seminar in Champaign-Urbana*, edited by Tamara Livingston, et al. Champaign: Elephant and Cat.
- Kim Myo-Sin. 2000. "The Search for Korean Identity Through Korean Farmer's Band Music in Hawai'i." Presented at the Toronto 2000: Musical Intersections Joint Conference.
- Kim, Elaine. 1993. "Home is where the *Han* is: A Korean-American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals." In *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by Robert Gooding-Williams. New York and London: Routledge, Inc.
- Lee Byong won. 1993. "Contemporary Korean Music Cultures." In *Korea Briefing*, edited by Donald N. Clark, 5-31. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Lee Young-mee. 1997. "Korean Traditional Theatre and *Madangguk* Theatre." In *Korea Journal* 37/3:40-62.



- Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Shin Yong-ha. 1985. "Social History of Ture Community and Nongak Music (I, II)." In *Korea Journal* 25/3: 4-17; 25/4: 19-35.
- Yang Jin-sung. 2000. *Honam Jwado Imshil P'ilbong-gut* [Cholla province "left side" style: P'ungmulgut of P'ilbong Village]. Korea: Shina Chulpansa.
- Yu Eui-young. 1993. "The Korean American Community." In *Korea Briefing 1993: Festival of Korea*, edited by Donald N. Clark. Boulder: Westview Press/Asia Society.

### Interviews, Email Correspondences, and Personal Communication

- Choe Hyondon 최현돈, (우리 문화 찾기회, 터), e-mail correspondence, 2001년8월10일.
- Nam Jang woo 남장우, (한울림, 한인 청년 문화원), telephone interview, 2001년8월1일.
- Kim, Kyongwoo 김경우, (한판), personal interview, 2001년6월25일.
- Kim, Haena 김혜나, (NYURI), personal interview, 2001년6월24일.
- Lee, Cliff Sukjae 이석재, (소리몰이), personal interview, 2001년6월28일.
- Lim, Grace, (우리), personal interview, 2001년6월24일.
- Park, Gloria, (굿거리), telephone interview, 2001년8월15일
- Park Jeanmann 박진만, (우리문화 공동체, 우리 문화 나눔터), personal interview, 2000년11월25일.
- Yi Chong-hwan 이종환, (한얼/SEKA), personal interview, 2001년6월25일.
- Yi Chöl-sön 이철선, (터), personal interview, 2001년6월29일.

### P'ungmul Web Resources, Other Media

- East Coast P'ungmul Network website: (<http://www.poongmul.com>).
- Hanul website: (<http://members.nbc.com/hanwool99/>).
- Jamaesori website: (<http://www.otherwise.net/jamaesori/>).
- Hwimori website: (<http://www.stanford.edu/group/hwimori/>).
- Loose Roots website: (<http://looseroots.uchicago.edu/>).
- Kang, Stefan. 2001. Personal National P'ungmul Network Camp report. To be posted on the National P'ungmul Network website: (<http://www.kycc.net/NPN>).
- KBS broadcasting. "필봉농악 뉴욕에 가다 [P'ilbong Nongak New Yorkae Kada]," *현장르포 제3시대* [Hyonjang Report Joe3Jidae], 2001년7월24일. Website (<http://www.kbs.co.kr>).
- Uri Munhwa Chatkihwe website: (<http://users.rcn.com/ckac/>).
- Uri Munhwa Nanumtuh website: ([http://www.homestead.com/kacc\\_nova/files/](http://www.homestead.com/kacc_nova/files/)).
- Service and Education for Korean Americans website: (<http://www.seka.org/>).
- Shimtah website: (<http://www.shimtah.wo.to/>).
- The Korean Youth Cultural Center website: (<http://www.kycc.net>).
- The National P'ungmul Network website: (<http://www.kycc.net/NPN>).
- The University of California/Santa Barbara Hanöl website: (<http://orgs.sa.ucsb.edu/kcag>).
- University of Buffalo Sorimori website: (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/student-life/sa/kfac/>).

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I use the term *p'ungmul* rather than *nongak* because this term is generally preferred by the majority of groups that have formed in the United States. Also, *p'ungmul* is favored because it is less limiting than *nongak* and allows for the inclusion of singing and dance (in particular *minyŏ*, *undong norae* and *talchum*), better characterizing the activity of some of the groups examined. Also, many *p'ungmul* practitioners in the United States are well aware of the fact that this music is being played outside the context of farming life, especially in the United States, making the term *nongak* less relevant.

