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**CHISIN PALPKI, P'UNGMUL, CHRISTIAN
SURFERS AND 'SLAMMING A RIDE':
FOLKLORE AND THE NEGOTIATION OF KOREAN
AMERICAN IDENTITY IN LOS ANGELES**

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... dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm or the center, that there is no one geographic center pulling the world together and glowing with the allure of the real thing ... in a decentered world we are always simultaneously in the center and on the periphery (Hoffman 1989: 275).

On a warm Los Angeles afternoon in early February, the sun's long rays glinting off a nearby glass and steel office building, a group of young men and women dressed in blue and white *hanbok* (traditional Korean attire) playing drums and gongs snake their way through a mini-mall parking lot. Store owners stand in their shop doors, and family and friends cluster around the edges of the lot. The *han'gul* lettering on the storefronts confirms that this is a business area catering primarily to a Korean heritage clientele. A small group of people at a nearby bus stop turns to watch the seemingly incongruous performance, unaware that this is the first month of the year by the lunar calendar and that the performance they are witness to is known by all involved as *Chisin Palpki*.

¹ I would like to thank the organizers of the SATII conference in Seoul in 1999, and the Committee on Degrees on Folklore and Mythology, Harvard University, for the opportunity to develop and present earlier drafts of this paper. In contemporary folk speech, an automobile is often referred to as "a ride," and modification is often referred to as "slamming."

(Treading on the Earth Spirits).² Interestingly, not all the people watching in the parking lot are Korean, and multilingual fliers—Spanish, English, and Korean—explaining the ritual have been handed out. According to the flier, the goal of the ritual is to guarantee that the various earth spirits inhabiting the mall remain underground, thereby insuring the safety and prosperity of the stores in the coming year. A second, less explicit goal of the ritual is for the musicians to raise money for their organization, a college-based group dedicated to the study and revival of Korean folk traditions, primarily farmer's band music (*p'ungmul*). A third, unspoken goal of the ritual is to make visible (and audible) the link between these Korean heritage businesses and the larger Korean American community. The performers soon move inside the stores, and the small crowd outside follows. Over the course of the next several hours, the group of performers and onlookers makes its way in and out of nearly all the stores in the mall, playing music, singing songs, joking with each other and the audience, and feasting on foods set out by each of the store owners.

As traffic rumbles by on the avenue in front of the mini-mall, the clang of gongs, the deep hollow beating of drums, and the enthusiastic singing of the group leader mingles with the sounds of car radios playing *banda* and rap, the wail of a distant siren, and the roar of a jet on its final approach to LAX. Given the setting and the performers, this small enactment of a traditional Korean folk practice, transplanted from its original rural setting and transformed by contemporary society, refracts many of the aspects of life in a multi-cultural American city poised at the end of the second millennium. While this folkloric performance has definite ties to rural Korean traditions, in its current form it is more a part of the cultural landscape of Southern California than that of Korea. As such, the *Chisin Palp'ei* performance on this day plays a small yet significant role in the ongoing invention of a distinctly Korean American identity that is situated not only temporally, but also spatially, and that accommodates the critical issues of transnationalism and multiculturalism in contemporary America (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; McLaren 1992; Bhabha 1994; Abelman and Lie 1995).

Although one might expect the ritual performed at the mini-mall to be intended only for people of Korean heritage, this does not turn out to be the case. Rather the ritual performance speaks to a common concern among many ethnic groups in Los Angeles for inclusiveness, a concern heightened in the aftermath of the destructive riots of 1992 (Los Angeles Times 1992; Banton 1983; Tangherlini 1999). This inclusiveness is evident not only in the multilingual explanations handed out during the performance, but also in the participation of people of non-Korean heritage in the event. One of the most enthusiastic participants this day is the sole Latino shop owner in the mini-mall. The inclusive attitude taken by the performers and the audience points toward an increasing understanding among Angelenos of the need for cross-ethnic communication in a city that Edward Soja has characterized as "a landscape filled with violent edges, colliding turfs, unstable boundaries, peculiarly juxtaposed lifespaces, and enclaves of

