Samulnori: Contemporary Korean Drumming and the Rebirth of Itinerant Performance Culture, by Nathan Hesselink [University of Chicago Press, 2012]

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The 1978 performance of four young musicians on a small stage in downtown Seoul ignited creative energies and movements for change in the world of Korean traditional music. The typical introduction to SamulNori (the group) and *samul nori* (the genre) or more properly *samullori,* begins with this once-upon-a-time moment, a moment in which everything changed and nothing would ever be the same again. On this, Nathan Hesselink's *Samulnori* does not disappoint. Rightfully paying homage to that moment in time and space, Hesselink painstakingly details the epiphanic performance that forever changed perceptions of traditional percussion music and opened new avenues for musical developments in the conservative world of *kugak* (Korean national/traditional music). Throughout the book, SamulNori/*samul nori* remains the locus of a broader discussion regarding tradition, preservation and innovation in Korean traditional music.

Samul nori draws on percussion rhythms from rural amateur and itinerant professional traditions. *Samul nori* literally means 'four things playing' and includes one to two small gongs (*soe*), a large gong (*ching*), an hour-glass shaped double-headed drum (*changgu*) and a barrel drum (*puk*). Performers typically sit on a stage and perform intricate and virtuoso percussion pieces, although many performances now also feature dance, acrobatics and song. While a relatively new genre (about 35 years old), *samul nori* has proved exceedingly influential to contemporary performance styles and is, arguably, the most popular and visible performance genre both domestically in Korea and internationally. Many universities in and outside the Republic of Korea (hereafter, Korea) include a *samul nori* ensemble and the majority of *kugak*-based after-school programmes in Korea include a class on *samul nori*. While obviously standard today, *samul nori's* history and development have not been without controversy and detractors. *Samul nori's* very presence compels scholars and performers of Korean traditional music, and beyond, to consider the position of new performance genres within the ranks of intangible cultural heritage.

Nathan Hesselink's chance encounter with *samul nori* in 1992 changed his academic focus (from Japanese music) and prompted several years of study on Korean rural percussion traditions. Having travelled to Korea for a change of visa status, Hesselink attended a performance at the National Gugak (sic) Center that concluded with a *samul nori* ensemble.[i] He says, *Something was so completely satisfying about it all, a fullness and richness borne completely of rhythm* (5). Determined to make *samul nori* his research focus, Hesselink faced discouragement from scholars and musicians who repudiated *samul nori* as a true Korean tradition, with some going so far as to say the new genre

represented a bastardisation of the perceived purity of *p'ungmul*. So, in 1995, the dutiful student began formal research on percussion traditions in the rural south western province of Korea. Eventually, a desire to further expand his understanding of Korean percussion led to a *samul nori* workshop in 2001, an experience that began to slowly dissipate his initial conservative *kugak* enculturation.

In many ways, Hesselink's book serves as a response to the *samul nori* detractors. While the author contends the book is a study of the first twenty years of the group SamulNori and the derivative genre of *samul nori,* two major ideas dominate: 1) *samul nori* represents the revival of an inclusive living tradition, a possibility seemingly thwarted by a preservation system that denied change and created an exclusive bubble around traditional performing arts and 2) *samul nori* is an extension of an itinerant performance troupe tradition, in particular the *namsadang,* representing the foundations of professional musicianship in Korea. The latter point, in particular, forms the core of the book around which Hesselink explores concepts of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and globalisation, not as new phenomena but as continuations of performance heritage embodied by the *namsadang* legacy. The *namsadang* (literally, 'male temple performance troupe') was one among a few types of itinerant groups in existence at the end of the Chosŏn era (1392-1910). Performances included percussion music and dance (*p'ungmul*), acrobatics, tight-rope walking, masked dance play and puppetry. Most importantly, the *namsadang* were constantly revising and refining performances to meet the demands of audiences. While common criticisms of *samul nori* compare it with *p'ungmul*, Hesselink contends such a comparison inadequately addresses the contributions of *samul nori.* Framing his book around the motto *pŏpko ch'angshin* (preserve the old while creating the new), Hesselink contends that *samul nori* represents more than a revision of *p'ungmul* rhythms and, instead, signifies a continuation of the *namsadang* culture *as lived and experienced today* (page 15).

