

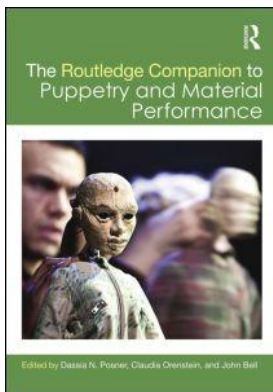
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Korean Puppetry and Heritage

Hyundai Puppet Theatre and Creative Group NONI
Translating Tradition

Kathy Foley

Korean traditional rod puppetry (*kkokdu gaksi noreum*),¹ which was almost defunct at the time of the Korean War (1950–1953), experienced a revival starting in the 1960s. This renewed interest in the art came with the rise of nationalism by way of post-colonial academic work in folklore, which hoped to reconstruct indigenous “roots.” Contemporary artists have, since the 1980s, sought strategies to fit *kkokdu gaksi* into modern performance. But the bawdy folk genre called *namsadang nori*, a type of performance that amalgamates farmer’s band (*nongak*) music, circus feats, acrobatics, mask performance, and the traditional puppet play of *kkokdu gaksi*, may remain an uneasy match for what the market currently desires in traditional forms: to be able to export a national “high” art in cultural exchanges, to activate child-specific entertainment of modern mediated puppetry, or to energize the urban middle class with a sense of roots in a period of economic growth and democratic freedom. These Korean folk genres, which were low class and critical of the hierarchy in their comic energy, have great potential in times of political urgency and were used evocatively by student protesters in the 1980s to oppose the military dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee and to attack the American military presence (Park 2013). However, they do not approximate elite “art” aesthetics of court or contemporary urban elites. This means that the modern puppeteer must make choices, when purely following the tradition will be seen as too messy, bawdy, or boring. One strategy is to wed selected portions of traditional forms to other arts with which it has no historical link; another is to mold tradition into an avant-garde display where visual aspects may be expanded and recast, becoming more impressive than the original, which was a joke-driven form. Only one government-supported heritage troupe of *namsadang nori* is currently performing the traditional show on a limited basis. But here, after some discussion of the history, we can see how the work of two groups in particular, Hyundai Puppet Theatre and Creative Group NONI, has reworked aspects of Korean traditional puppetry.

“Courtly consort” and the “big bang” in Asian performing arts

For clarifying the situation of Korean puppetry, it is useful first to discuss the two poles of traditional Asian puppetry, which I call the “courtly consort” and the “big bang.” Elite arts are or were forms where the artists may live in or by the palace/temple/theatre they serve. They tell epic stories that are generally supportive of the religious or state ideology that assures their daily rice. These forms are relatively high in status and grow as elaborate as the patronage may allow: large sets of figures/impressively large puppets, elaborate musical instruments, and polished presentations are the norm. Some genres from Southeast Asia, such as the court shadow puppetry of the Thai (*nang yai*) and Khmer (*nang sbek thom*), the *wayang* of Java, and court marionettes of Myanmar (*yokthe pwe*), enjoyed court support. The Japanese forms of mask performance (*nō*) or puppet theatre (*bunraku*) could arguably be included as “courtly consorts”: while they moved out of the palace and temple, respectively, to play for urban audiences, these Japanese forms were, in the past, genres with elite support.

By contrast, there also exist Asian forms presented by itinerants, who do short skits or episodes that can be quickly grasped by the passerby. In these, the “scene,” rather than the ongoing narrative, is a self-standing unit. Big sound, slapstick action, shocking language (sex, political rabble-rousing) can attract attention and garner applause. The puppet figures are rough, small enough for itinerants to carry, and easy to manipulate. Musical instruments are limited and emphasize loudness (drum, gong, oboe/loud stringed instrument). In these forms the musician usually sits outside the simple cloth-draped booth and interacts verbally with both audience and puppets, which are moved by one or a few manipulators. Everything seems a bit fly-by-night, and since the performers are often *persona non grata* (their humor often criticizes the constraints of the upper-class-dominated order), quick exits before official sweeps are sometimes needed. Rajasthani marionettes (*kathputli*), Iranian string puppets (*keimeh shab bazi*), and Korean *kkokdu gaksi* rod figures are all “big bang” forms.