² For descriptions of *Chisin Palp'ei* in Korea, see the normalizing descriptions for the various regions of South Korea found in Sim U-Sōng (1975, 255-74). For an overview discussion of the earth spirits, the rituals surrounding earth spirits, and a general description of the practice of *Chisin Palp'ei* (as well as a list of the terms used for the practice in different parts of Korea), see the *Han'guk Min'yok Munbwa Taebaek'ewa Sajōn*, vol. 21, pp. 289-92.

outrageous wealth and despair" (1996: 448). Unlike ethnocentric behaviors that are based on the concept of exclusion, and contribute to the violent edges noted by Soja, this performance acknowledges the advisability of building bridges between the numerous ethnic communities that contribute to Los Angeles' remarkable diversity (Banton 1983). This type of overt inclusiveness is not, however, characteristic of all the traditions in the Korean American community, even in the case of traditions that trace their roots to the culture of urban Los Angeles rather than rural Korea.

FOLKLORE AND GROUP IDENTITY

Folklorists assert that cultural enactments such as the *Chisin Palpki* performance as well as other traditional expressive forms play a significant role in both the creation and maintenance of group identity, since these traditions are both culturally meaningful and provide a sense of history (Horton 1992, 242; Blaustein 1993, 263-4; Wicker 1996, 23; Bendix 1997; Oring 1986; Klein 1980; De Vos 1975; Barth 1969). In many immigrant groups, traditional expressions such as dance, clothing, music, and foodways become matters of great consequence, and people will go to considerable effort and expense to see that these traditions are perpetuated. This will to preservation also receives impetus from immigrants' sentimental desire for the familiar in the face of something new—a new country, a new language, new customs. For recent immigrants, the desire to maintain traditions often stems from a fear of losing a connection with their country of origin coupled to an idealizing nostalgia. Discussing this nostalgic reification of traditional expression, Mahdi notes,

... immigrants' sense of native culture and ethnic identity is rooted in nostalgia and idealization of their homeland. To a great extent, the characteristics of this "culture," and the subsequent "identity" it is meant to generate, are "imagined" and perceived in contradistinction to an "other" (Mahdi 1998, 90)

Mahdi's emphasis on the "other" reveals an important part of the process of identity formation, namely the frequently oppositional nature of these identities—in Los Angeles, and in many other multicultural environments, the "other" is not singular, but rather comprises numerous other groups. Performances of traditional expressions in public spaces help recent immigrant groups carve out a space for themselves in the new cultural setting with its multiple actors, just as they allow established immigrant groups the opportunity to maintain their claim to a piece of the American multiethnic fabric (Deloria 1981, 22; Keefe 1992, 37).

Among the children of immigrants—the "second generation," as they are often called—and to a lesser extent among their children—the "third generation"—one frequently finds an interest in the perpetuation of traditional expressions as well (Mahdi 1998, 77). In the United States, with its long history of immigration, this interest among the later generations often derives from a desire to learn more about parents' or grandparents' countries of origin. In their comments concerning their interest in *p'ungmul*, many members of the group mentioned this as a motivating

factor for joining the club: "I feel the souls and the blood of my ancestors [sic] soaring in the music we make. It's like finding my own roots all over again." For many of the participants in this and similar Korean American drumming clubs, the exploration of the culture of their parents' home country is intimately related not only to the development of group identity but also to the development of self identity. Accordingly, it is not surprising that nearly all of the participants are of college age, a time when self-exploration reaches its height. This desire for building group identity while engaging in a process of self discovery also obtains within the "one point five" generation, children who immigrated with their parents. Caught between the culture of their childhood and the culture of their adolescence, it is within this sizeable group that one finds an intriguing negotiation of both the cultures of Korea and America that leads to the emergence of hybrid traditions as part of the creation of their Korean American identity, a process which Mahdi notes, is a negotiated one:

The process of identity formation is not unilinear; identity is a multi-layered phenomenon. Second, most individuals have multiple identities and use them intermittently. Third, identities are largely social constructs and subject to situational and historical change. Fourth, identities are discursive and subject to negotiations in situations of both opportunities and constraints (Mahdi 1998, 81)

The negotiated process of identity formation accordingly leads to intriguing intersections between received notions of the homeland culture of the first generation by subsequent generations and these "one point five" and second generation immigrants' lived experiences of other cultural expressions in the United States. In his study of second generation Iranian Americans, Mahdi realized that, "The [youths] understand Iranian culture in their own terms, relating to it when suitable and appropriating from it what is relevant to and desirable for them," a process remarkably similar to the types of cultural resourcing prevalent among Korean American youths (1998, 89).

