

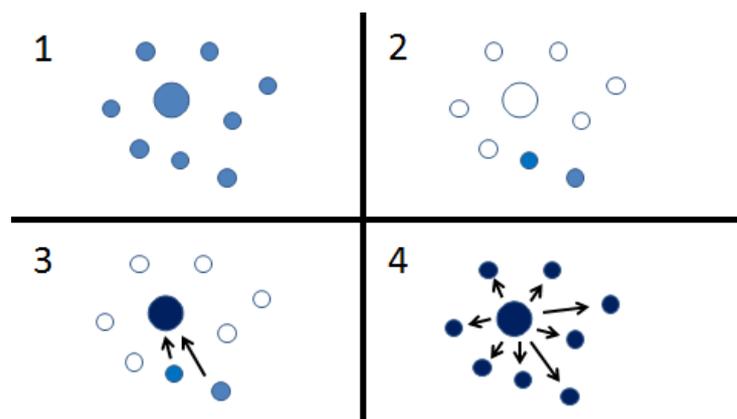
## Local heroes: Re-establishing drums and gongs in Ulleungdo's musical life

Simon Mills, Durham University

**Abstract:** A small number of people have become widely known in South Korea as influential innovators and/or preservers of traditional percussion band music, having led the way to establishing it as an icon of Korean identity on the national level. Meanwhile, there have been countless others who have been responsible for spreading percussion band music-making on the local level. This paper examines the activities of two such unsung heroes, Yi Ch'ungsŏng and Kim Chŏngsu, who have lived their whole lives on the remote island of Ulleungdo and who were instrumental in founding new groups there in the 1990s and 2000s. The paper begins by examining the disappearance of the island's original folk percussion ensembles in the 1960s and 70s. It then explores Yi and Kim's motivations for beginning to learn traditional percussion music at a late stage in life, and documents the trials and tribulations they experienced to re-establish drums and gongs in Ulleungdo's musical life.

**Keywords:** *p'ungmul*, *samullori*, Ulleungdo, folk revival, community music, percussion band

Korean percussion band music-making has been through a number of transformative phases over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The diagrams below visually represent these successive phases, the filled circles denoting communities with bands:



In pre-industrial Korea (point 1), many communities maintained bands but then, during the modernising initiatives of the Japanese occupation and Park Chunghee's dictatorship, bands became the preserve of marginal enclaves of traditional culture (point 2). Next, with the people's culture movement, when people were searching for arts that could represent 'the Korean people', bands were rediscovered during a folk revival: influential innovators/preservers took marginal forms and revived them in the cultural/economic centres (point 3, with darker shading indicating revised forms). Finally, the revised folk arts spread out from the centres, new converts taking the music back

to the communities that had previously fostered them (point 4). This 4-part history exemplifies the so-called “pizza effect”, a type of cultural re-enculturation explained by Agehananda Bharati in 1970 through allusion to the way in which pizza-like dishes were taken from rural Italy to America by emigres, developed into modern pizzas in urban centres, and then returned to Italy, spreading throughout the land (Bharati 1970: 267–287). This paper focuses on the final part of the process, considering the contributions of those individuals who helped re-establish percussion bands in local communities.

Some communities have been less well-disposed to respond to the percussion band revival than others – particularly those that lost their original traditions long ago and are located far from cultural hotspots. In those places, people have had to go to great lengths to reinstate percussion band music-making, overcoming practical, economic, geographical, and cultural obstacles. This paper focuses on one such locality: Ulleungdo. This small island, roughly 11km across at its broadest point and with a population of around 10,000, is the most remote Korean territory apart from the contested rocks of Dokdo. Research conducted with Sung-Hee Park<sup>1</sup> reveals that two people in particular have been at the forefront of promoting percussion band music-making on Ulleungdo. I describe them here as “local heroes” but it is not just me who regards them as such.