While the court arts may have at one point derived from these faster and more brash materials and may keep traces of this old material somewhere in their structures, the court arts of the powerful have acquired the pomp that is the mark of an elite: palaces generally slow performances down, multiply the number of performers, expand the orchestra, demand extended space, and tell narratively big stories. Court arts are displays of power, resources, and importance. These genres, in an era of the modern nation-state, often garner significant government or elite support, are frequently sent to represent the country in international arts exchanges, and have moved quickly into “Intangible Cultural Heritage” status that UNESCO has created since the turn of the millennium.

Meanwhile, village arts deal with basics. How does one gather a crowd – humans, ancestor spirits, and/or demons? The instruments need to be heard – for example, the brass handheld gong, drums, and the piercing sound of a shawm in the Korean farmer’s band. The iconography of figures may be broad and bright, to “read” outdoors and over distance. Narratively, performers turn to basic themes – sex, pecking order, and death – and laughter trumps tears. Since the players depend more on popularity with the masses than approval of a permanent patron, the show’s point of

view will often reflect the “little guy” and skewer authority. These puppeteers come from the bottom of society, and their clowns playfully expose the viewpoint of the macho-yet-put-upon, lower-class male. In transitioning from traditional societies, these arts may have a more difficult time gaining significant support from national governments or the attention of modern educated urban audiences, and artists may puzzle over how to use them. Traditional puppetry in Korea falls into this “big bang” category, since it was a significant tool in questioning the strict social order, and yet in the last decades, for political and social reasons, there has been an inclination to see how *kkokdu gaksi* and *namsadang nori* might migrate into something a bit more like the “courtly consort.”

Translating tradition in post-colonial frames

The migration of Korean folk forms from “big bang” to “courtly consort” during the latter half of the twentieth century posed difficulties. First, there was the traditional class status of the performers and their historical association with male prostitution – modern performers needed to dissociate from this class stigma. Second, there was the spiritual outlook toward shamanism and Buddhism embedded in the performances, scorned by the elite in the Joseon (1392–1910) period and seen in the Japanese period (1910–1945) as primitive or corrupt. This religious root needed to be reframed. Third, there was the narrative – episodic, comic, and antiestablishment. Post-colonial perspectives, nationalist revival, and serendipitous experiments with modernizing the genre led to the reformulations we see in groups such as Hyundai and NONI.

Namsadang nori (literally, “male performers’ play”) of the Joseon Dynasty were sometimes called *hwarang*, or “flower boys” – a term that some link to early Silla era (57 BCE–935 CE) practices (see Rutt 1961; Kim 1981; and Kim and Hahn 2006: 61; the latter state that other terms used for these male homosexual performers were *kkokdu gaksi*, *midonggaji*, and *namsadang*). They were lower-class males who wandered the countryside performing puppetry and other entertainments and who were generally available as homosexual prostitutes. Working under a single troupe leader for a group of perhaps 40, senior performers for the multifaceted performance were dominant males called *sudongmo* and “females” who were known as *yeodongmo* (Sim cited in Kim 1981: 10). The apprentices – orphans, children from impoverished and shaman families, and kidnapped boys – fell into this “female” group (Kim 1981: 10). The art during the current era, which frowned upon these homosexual practices, needed to be decoupled from such associations to elevate its status.