MEMORY AND REVIVAL

Immigrant groups in the United States and throughout the world often exhibit a selective cultural memory: certain traditions are maintained, while others are discarded (Mahdi 1998, 77; Klein 1980). Blaustein, writing about folk music revivals, mentions

Of course, very much the same thing could be said of nostalgic immigrants who selectively reconstruct their traditional cultures, which highlights the inadequacy of the term "revivalist" as used by most American folklorists ... traditions do not usually totally die out; what is actually happening is the reinterpretation or reinvention of traditions rather than their literal rebirth ... [these revival movements] stem from the recurrent need of individuals to reconsider and reconstruct their social and cultural identities (Blaustein 1993, 271).

Interestingly, those traditions that are maintained are frequently performed with greater zeal than they were or are in the country of origin. In the performance of these traditional expressive forms, one tends to find an emphasis on "authenticity," a concern which is markedly absent from the hybrid or newly emergent traditions in the same group (Rosaldo 1989; Bendix 1997). Attendant the will to authenticity among immigrants is a concomitant conservatism and a rigid resistance to change where traditions from the country of origin are concerned. In short, immigrants appear to be far more concerned about the "preservation" of tradition than its evolution. Ironically, regardless of preservation efforts, the transplantation of a tradition from an originating country to an entirely different cultural environment necessarily leads to profound variation in that tradition. Citing Wallerstein (1983), Horton provides the following caution about these transplanted traditions:

As Immanuel Wallerstein has observed, if we wish to understand the cultural forms of politico-economic struggles, "we cannot afford to take 'traditions' at their face value, in particular we cannot afford to assume that 'traditions' are in fact traditional" (Wallerstein 1983, 76). He meant that cultural and ethnic formations are the changing outcomes of the way groups have been incorporated into the capitalist world system. Ethnographers more attuned to the microcosm of urban life remind us that ethnic identity is also the mundane work of local actors who come together at the porous borders between immigrants and established residents to fashion new definitions of themselves and America (Horton 1992, 242).

As such, the "preserved" folk traditions—which often are presented in "revivalist" enactments—are as innovative as the new cultural practices which emerge through the dynamic intersection of ethnically defined groups in the urban environment—and neither type of tradition is more or less authentic than the other.

It is the selective preservationist memories that one finds among immigrant groups which enables the conscious revival of traditions, a process particularly applicable to the *Chisin Palpei* performance described above. While a particular tradition may have been gently abandoned in the country of origin (*Chisin palpei* for instance is no longer a common feature of the South Korean ritual landscape except as a revival form), one often finds that this abandoned tradition is revived in the country of settlement. In some cases, the revival may be due to a need among the immigrants for an expression that the original tradition fulfilled. In most cases, however, the motivation for the revival stems from the sense of history that derives from the performance of an "earlier" tradition. As Benedict Anderson has noted in his seminal study of nationalism, a projection of a long and august history is closely related to claims of legitimacy (Anderson 1983). Among a new immigrant group, the revival of an old tradition can project to outsiders that the group, while relatively "new" to their adopted homeland, have a long—and legitimate—history behind them. This motivation in large part animates the revival of traditions such as the *Chisin Palpei* among Korean Americans, given the rough and tumble associated with being the "new kid on the block" in the Southern Californian multicultural neighborhood.

INNOVATION AND TRADITION

Of course, new environments are also conducive to more radical innovation, including the development of new traditions that receive their main form neither from preservationist nor revivalist tendencies. There are two main processes attendant the emergence of these new traditions, namely the appropriation of an extant tradition in the country of settlement into the traditional expressions of the immigrant group and the modification, hybridization, or creolization of an immigrant tradition to accommodate aspects of the new cultural environment. It should be understood that all of these processes of variation and innovation are often interrelated and rather than two closed categories, it may be best to imagine a sliding scale connecting the preservationist traditions on the one end to the appropriation of traditions on the other end.