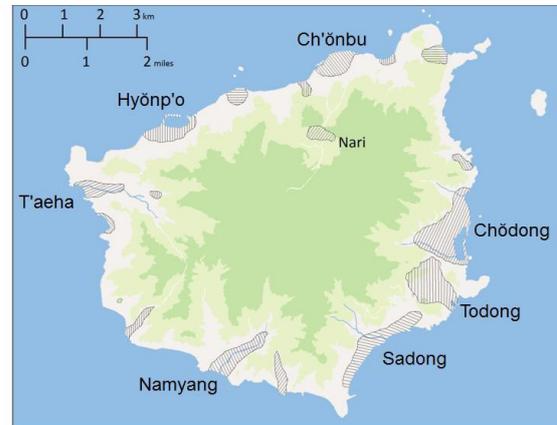
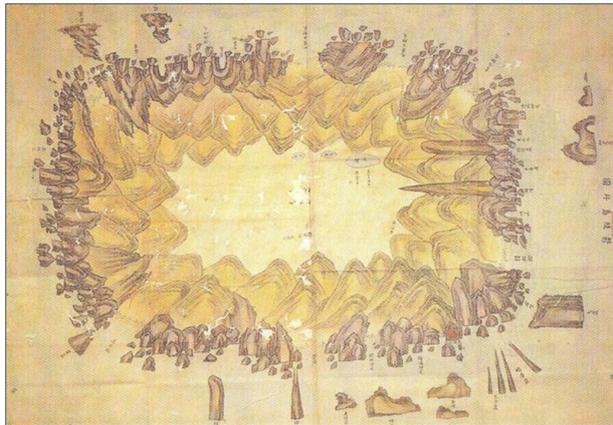
Allusions to the film “Local Hero” are intentional. Ulleungdo’s communities are reminiscent of Ferness (the film’s fictional Scottish coastal village): everybody seems to know everybody; people feel relatively safe (often leaving doors unlocked); people often undertake multiple occupations when necessary (For example, we know a policeman who works nights frying chicken in his wife’s fast food place); and people see stark divisions between inside and outside, small community and big city – and island and mainland in Ulleungdo’s case. But the common feature highlighted here (and in “Local Hero”) is factionalism: factionalism has evidently played a positive role in advancing the re-establishment of percussion bands on Ulleungdo, which I shall return to later.

Although Ulleungdo is well-known for its fishing industry – especially its cuttle-fish – these days the islanders profit more from exporting wild mountain vegetables, particularly wild-garlic known locally as “*myōng*” (“life”). And in the past, when connections with the mainland were weaker and islanders had to be self-sufficient, many devoted their lives to farming. To tempt the first shipment

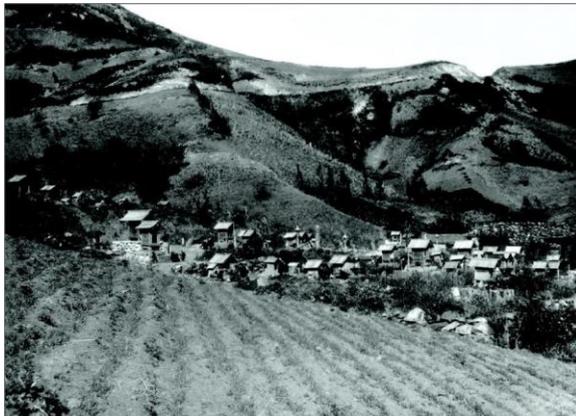
---

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork on Ulleungdo: 28/8/2010–4/9/2010 and 20/4/2011–16/5/2011.

of 54 colonists to relocate in 1883,<sup>2</sup> the following map was used (below left, from Song Pyŏnggi 2010: 177), showing a deceptively large plain in the centre of the island which in reality is very small, corresponding to the shaded area of Nari (below right)<sup>3</sup>.



Old photos reveal farming on a far bigger scale than today. The following photograph (below left)<sup>4</sup> shows farming at the top end of Todong, the island's administrative centre. According to Yun Sŏkch'an, an 80-year old shop owner, a small farming community remained there, far from the harbour and fishermen's houses, until the early 1970s when it "quickly disappeared without trace" (personal communication, 15/5/2011). Yun recalled that they played *p'ungmul*: groups of 15 or so would come down into the town and perform. You can just make out the musicians' *kokkal* hats in an old photo of Todong's seafront from the early 1970s (below right)<sup>5</sup>.



T'aeha, in the remote northwest, also had a large farming community, which was relatively late to modernise. Older residents told of how, until around 1970, the houses were made out of bamboo and, with no electricity, they relied on oil-lamps. One man remembered struggling to complete his homework before the lamp burned out (p.c. 12/5/2011). The following photo (below left)<sup>6</sup> is from about 10 years later but there are still some thatched houses and fields stretching into the distance –

<sup>2</sup> Ulleungdo has not had a settled population for long. From 1438 until 1883, the Korean government enforced an 'empty island policy', judging it too remote and insignificant to govern (Chu Kanghyŏn 2008: 290-291).