Shamanism, though the early Korean religion, was also devalued during the Joseon period, when Confucian ideology prevailed, so this music/performance with shamanic roots, by association, was held in low regard. Exorcisms were probably the first impulse behind farmer’s band drums and gongs – agitated rhythms that link to ecstatic shaman performances of the peninsula. *Namsadang* performers, like shamans, were outcasts, and often performers were relatives of the mostly female shamans. Male shamans were a minority, but their cross-dressing and feminine behaviors had parallels to the homosexual culture of *namsadang nori* troupes. Buddhism was a

second spiritual root and similarly attacked in the Joseon Dynasty. *Namsadang nori* itself is often linked to an institution of the Silla Dynasty – which reached its zenith by the sixth century CE – a kind of Buddhist Boy Scouts called *hwarang* (Rutt 1961: 3). Farmer’s band music, associated with the troupes that did puppet shows, acrobatics, and masks, supposedly derives from marching band performances of these Buddhist youths’ military/spiritual training, as they went out to honor the rivers and mountains with their shamanic-Buddhist playing and dancing. These lovely, feminine boys used cosmetics, dressed beautifully, and had homosexual liaisons. *Namsadang nori* of the late Joseon period is argued by some to be a distant, corrupted manifestation of this old Buddhist-shamanist Silla practice, though direct links are impossible to prove (Rutt 1961). In post-colonial Korea, shamanism and Buddhism would be reintegrated and no longer devalued as they had been in the Confucian Joseon perspective.

The narrative of the traditional play did not fit either an elite model during Korea’s dynastic period or the various modernized theatre models that emerged in the twentieth century: it shows short episodes of monks, the upper class, or political leaders acting badly. In these plays governors are corrupt and men are self-serving. This brought disapproval first from Confucian officials; while during the colonial period (1910–1945), Japanese authorities saw these low-class performers as politically suspect nuisances who were apt to attack Japanese rule. This genre was, therefore, always important for its critical nature, which questioned class structure and religious orthodoxy, but for that very reason rarely won undivided support from those in power. *Namsadang nori* was largely defunct in the early twentieth century, although some Japanese folklore researchers did begin to write on such forms, laying the groundwork for later studies by Korean folklorists (Ch’oe 2003; Janelli 1986). The form’s emblematic characters – Bak Cheomji (Old Man Park), who introduced scenes and was voiced with a swizzle/reed; his well-endowed nephew, Hong Dongji, who saves his uncle from a dragon; the lovely concubine; and the abandoned wife, Kkokdu Gaksi, who squabbles and is sometimes killed to provide the corpse for a funeral – all seemed phantoms of the past.

During the late 1950s, revivalists, government cultural officials, and academic researchers reconstructed the art during a post-colonial search for national roots. Emphasizing Korean folk culture was a way of rejecting Joseon’s Confucian court culture, which was held responsible for allowing the Japanese to prevail (Saeji, pers. comm., January 14, 2013). The emphasis on lower-class culture, shamanism, and Buddhism was a way to move beyond both the period of Japanese influence and the Confucian period, where Chinese influence was seen to have dominated, and back to some pristine Korean-ness that might strengthen the nation. The *namsadang nori* genre was declared part of the nation’s cultural heritage, and funding from the government was allocated for teaching the genre as it was practiced in the early twentieth century. This reinvented *namsadang nori* was arguably most alive from the late 1970s through the 1980s when the ideas of drumming to gather a crowd and short skits to get political points across were important to university students who wanted to protest the military dictatorship. But with democracy achieved by the 1990s, this brash, youthful energy subsided.

In these more settled times, groups such as Hyundai and NONI restructured elements of *namsadang nori* to see how “big bang” puppetry could morph toward

“courtly consort” art to fit better into categories of “national heritage” and contemporary “art” production. Directors think of educating the next generation in their Korean distinctiveness (through a show like *Deong deong kung ta kung*) or impressing foreign audiences on tour (e.g., *Kkok-du* in India or Germany) using selected aspects of traditional *namsadang* and puppet/mask arts to show Korea to all as the serious economic, political, and cultural player that it is.

Hyundai Puppet Theatre

Seoul’s Hyundai Puppet Theatre creates an intergenerational music and dance variety show that maintains some of the imagery and sound of the traditional *namsadang nori*. At the same time, the group melds these commoners’ arts with elements from either elevated court arts or modern pop culture to create a fusion performance for local urban audiences and international tours.