<sup>2</sup> In 1993, Eui-Young Yu estimated that there were approximately between 950,000 and 1 million Koreans living in the United States. In 1990 the U.S. Census counted 798,843 Koreans (Yu 1993:139). It is safe to assume that as stated above, there are well over 1 million Koreans living in the United States in 2001. As is the case in South Korea as well, the practice of Western classical music figures prominently in the expressive culture of Korean Americans, as does choir singing and going to *noraebang* or *karaoke*. In addition to *p'ungmul*, other Korean and music and dance genres are practiced by immigrant performers and teachers who have formed their own semi-professional centers. However, these centers are more difficult to maintain and are thus few and far between.

<sup>3</sup> I have reason to believe that there may be as many as 50 or more *p'ungmul* groups active in the United States. Though the community-based and college groups are well networked, there are still many informal gatherings, including senior citizen groups that are not well-known outside their own communities. In addition, there are groups that are based more exclusively in the tradition of *samulnori*, which I am not including in my estimation.

<sup>4</sup> For example, according to Jennifer L. Bussells interview with member Kim Namhoon, *Il-kwa-Nori* became inactive from 1989 to 1992 in order to focus on South Korean political issues, one year after forming in 1988. In Los Angeles, organizational shuffling and name changing was due in part to factional splits in the community. To be specific, the *Minjung Munhwa Yongusŏ* changed its name to *Uri Munhwa Kongdongche* in order to attract a broader range of young people that may have not wanted to be connected to the perceived political affiliations of the *Minjung Munhwa Yongusŏ*. Of the *p'ungmul* groups mentioned in this paragraph, only *Binari*, *Il-kwa-Nori* and the *Hanin Chŏngnyŏn Munhwawon* are still active. All others have since closed their doors.

<sup>5</sup> Halfway between first (*il-se*) and second generation (*i-se*), *1.5* or *il-jom-o-se* designates those that have been born in Korea, immigrating sometime in their childhood or teen years.

<sup>6</sup> Though the *Hanin Chŏngnyŏn Munhwawon* or *Chŏngmunwon* continues to have strong affiliations with the University of California/Berkeley, due to the growing diversity of its membership students at the UC Berkeley have decided recently to form their own group separate from *Chŏngmunwon*.

<sup>7</sup> The summer of 1999, Yi Jong-woo *sunsaengnim* of the *Seoul P'ilbong Junsugwan* came and did his first extended multi-week residency at SEKA. He also spent a week with *Jamaesori* and the *Hanin Chŏngnyŏn Munhwawon* in Oakland, California. The following summer in 2000, he came again visiting the same groups, but this time P'ilbongs *sangswe* and leader Yang Jinsung *hwejangnim* also came for several weeks. Summer of 2001, four teachers from P'ilbong came to perform in Manhattans Central Park and teach the 2nd *Junmi P'ungmul Yonhap* camp. All three extended residencies were open and publicized and were well attended by people from other groups. The most recent trip was also documented by KBS broadcasting on the show *Hyŏnjang Rŭpo Joe3Jidae*, entitled *P'ilbong Nongak New York eh Kada* and can be viewed online at [www.kbs.co.kr](http://www.kbs.co.kr).

<sup>8</sup> Several other community/cultural organizations have obtained federal 501(c)3 non-profit organization status, such as *SEKA* and *Uri Munhwa Chatkihwe*. This status allows those organizations that are formed for mainly charitable or educational purposes to receive tax-deductible donations and to not pay business taxes. In addition, this status gives a certain degree of respect and sense of establishment to an organization.

<sup>9</sup> Typical beginning curriculum would include the *ilchae*, *ichae*, *kutkori*, *samchae*, *pungryu* and *obangjin* rhythms.

<sup>10</sup> I have been able to establish this from the short interviews I was able to conduct during the most recent NPN meeting. This information is by no means a comprehensive and is merely a list of the *Jishinbalbki* that I know are produced.

<sup>11</sup> Because *Jishinbalbki* requires a lot of people, *p'ungmul* groups find it beneficial to work together. For example, because Koreatown in Los Angeles is so densely populated with businesses, several *p'ungmul* teams are required.