The emergence of a distinct Korean American Christian surfer culture in the beach cities of southern Los Angeles county is among the most intriguing examples of the appropriation of tradition. In this case, young Korean Americans have developed a small niche within a larger Christian surfer culture, which in turn forms a small part of an elaborate Southern Californian surf "scene." Apart from their ethnic heritage and their own self-identification as an independent, ethnically defined group, there is nothing particularly Korean about the surf group. Nevertheless, it is telling that the informants all identified themselves as both Korean American and Christian surfers. This self-definition as distinctly Korean American Christians is deployed as an identity in contrast to other groups of surfers who were perhaps neither Christian nor Korean American. In narrative, these out-groups are often represented as a source of conflict for the Korean American Christian surfers. One elaborate narrative clearly articulates the foregrounding of ethnic identification and territorialization among surfers, all of whom, it should be noted, are engaging in an identical pursuit:

My friend was at Palos Verdes next to Lunada Bay... That place had the perfect left waves. He had to walk three hundred yards to get to it and the waves are all left. Most waves break right in Southern California. The waves were perfect left and about six to eight feet. He and his best friend Charles paddled out there. His other two friends Johnny and Marcos sat longboarding in the cove. So he and Charles decided to go out there and it was a huge day walking along the cliffs—at least a mile walk with sandals on. These waves would come and smash against the rocks. It was dangerous in itself going out there and he went out there. Finally all these awesome waves came and he was like, "Thank you, God." Then he and his friend see a whole mess of locals. They were high school to beginning college white dudes and he was like, "Cool, maybe they'll show us around." One of the locals yelled out, "Hey, did you come from the cove? Why don't you go back?" My friend and Charles looked at each other thinking whatever. My friend didn't know what they meant. The locals said, "Go back, we don't want you here." And it hit him that this was the locals'

territory and locals didn't want them there. And my friend was like, "Why don't you go back?" Then a white guy said, "Dude! 'Cause I got here first!" The locals were being so stupid that he wouldn't even acknowledge it. The locals asked where he was from and he said, "La Canada." And the locals said they were from P.V. (Palos Verdes). My friend was praying to God to not be stupid since there are twenty white dudes and two Korean dudes. He's had many white friends and he loves white people and thought they would identify with him since he grew up in a white town. Then the locals called him and Charles, "Stupid Gooks!" He couldn't believe what he heard. He was ready to flip, he wanted to kill these guys. He rushed them and stared right at them, and they shut up all of a sudden. Every time he ate it, the locals would laugh. Then twenty guys circled him and Charles. Charles wanted to get out of there but my friend didn't want to give in to this sort of oppression, the racism, and territorial ordeal. He felt it was stupid. He then felt bad vibes and didn't feel like surfing, so he and Charles went in and crashed into the rocks onshore and he saw Charles in between two rocks around three feet apart. He thought Charles was going to die and was praying his ass off. This wave smashed behind Charles and then he popped up two minutes later and he seemed all right. Charles said he just prayed and he curled up in a ball and went through the rocks. Both rushed up onshore and my friend said, "Let's go back," but Charles said, "No." He said, "Let's pray right now; God just saved our lives." And so they prayed for two minutes, thanking God for his mercy. My friend hasn't gone back, but he's determined to go back when he is ready spiritually and morally, and go back and be benevolent and loving. When he's got more confidence in his surfing, he'll go back. It's perfect left, and he can't give that up.

In the narrative, the informant's friend (the main actant in the story) draws attention to the oppositional category of him and Charles on the one hand and the white locals on the other. Interestingly, the ethnically marked differentiation, emphasized in the use of the derogatory slur, is not initiated by the informant's friend, but rather something brought to the fore by the "locals." This exclusion from the surf area highlights one of the main processes that confronts many immigrants who attempt to adapt cultural expressions of another culture, namely that of cultural ownership. The resolution of the narrative above, however, is remarkably positive, with the Korean American surfer vowing to return to the site and to continue to pursue an activity which is as much an expression of his own identity as it is an expression of the "locals" own identity.³