A sample of this work is their 2009 show *Deong deong kung ta kung*² – the name comes from the drum syllables used in Korean percussion. This specific work was created in collaboration with Gyeonggi Korean Traditional Music Center and was directed by Lee Mi-yong (Yi Mi-yeong) for both live performance and television in order to introduce children and general audiences to traditional music. The piece includes variations on works introduced years earlier by company founder Cho Yong-su (Jo Yong-su, 1932–1992) – a journalist and graduate from Konkuk University who was hired by KBS-TV (Korean Broadcasting System) in 1962 to oversee children’s offerings. Seeing television models from the United States in that era using puppetry as a highlight of children’s programming, Cho founded Hyundai in which his brother and current director Cho Yong-suk (Jo Yong-seok, b. 1947) developed his craft. The company mostly began with rod puppets, working from Japanese doll puppet traditions and Western puppet techniques rather than the indigenous model of *namsadang nori* that performed in Korean commercial centers and the countryside as popular entertainment. Over the years, Hyundai has used a wide variety of puppet forms (black light, marionettes, rod figures) combined with local content. The group began to tour internationally as the Korean economy lifted in the 1980s, and it was useful to have pieces that reflected Korean heritage, both for educational purposes at home and to represent Korea internationally. Thus, *Heungbu and Nolbu*, a popular Korean tale about the noble Heungbu and his greedy brother, Nolbu, drawn from Korean story singing (*pansori*), was the company choice for a tour to Japan in 1982. During the same era, Cho Yong-su saw the useful links between puppetry and traditional music for informing youth about indigenous heritage and created pieces for children based on the farmer’s band percussion orchestra of *namsadang* performers, now generally called *samul nori*, literally “playing four instruments” (the large gong, small gong, hourglass drum, and barrel drum). Cho also did versions of traditional fan and flower crown dances (*hwagwanmu*) that borrowed from the entertainments performed by courtesans of the pre-colonial Korean court.

The company does not faithfully reproduce *kkokdu gaksi*, avoiding the play’s episodes of marital infidelity, the exploits of the nude, red-bodied Hong Dongji with his

large penis, killings, etc. – aspects which the group probably considers inappropriate for their contemporary target audience of school children, middle-class families, or foreigners who can be educated about Korea when the company is on international tour. Though the company borrows from the tradition, it takes selectively. The program for *Deong deong kung ta kung* includes some pieces from *namsadang*-like sources (the farmer's band music, drum dance, and a mask dance number), and these are mixed with examples of court music and dance. Including court genres moves the program away from *namsadang nori*'s characteristic comedy and gives it a kind of cachet that *namsadang nori* lacks on its own. For example, the program begins with a macho masked traditional seller whose big head and deep voice reminds one of the butcher in the mask dance of Hahoe village. But rather than hawking bull testicles as an aphrodisiac to flabby and aging aristocrats (as in the Hahoe original), the character is “selling” the appreciation of traditional music to assembled school children. Tradition is referenced and reworked. It assumes that children, through clips of annual folklore festivals that appear on television, will recognize the character, but the physical image rather than the raucous jokes are appropriated. This is a cleaned-up heritage display and not a messy folk form that has the potential to shake up the social structure.

After a demonstration of some of the softer traditional instruments used in art music, the puppet farmer's band of *namsadang nori* takes center stage. Puppets perhaps 80 centimeters long are attached to the manipulators' feet. A central string comes down from the head of the dancer/manipulator and is attached to the puppet head, while rods manipulated from above activate the puppets' arms. In the stage lighting, the black-clad performers “disappear” as we watch the lively music quartet; the figures dance and play instruments with the sound provided by a recording. Lyrics accompanying the drumming note that music “goes throughout the urban and rural land / ... The *Janggu* [hourglass drum] rhythm / gets exciting / just like a welcome rain.” The complex percussion music takes the traditional farmer's band sound and extends it toward the jazz-like improvisations of contemporary *samul nori* music. It also adds lyrics that remind urban children of their roots, providing a positive updating for the genre. Another piece includes an hourglass drum dance by five female drummer puppets. This episode has upbeat energy and uses complex choreographic patterns with the same manipulation style as the farmers' band sequence just described: this is a new music composition by composer Park Byung-oh (Bak Byeong-o) based on tradition, and while the number is not a traditional *namsadang nori* piece, it has some of the same earthy energy.