<sup>3</sup> Adapted by the author from Google Maps, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <http://blog.daum.net/ul4603/137> (2011)

<sup>5</sup> <http://blog.daum.net/ul4603/137> (2011)

<sup>6</sup> <http://blog.daum.net/ul4603/137> (2011)

now all gone. In interview, Yi Haeu (born in 1916, below right)<sup>7</sup> spoke emotionally about the loss of the farmland in T'aeha and also about the loss of *p'ungmul*.



Yi Haeu was once the leader of the village's *p'ungmul* group and remembers how it used to perform *chishin palpki* (literally, 'treading the earth spirits') on the first full-moon of the lunar calendar. About 15 farmers would congregate with their instruments at the community's central meeting place and then process from house to house, followed by an entourage of locals – particularly children, some playing saucepan lids in emulation – playing outside and inside the homes, shouting out chants such as "Aerua chishina!" In gratitude for their cleansing rituals, each household left money for them in a bowl of rice (p.c. 13/5/2011). In all respects, the procedures recollected by Yi and others match the traditional *chishin palpki* practices on the mainland (see, for example, Yi Kyöngyöp et al. 2007: 95-96).

From the 1960s, farming declined in Ulleungdo. Veg could be imported more cheaply and easily so islanders turned to fishing and gathering wild mountain plants. While the decline of communal farming culture was prompting the decline of *p'ungmul*, the spread of Christianity was making people question the efficacy of practices like *chishin palpki*. And, by the early 1970s, mass media had become available everywhere, broadcasting upbeat modern music to motivate the masses (see Chu Kanghyön 2008: 55–58). Interviews with elderly islanders suggest that the island's *p'ungmul* bands had all disappeared by the late 1970s, T'aeha being the last community to perform *chishin palpki* in 1976. *P'ungmul* was now associated with 'old Ulleungdo', with its hard winters, poverty, and 'superstition'.

Yi Ch'ungsöng, a government officer and native of Ulleungdo, was single-handedly responsible for bringing percussion band music-making back to the island in the mid-1990s. As manager of Ulleungdo's Cultural Division, he was responsible for setting-up the island's first ever annual festival – the Usan Cultural Festival – primarily to boost the island's growing tourist industry. However, as well as inviting professional entertainers from the mainland, Yi was keen to involve the islanders as performers and participants, showcasing Ulleungdo culture and benefiting from the experience. However, he quickly discovered that "there was not a single performance group... not one!" There were a few church choirs, but their hymn-singing was unsuitable for the festival context. Yi explained: "I realised that we had no music... We had no culture of our own" (p.c. 11/5/2011). Following vast improvements in communications technologies in the 70s and 80s, the islanders had become mainland dependent and music, like veg, could be imported, mainland musicians visiting to perform and mainland mass-media being played at home and in entertainment venues.

---

<sup>7</sup> Photo by the author and Sunghee Park

Although he had not been involved in music-making since his school days, Yi became resolved to “bring music to Ulleungdo” himself, choosing *samullori* as the starting point. He pinpointed familiar motivations: “It’s uplifting for the spirit – gets you moving. It’s easy to learn and has a teaching method that is well-established and easy to learn”. So, in 1995 and 1998, he used up his precious holidays on the mainland, taking week-long intensive courses in Kim Duksoo’s Munhwawön in Puyö and Onnuri Kugak Yesuldan in Ch’öngdo. Each time, he brought back notations, books and CDs so that he could continue to progress by himself, alone in Ulleungdo (p.c. 11/5/2011).

By the end of 1998, Yi had learnt “Yöngnam Nongak” – a *samullori* piece that he thought well-suited to represent Ulleungdo, being derived from patterns collected in the neighbouring mainland Kyöngsang provinces. He was ready to transmit the piece to others and, being involved in local government, was well-placed to get funds to buy drums and gongs. He named the new group “Yongorüm” (“Dragon Rising”), after a rare variety of tornado which occurs in that part of the East Sea more frequently than elsewhere. Yi’s fellow office workers constituted the original six members but others of different occupations soon joined, and the group went on to perform at the island’s festivals up until 2004. The same mission statement was repeatedly printed on programmes and webpages: “This group was founded to establish a musical tradition and create local culture”. Eventually, however, the group fizzled out. Yi blamed the island’s unusual predicament: there were no suitable places for practice and storage, no experts to guide the group into new repertoire, and no stable membership. Yongorüm was mainly composed of middle-ranking officers, stationed only temporarily in Ulleungdo. As people came and left, Yi found that he was repeatedly reintroducing the same material, alienating the small core of long-term members (p.c. 11/5/2011). Finally, the instruments were locked away in a basement room to gather dust.