Korean American wedding ceremonies stand as perhaps the best known example of a hybridization or creolization of tradition, where symbols and practices from Korea are fused with those from America (which in turn are themselves an example of the mixing of practices from various other cultures) (Kendall 1996). Talking of hybridity in culture, Wikker mentions that "...ethnic identity and quasi-natural ethnic delineation [should] be replaced by concepts that have

³ Indeed, the "locals" have no greater claim to surfing than does the informant, since surfing itself originated in the Pacific islands and Southern California surf culture is in itself an example of cultural appropriation.

no use for these categories or turn them into their own opposite, i.e. into concepts based on interaction and signaling 'mixture,' 'impurity' and 'constructedness'" (1996, 15). Winker emphasizes process rather than static forms, noting that, "Hybridity includes those components of the hybrid, of mixing and impurity which will eventually form the groundwork for a future theory based on process, reflexivity, of negotiability" (1996, 15). It is this type of negotiated process which animates much of the emergent cultural forms among Korean Americans such as the Korean American wedding ceremonies which make evident the negotiation of the expectations and demands of the parents' generation with those of the bride and groom's generation. Similarly, Hannerz describes "creolization" as "a process where meanings and meaningful forms from different historical sources, originally separated from one another in space, come to mingle extensively" (1992). While it may not be suitable to speak of Korean American cultures as exclusively hybrid or creole, certain expressions certainly make use of the mixing and matching of historically situated expressions that lead to the emergence of the complex cultural expressions one encounters among Korean Americans. Of course, this same process of hybridization in wedding ceremonies has occurred in Korea as well, not as a back formation, but rather as an accommodation of modernization among Koreans in contemporary society (Kendall 1996).

These four interrelated processes—the preservation of folkloric expressions from the country of origin as part of the creation and maintenance of group identity, the revival of folk traditions, the emergence of new traditional forms among diasporic populations (and the potential for the subsequent move of these new traditions back to the "homeland"), and the creation of hybrid traditions—are all clearly evident among the contemporary populations of Korean heritage in Los Angeles. Ultimately, all of these processes contribute to the ongoing development of a distinct traditional culture among Korean Americans and all play an important role in the on-going process of individual and group identity formation.

KOREAN AMERICANS, FOLKLORE, AND LOS ANGELES

In the following examination of emergent traditional expressions among Korean Americans in Los Angeles, I intend to focus on several traditions that contribute to the development of Korean American identity that has emerged in Southern California during the past twenty years.⁴ No

⁴ The fieldwork for this present study is part of an ongoing project documenting the folklore of Korean Americans in Los Angeles. The work stems from my own collection efforts as well as those of my students in an introductory course on Korean folklore taught every year. Close examination of the collections housed in the archive allows one to develop a "thick" understanding of Korean American communities (Geertz 1973). Despite the remarkable diversity of the topics documented in the archive, one quickly discovers that all of these traditions contribute to the invention of a Korean American identity that depends not only on a link to Korea, its history and culture, but also on the multi-cultural environment of Southern California.

longer are Korean Americans focused on recreating a version of Korea in America, as it may have seemed during the early years of significant Korean immigration.⁵ Rather, a diverse and heterogeneous series of overlapping cultural practices have developed. Interestingly enough, many of these practices are making their way back to Korea—or at the very least resonating with developments in Korea—thereby eliminating the “one-way” street that has in the past characterized many immigrant cultures. Perhaps one of the best examples of the new “two-way street” is the emergence of a distinct hip-hop culture in South Korea which derives much of its form from the hip-hop culture of Southern California. The South Korean hip-hop, in turn, comes back to the United States where it influences and shapes the new Korean American hip-hop. And so on.