The puppets dancing in the finale wear costumes and masks that emulate the *talchum*, or mask dance of Bongsan (Pongsan) – a genre formerly of North Korea (preserved in Seoul) and the most virtuosic of the Korean mask dances, related in characters and episodes to *namsadang nori* (see Saeji 2012). But rather than enacting scenes from the traditional mask/puppet play, the figures are just “in the style” of the folk genre. The movement is generic rather than the distinctive mime of the characters presented in a traditional play. The sequence borrows a white-faced Somu (female shaman) mask, a twisted-nose mask that might in a traditional context signal a young and foolish aristocrat (*yangban*), and a dark mask, which might represent an older monk character who tries to seduce a beautiful shaman. But here we have instead

generic “Korean mask dance,” as the three puppets move in unison rather than doing dance gestures that might indicate their differing characters. The masks provide color contrast rather than specific characters or actions that we would find in a traditional performance. Moreover, they enter to synthesized music (perhaps to aurally signal they are in synch with modernity) – a fast, electric rhythm sounds under their funny, robotic walk. Then they dance to a recording of traditional instrumentation.

This is tradition nouveau, cut loose from expected characterization, wisecracks, and stories. The images are signs of Korean-ness, as is the norm with Korean masks used in TV commercials or displayed on tourist brochures. The *namsadang nori* arts that are included in this performance (farmer’s band and mask dance) are comic and energetic parts of the child-friendly program, used to balance out the dances inspired by court-dance tradition. In another item, a court fan dance, puppets are again manipulated by a combination of strings and rods, but the rods are here sometimes held by a second manipulator as the dancing figures flip their fans open and then close them while they gracefully glide and twirl. A fairy dance is another new creation in the program: the white costumed dolls are mounted on a central rod atop the heads of black-clothed manipulators, who see through the sheer skirts. The fabric floats as the dancer-manipulators swirl, moving the figures’ arms with rods. The white costumes and flowing movement evoke aspects of *salpuri*, a now classicized female Korean dance genre that is an artistic extension of traditional shaman performance. These floating female dolls of both the fan and fairy dance recalibrate the overall program in a way that *namsadang nori*’s more rough art would not. Perhaps these refined female dances are thought to provide “soft” characters for little girls, as the impression they give is of “princess-like,” “ethereal” beings. The intent of the program is to encourage children of both genders to engage with traditional and neo-traditional Korean music and dance, rather than abandoning themselves to Western forms.

This program borrows selectively from *namsadang nori* and *kkokdu gaksi*, taking their music and movement but dispensing with narrative scenes, known characters, and satiric perspectives, probably since these materials are not considered “child appropriate” in current society. By adding courtly dances to the *namsadang nori*-lite program, this becomes a free-floating representation of heritage – bowdlerized and balanced. The pieces can easily be exported and appreciated internationally.

Creative Group NONI

The show *Kkok-Du* by Creative Group NONI, formed in 2006 by a group of graduates of the Korea National University of Arts, takes a different tack. The company keeps aspects of the ribald *kkokdu gaksi* drama, which sometimes earns negative comments from international viewers, but the group also elevates the form and emphasizes the spiritual roots of the heritage, reflecting trends in academic research on this art since Korean independence. Their reframing is done via stylizing the visual design and incorporating sequences not found in *namsadang nori*’s *kkokdu gaksi* to show the shamanic roots of the puppetry/mask dance practices as they have been theorized by Korean folklorists.