The next renaissance began a few years later when the island’s administration decided to re-introduce an annual festival marking the year’s first full-moon: the Sadong Talmaji (‘Receiving the moon’) Festival. The first of these was scheduled to happen in 2008, geared towards fostering local community rather than the tourist industry. Knowing that *p’ungmul* had traditionally been a crucial element within local New Year celebrations, the authorities were keen to have a local *p’ungmul* ensemble created and were willing to finance tuition. The head of the Ulleung district office teamed up with his friend Kim Chöngsu – a prominent resident of Sadong – to work out a strategy and a simple internet search led them to Ch’asan Nongak, an incessantly fast-paced style with headquarters located in Ch’öngdo, near Daegu. With admirable intrepidity, a group of 11 islanders – mainly residents of Sadong, all over 50 years old, and with no previous traditional percussion experience – travelled all the way there for a week-long workshop. Knowing they only had limited access to expertise, they played non-stop, continuing long after the classes had finished; several remember how they came to perceive all rhythmic sounds in terms of drum and gong patterns – the swish of car windscreen wipers or the patter of rain. After their first triumphant performance, the group, now named “Changhüng Nongak”, was granted funds for another week on the mainland. But thereafter, the same old obstacles reappeared: How to improve without local expertise? (The county refused to finance a third trip). And where to practice and store the instruments? (A colony of rare black pigeons was nesting too close to the only well-suited venue in Sadong). But early in 2011, they found an ideal (albeit temporary) solution: over a bridge on the outskirts of Sadong, past a sign

saying “Changhŭng Nongak Training Centre”, there is an abandoned house which they adopted for practicing (see below)<sup>8</sup> (p.c. 1/9/2010, 12/5/2011).



But that is not the end of the story. In 2009, there was a change of policy regarding the Talmaji Festival, which inadvertently boosted the island’s percussion band culture. It was decided that, from 2010 onwards, the Festival would be hosted by a different part of the village each year. Like many villages in Korea, Sadong is divided into relatively distinct communities – Sadong 1, 2 and 3 – which are clearly delineated by geography, status, familial connections, and other factors. In 2010, Sadong 2 – also known as Okch’ŏn (Jade Stream) – would be the hosts. The introduction of this new policy immediately brought old loyalties and rivalries to the fore (- and here I am returning to the theme of small-community factionalism, so artfully represented in the film “Local Hero”). Because the “Changhŭng Nongak” group was mainly composed of people from Sadong 1 and 3, they were unwilling to play at the forthcoming event hosted by their neighbours. And so the inhabitants of Sadong 2 responded by creating their own group – “Okch’ŏn Nongak” (see below)<sup>9</sup> – calling on Yi Ch’ungsŏng to teach them “Yŏngnam Nongak” and a few patterns for parading. In turn, “Okch’ŏn Nongak”’s performance was good enough to motivate “Changhŭng Nongak” to redouble their efforts: in preparation for the 2011 Festival, with no more funding from the administration, the members pooled their own resources to pay for a third workshop on the mainland.



In interview, members from the two groups highlighted the qualities that put their group above their rivals’. Several “Okch’ŏn Nongak” members explained: “They were created by the authorities but we are a real community group: created by us for us”. On the other side, “Changhŭng Nongak” members pointed out: “They play *samullori* but we play *p’ungmul*”, going on to explain how

<sup>8</sup> Photo by the author and Sung-Hee Park.

<sup>9</sup> Photograph provided by Yi Ch’ungsŏng (2011)

*p'ungmul* is the “real original” form of percussion-band music, better suited to community celebration.

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

#### References

- Bharati, Agehananda. 1970. 'The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns', *The Journal of Asian Studies* (Association for Asian Studies), 29/2: 267–287.
- Chu Kanghyŏn. 2008. *Dokdo Kyŏnmullok [A Record of Dokdo Observation]*. Seoul: Woongjin Books.
- Song Pyŏnggi. 2010. *Ulleungdo wa Dokdo Kŭ Yŏksajŏk Kŏmjŏng [Historical References to Ulleungdo and Dokdo]*. Seoul: Yŏksa Konggan.
- Yi Kyŏngyŏp, Kim Ŭnjŏng, Kim Hyejŏng and Song Kit'ae. 2007. *Kurye Chansu Nongak*. Seoul: Minsokwŏn.