The first of the contemporary Korean American traditions I address below is rooted in the automobile culture of Southern California and is practiced by a group of young “1.5” and second generation Korean Americans who modify and illegally race imported Japanese automobiles. The second tradition is one rooted in the rural traditions of Korea and has been revived by a group of “1.5” and second generation Korean American university students, namely *p'ungmul* groups and their practice of *Chisin Palpki* described briefly above. Interestingly, the groups are not mutually exclusive, and one can certainly find Korean Americans who modify and race cars, and play in *p'ungmul* groups. The first tradition illustrates well the concept of hybridization, while the second tradition stands as a clear example of traditional revival. Drawing these two seemingly disparate traditions—and the processes that animate them—together, I will conclude by briefly exploring the folkloric response among Korean Americans in the aftermath of the 1992 riots. This response included both traditions based on a revivalist ethic as well as newly emergent hybrid traditions, thereby producing a range of expression that spoke simultaneously to the Korean and the American in the notion of “Korean American,” all the while aware of the dynamic cultural and political environment of contemporary Los Angeles (Tangherlini 1999).

CAR MODIFICATION

California is home to a culture that revolves around the automobile. Multi-lane interstate freeways crisscross the southern part of the state, and it is not uncommon for people to spend three to four hours of each day in their cars, commuting, running errands, or just simply driving. In a place where the automobile is ubiquitous, it is not surprising that it has become a major icon in popular culture. Indeed, the southern Californian love affair with the automobile has been immortalized in songs, on television, in print, on T-shirts, and in films. It has influenced the way people shop, eat, and interact, governing, in short, the practice of everyday life (de Certeau 1984) and profoundly

⁵ For discussions of similar strategies of adaptation among other Asian American immigrant groups, see Wong and Hirschman (1983), Skinner and Hendricks (1979), O'Brien and Fugita (1983) and Okamura (1983).

refiguring the landscape (Davis 1990). Not surprisingly, people's relationship with the automobile has taken on intriguing dimensions.

The automobile in Southern California is not solely seen as a means for transportation. Rather, it is often considered to be a status symbol, a group identifier and, in a process the most intriguing to folklorists, a canvas for individual or group expression. Bright mentions that, "It is through the dialectics of social life that cars emerge as a canvas for personal and cultural representation" (1998, 416). "Art cars," for example, are well known, and the tradition of decorating automobiles is one that derives in large part from the changing relationship that Californians have with their vehicles. The almost standard practice of naming vehicles is one step on the elaborate anthropomorphicization of the automobile that characterizes a great deal of this car culture. The "low-riders," which developed in the late 1950s out of a "street rod" scene that had received initial impetus as early as the 1920s, are perhaps the best known example of an automobile-centered folklore form. Prevalent in the Latino communities of Southern California, the term refers both to the car owners and the cars themselves (Bright 1998). Generally, the cars are large American-made automobiles that have been extensively modified with lowered suspensions (hence the name), elaborate hydraulic lifting mechanisms that allow them to "hop," and custom paint jobs. Many low-riders incorporate spark plates, neon lights and enormous sound systems that provide a "rhythm" for the car's animated performance. This last element, the powerful sound system, has also been adopted by African American groups that modify cars. In the African American tradition, the emphasis tends to be on large American made cars with lowered suspensions, low profile tires, chrome accents and stereo systems optimized for rap music (Bright 1998). Usually the most noteworthy feature of these vehicles is the earth-shaking bass response generated from loudspeakers that often occupy not only the rear seat but most of the trunk as well.

These generally decorative approaches to car modification contrast with the focus on racing performance that characterized many of the early car modifications in Los Angeles going back as far as the 1920s. The "street racers" who dominated this early scene were predominantly white and, surprisingly, Japanese American youth, who would buy junk cars, repair them, and race them on the deserted streets of eastern Los Angeles county (Davis 1999). After the Second World War, an ever-increasing emphasis on race modifications emerged, and numerous "speed shops" began to appear in Los Angeles (Davis 1999; Dobrin 1996). By this time, street racing was a scene dominated primarily by working and middle class youth, whose sub-culture of "muscle cars" was quite prominent in the cultural landscape of Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s (Dobrin 1996).

Not surprisingly, as large numbers of second generation Korean Americans have reached college and driving age in the past ten years, they have, like many of their Southern California counterparts, developed a fascination with the culture of the automobile and, in particular, with car modification and street racing. Interestingly, this fascination among Korean Americans contrasts sharply with the traditions of their peer group in Korea. As one informant notes, car modification, while popular in Japan, is almost unheard of in Korea:

I think this car hysteria applies a lot more to Koreans living in the U.S. than to Koreans living in Korea. When I went to Korea last winter, I noticed that no

one really modifies their car. I saw one Hyundai Scoupe Turbo with a racing exhaust and an HKS AIC (additional injector controller) but soon learned that it belonged to a Japanese man who was living in Korea. Modifying cars is a big trend in Japan but not so much in Korea—at least not yet.