The play, using a cast of six and directed by Kim Kyung-hee, is an adaptation of the traditional *kkokdu gaksi* play by Kyoung Min-sun. The musicians (a vocalist and drummer) are on the side of the stage, performing and interacting with the puppets/mask dancers – this corresponds to the practice in traditional *namsadang*. But instead of the simple rod puppet show of *kkokdu gaksi*, which was traditionally staged in an enclosed booth with the puppeteers always hidden, the performance shifts between small rod figures, oversized body puppets of the same characters in front of the booth, shadow sequences, and a dragon character that is painted on the screen during the performance. While the group references the traditional narrative – a love triangle, a monster, and a death – the presentation impresses with a stunning visual display, reorienting viewers toward sacred roots rather than adhering solely to the raucous reality of the traditional show.

The play begins with two unmasked dancers in the white garments of shamans bowing at a table for the spirits. In a ritual opening they dance with the traditional white pompoms used by shamans. The shadow of a bridge appears on the screen – evoking the idea of bridges between life and death. Then we see in the curtained booth the main figure of the traditional play, Bak Cheomji, an old aristocrat, presented as a traditional-looking rod puppet. Bak Choemji then re-emerges as an oversized body puppet, outside the booth, where he interacts with his wife (Gaksi) and concubine (Deolmi), who at first remain small rod puppets. The love triangle and bickering between the three are true to original *namsadang nori*. Soon the serpent-dragon (Isimi), who traditionally eats people, appears. But rather than the small traditional rod figure for the dragon, Isimi magically manifests via quick, calligraphic brushstrokes drawn by designer Won Yeojung all across the back of the extended shadow screen. The small rod puppets pass through the booth as rod puppets and then become shadows as they dance along the extended screen. Their shadow images disappear into the gaping jaws of the large painted dragon. The piece ends, as is customary in *kkokdu gaksi*, with a funeral, as the assembled rod figures carry a decorated bier. Yet, as with the shamanic opening, this scene is given spiritual weight by the music and mood of solemnity. It is not being played for laughs as in a traditional *kkokdu gaksi* show.

Won's design for the puppets draws from traditional characters but presents them with stylization: the concubine has the look of a Modigliani beauty, and the old wife's deeply etched facial lines remind us of a visage that might have been created by expressionists such as Ernst Barlach or Edvard Munch. The body-puppet version of Bak Cheomji is no longer the rough figure we see in *namsadang nori* but has moved toward the figural abstraction reminiscent of Mummenshanz or the polished lines of Cirque du Soleil representations. We recognize the body puppets as Bak Cheomji or his old wife from their grotesque characteristics, but the stylization gives the figures an added coolness that the rough folk puppetry does not have. This is sculptural performance art rather than costumed folk figures. The comedy is here, but it is a *namsadang nori* that has been passed through an abstracting aesthetic in the same way *commedia* in the hands of Lecoq-trained artists is transformed into something new. The overall actions, from the opening appearance of performer/manipulator/dancers in shaman white to the closing funeral, are presented within a theatrical frame: we are inside a shaman ceremony (*gut*). The company's press material

states: “There is both recognition and confusion – an acknowledgement of the strange and foreign and of the known and native; of traditional practice and its contemporary meaning; of particular stories and universal truths” (*The Hindu*, August 5, 2011).

Serious visual art characterizes the group. Their other work, including *Playing Wind* (Param Nori, 2010), which uses mask images and music from the traditional mask dance, also shows their emphasis on design. In *Playing Wind* the masks, lighted from inside, create ethereal faces as the performers parade through the dark in white traditional clothing and pure white masks (unusual for the tradition): white references both the traditional hemp clothing mandatory in the Joseon period and the color of purity and shamanic power. The company’s *Monkey Ddance* (sic) (2012) and *Ignis fatuus Rin* (2010) use aspects of traditional performance (monkey masks and movements, acrobatic spinning, and flags), mixing them with digital projections and shadow puppetry.³ All NONI presentations bring together striking visual design, elements of Korean performance tradition (distanced from their source), and an emphasis on natural materials sculpturally conceived. The NONI website gives their principles: “Natural Material, Analogue Object, AlterNative View, Traditional Play” (Creative Group NONI undated)