The book serves as a thorough exploration of SamulNori/*samul nori's* development and significance. The first chapter covers the history and repertoire of the *namsadang* as well as introducing an important and continuing character, Shim Usŏng, in movements toward the popularisation of folk performing arts that laid the groundwork for SamulNori's emergence. Chapter 2 explores issues of urbanisation and stage culture by examining some of the important post-1960s changes leading up to SamulNori's 1978 debut.

Chapter 3's exploration of *och'ae chilgut* ('five-stroke road ritual') in the *p'ungmul*, *namsadang*, SamulNori, and Red Sun/SamulNori collaboration context serves as perhaps the heart of the book. The explanations of the rhythm in these contexts are accompanied by stroke and Western notation as well as sound recordings included in the accompanying CD. Although the demonstration of the *namsadang-samul nori* link is most assertively demonstrated in this chapter, certain ideas regarding urbanisation and the audience-performer divide are slightly muddled in the process. For example, Hesselink asserts SamulNori heralded a move from the countryside to the city (see page 69), yet, in this chapter equally maintains that *namsadang* served as the original urban performance genre. Hesselink's main goal appears to have been to connect the *namsadang* and SamulNori through ideas about professional musicianship and shifting contexts, a point that might have been made clearer by sticking to ideas of professionalism instead of the urban/rural divide. Hesselink also discusses the concert stage as part of the process of urbanisation and professionalisation for SamulNori. In the process, he bemoans the audience-performer divide initiated by the concert stage, yet admits that, because of their mystique as expert performers, the *namsadang* always maintained a separate space from audience members. Such ambiguity places *namsadang* in a weirdly liminal space instead of drawing the clear links to SamulNori/*samul nori* Hesselink proposes to accomplish.

Chapters 4 and 5 emphasise the aspects of SamulNori's contribution that make it both unique and formidable in the world of *kugak*. Chapter 4's exploration of SamulNori's cosmological didacticism employed in the team's educational outreach presents thorough details of *p'ungsu's* relation to Korean tradition and its integration into the educational pedagogy of SamulNori. Such an exploration remains absolutely crucial to understanding SamulNori's overarching influence on contemporary conceptions of *kugak*'s cultural import. Chapter 5 addresses east-west encounters via hybridity through the concept of the *nanjang* (community festival), which Hesselink stresses as a historic precedent for inter-cultural interaction and hybridity. According to Hesselink,

the *namsadang* epitomise the freedom and openness to hybridity represented by the *nanjang* (see pages 103, 110-11). However, Hesselink never goes into detail regarding this hybridity and provides no clear examples. In addition, the obviously xenophobic nature of the *tŏppoegi* masked dance plays included in the *namsadang* repertoire (see page 30) contradicts the notion of openness to outside influence. This brings to the surface questions regarding the *namsadang*'s repertoire and potential contemporary framing within the cultural protection context of the mid-twentieth century. Hesselink never really addresses this seemingly crucial issue and the reader is left scratching her/his head in dismay over the apparent contradiction. Despite this oversight, Hesselink's discussion of the *namsadang*'s supposed hybridity connects this performance form to SamulNori's prolonged work with international artists. His points regarding power balance and sustainability are crucial in marking SamulNori and the team's collaborations with Red Sun as success stories within the global music market.

Nathan Hesselink's accessible writing style makes *Samulnori* a wonderful contribution to the library of both academics and non-academics specifically interested in Korean performance traditions and more generally interested in issues of cultural preservation, innovation, and hybridity. The book compiles years of Hesselink's research on SamulNori, *samulnori,* and *p'ungmul* for a comprehensive study of the team and genre and its implications in and outside Korea. Despite some drawbacks (mentioned above), Nathan Hesselink's work serves as a multifaceted and engaging account of one academic's struggle with the meaning of 'tradition' as well as the legacy and continuing influence of SamulNori in *making tradition relevant again* (page 132).

i While Hesselink refers to the Kungnip kugagwŏn Center as the 'National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts' (NCKTPA) (its previous English title), the Center changed its official English name to the National Gugak Center in 2012.