International reactions to *Kkok-du* have ranged from highly laudatory to dazed and confused. Indian viewers, as attested by their letters to *The Hindu* on the performance, were often critical, bewildered by the skits when they wanted a narrative plot and shocked by the ribald English subtitles, which emulate the original *kokkdu gaksi*. C. Venugopal noted:

Kkok-Du opens as most Korean theatre productions do – strikingly stark, with exquisite lighting, and cleverly crafted paper lanterns adding to the mood. Characteristic Korean percussion is heard along with clanging cymbals. The backlight shows dancing musicians in scintillating silhouette. One waits for the promised storyline ... but all one gets are shockers – gutter humour which the brochure calls “earthy.” One prepares to get up and leave. Again the magic ... The screen comes alive with a python writhing across the screen ... stagecraft that any theatre person would kill for ... again the crass humour laced with crass action ... Finally, one can take it no more and leaves the show with a lot of mixed feelings. Awe for the craft but tinged with anguish for the trash that is shown as art.

(*The Hindu*, August 14, 2011)

Hariharan agreed:

Twenty minutes of the 80-minute production was devoted to an elegiac epilogue to an old debauch who supposedly drowns to death in a cup of water. Such criticism could be overcome if contextualised and studied within the framework of traditional Korean music and puppetry. But the predicament here was locating the art of ribaldry which was its driving principle.

(*The Hindu*, August 14, 2011)

However, Taroon Kamar praised the show:

We were all blown away by what is undoubtedly one of the most creative collage[s] I have seen in theater: brilliant set design, great costumes and choreography, amazing puppetry, exhilarating live rhythms – woven together in a funny yet poignant story. Subtitles are provided and they work very well. Superb!

(*The Hindu*, August 14, 2011)

A German reviewer of *Kkok-du* focused on the stylization and was not concerned with words or narrative:

All in all this exciting performance showed an interesting way to deal with traditional art forms. At no time [did] it seemed outdated. The free combination of different artistic elements produced interesting effects of recognition and confusion. It was not a problem that at times the projected subtitles (the piece was performed in Korean) were difficult to follow. The images, the sounds of drums and voices behind the curtain – and, of course, the wonderfully manufactured puppets – stood for themselves.

(Creutzenberg 2007)

The publicity material for a second piece the group has staged in Germany discussed NONI's use of related techniques:

The Korean Ensemble Creative Group NONI of Seoul presents a summary of their shadow play *Ignis fatuus Rin*. The play takes the audience into a fantastic world of ancient Korean rites and legends, ... throw[ing] light and shadow ... The Shamanism and Buddhism entertainment arts of the rural population of Korea meets ... Commedia dell Arte, Sound art, Jazz, Tango and Physical Theatre.

(Huguet 2011)

It was probably easier for the European viewership, accustomed perhaps to greater sex or profanity in modern performance as compared to their South Indian middle-class counterparts, to appreciate the work and not be put off by *Kkok-du*'s borrowing from *namsadang nori*'s ribaldry.

NONI's work clearly moves away from the political-critical-comic potential that was a central aspect of traditional performances and toward the shamanic-visual-ethereal. There are clowns and attention to the source material, but these are the clowns one encounters in the avant-garde – archetypes, not belly-laugh beings. The production goes toward “roots,” indigenous Korean shamanism that the post-colonial research community has emphasized as the motivating spirit behind *namsadang nori* and linked to Korean national beginnings. NONI's performance puts the viewer in touch with Korean shamanic distinctiveness by way of a modern, visually stylized spectacle. The result is a performance that is more easily exportable to international

festivals and more appealing to local viewers than the original puppet show, which is presented in Seoul more as pure heritage than “art.”

The title communicates NONI’s intention: *kkok-du* are small figures carved on the sides of traditional funeral biers who “accompany” the deceased to the next world. This, of course, reminds one of the Northeast Asian use of figures/dolls placed in tombs to “serve the dead,” of which the terracotta warriors of Xian (third century BCE) are merely the grandest example. While *kkokdu gaksi* may have first stemmed from related archaic practices, this was not the play’s function during its documented history in the Joseon Dynasty, when sexual innuendo and satire of class and power prevailed. NONI’s way of raising the performance’s status is by aesthetically cleaning up the visual lines, making the depictions more abstract and modernist, and pushing the content toward cosmic questions of life and death. The use of shadow theatre, which was very rare in Korea in the past, helps the company’s transition to “other” worlds. The shadow’s ephemeral nature and the play of light and dark make it a genre conducive to tropes of the spiritual and mystical. That the *kkokdu gaksi* itself was played out of doors with three-dimensional figures and was secular and satiric in content does not matter. The group’s intention is to move back to what members, along with contemporary Korean researchers, believe to be the root of the theatre. They link their Intangible Cultural Heritage genre to what they see as spiritual needs in modern society, to “question how traditional techniques can continue to have relevance for contemporary audiences and explore how their creative processes can be eco-friendly to mirror the strong bonds between Man and Nature” (*The Hindu*, August 5, 2011) in a primordial and timeless Korean space.

Though Hyundai and NONI are only two examples of contemporary redeployments of the traditional puppet arts, each is engaged in figuring out how the past as represented by *namsadang nori* can fit present audience expectations. They are dealing with the reality of how a low-class and previously frowned-upon folk genre can be retooled for a modern educated audience. These companies show how the material can be alternatively transformed into art that communicates selective parts of the tradition to a contemporary child audience or how young artists may approach aspects of tradition as “roots” for an adult viewership. In each case they are addressing some of the same issues that Punch and Judy performers may encounter in Anglophone countries in an era when presenting violence or sex if children are watching is frowned upon or when political correctness may censor some traditional scenes. Heritage is a powerful lever and yet it cannot always immediately address what may be the central issue – “big bang” arts by their nature fit uncomfortably inside a “courtly consort” frame that heritage efforts sometimes tend to favor. Instead, they are always exploding out.

Notes

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- 1 “Old wife’s play,” also known as Bak Cheomji’s play, *deolmi* (concubine’s [play]) or Hong Dongji’s play. All the names are of significant characters in the show. For background see Cho (1979, 1988), Jeon (2005, 2008), Lee (1981), and Sim (1970, 1997). The puppet play was made a Korean Intangible Cultural Property in 1964 and inscribed in 2009 as part of *namsadang* as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity genre. The UNESCO webpage features a short video of *namsadang nori*, which includes the puppetry; pictures of the Anseong-based, government-supported heritage troupe; and documentation submitted at the time of inscription. See <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00184>>. This Anseong group is the only group currently presenting the traditional puppet show. Called Baudeogi Pungmulden Anseong (Anseong Municipal Namsadang Baudeogi), it is named after the first female leader of a *namsadang* troupe. This group’s mission is to preserve not innovate. This chapter instead focuses on groups that attempt to rethink the art. See Anseong Municipal Namsadang Baudeogi Pungmuldan at <<http://www.namsadangnori.org/e3.htm>>.
- 2 See “Hyundai puppet theatre presents ‘Deong deong kung ta kung,’” (July 22, 2011) at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sh4JqbCblh4>>. This discussion is based on the YouTube version. Many of the pieces are also included in the more musically eclectic *Puppet City*. See “The Puppet City – Hyundai Puppet Theatre,” (March 28, 2011) at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzAXk8MYUyI>>. *Puppet City* has toured internationally since the 1990s and has other musical numbers, including an “Elvis” impersonation.
- 3 Clips of Creative Group NONI’s work can be seen on YouTube. *Kkok-du* (December 24, 2010) can be viewed at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaSJuQr3lv0>>. For *Playing Wind* (December 26, 2010), go to <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyDG9mdGHAg>>. For *Monkey Ddance* (September 10, 2012), go to <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AJnsXeVuZk>>. For *Ignis fatuus_Rin* (December 26, 2010), go to <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9Sw7bnqvRM>>.

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