The lack of a tradition of car modification and street racing in Korea⁶ and the existence of a long standing tradition in the United States clearly indicates that the emergent tradition among Korean Americans is closely linked to the cultures of Southern California. Of course, the informant's last comment indicates his awareness of the two-way interaction that now characterizes the interface between Korea and Korean America.

Despite its similarities to the general tradition of car modification, Korean American car modification has certain features that separate it from other similar Southern Californian traditions. For example, unlike their Latino, African American, and white counterparts, most Korean Americans who get swept up in this fascination with the car channel their efforts into the modification of imported Japanese automobiles, an endeavor essentially unheard of in "street rod" culture until the 1980s. The choice of Japanese cars also contrasts with the automobile choices among other Asian American groups in which racing modification is also prevalent. According to one informant:

All Asians fix up cars but different ethnicities have different styles. For example, Chinese people tend to fix up BMWs, Benzes, and NSXs, usually with 18-inch wheels. Japanese people usually invest a lot on both aesthetics and performance by adding extravagant body kits imported from Japan and turbo-charging naturally aspirated cars. Filipino people focus more on just aesthetics by adding fog lights and high spoilers. Koreans know how to fix up cars correctly.

This last comment is of course particularly telling, and points to the role modified automobiles play in the outward representation of a Korean American identity. This constructed identity is in turn frequently contrasted with that of other groups as evidenced, for example, in the comments above. These comments also reveal the dynamic of ethnic disidentification examined by Hayano, who notes, "Ethnic disidentification, then, more than a curt denial or joke here and there, reveals much about ethnic ranking systems, stereotyping, socio-political alliances, and patterns of prejudice. Its importance cannot be underestimated in understanding how individuals perceive and promote their ethnic selves" (Hayano 1981, 167). Other exclusionary comments, such as those of another informant, go beyond ethnic disidentification mentioned above and focus on the construction of out-groups and in-groups (Barth 1969): "When I see a white guy in a lowered Civic with an exhaust, it just looks too wrong. White people should stick to fixing up their '84 IROCs and '66 Mustangs." Interestingly, as evident in this comment, a tradition that emerged from a pan-ethnic interest in the modification and racing of automobiles—a Southern Californian tradition that was originally quite inclusive and cut across ethnic boundaries even during a time

⁶ The lack of a Korean tradition is likely due, until recently, both to the relatively high price of automobiles and the congested roads.

when overt racism was commonplace—has given rise to a tradition that no longer emphasizes commonalities but instead leads to the expression of exclusive attitudes.

The modification of Japanese cars among Korean Americans is not limited to a small subculture. Rather, it is so common for young Korean Americans to drive heavily modified cars that one of my informants quipped that “UCI” is no longer an acronym for the University of California, Irvine (a campus of the University with a large Korean American and Asian American population), but rather for “the University of Civics and Integrals.” With the ubiquity of car modification, both personal and group identity have become closely connected to these automobiles. For example, one informant mentioned the extent to which individuals and their cars have become linked: “So many times have I heard someone being referred to by the type of car that they drive. For example, if I were to say, ‘I saw a movie with Joon last night,’ a typical response would be, ‘Civic Joon or RX-7 Joon?’” This form of naming, of course, has its roots in Korean practice.

Given the emphasis on “Koreanness” expressed by many of the informants—their reference to “Korean traditions” as a justification for their car modifications, the emphasis on received notions of traditional Korean rules governing relationships between in-group members,⁷ and their differentiation of themselves from other ethnic groups based on car modifications—it is somewhat surprising that the cars chosen for modification are Japanese. Even more intriguing is the general scorn directed at cars imported from Korea, which are considered to be of inferior quality and, by extension, unable to convey status. In the very few instances when Korean-made automobiles are modified, it is always considered to be part of an elaborate joke, as in the story one informant tells concerning Daewoo automobiles:

In 1998, Daewoo started off their company in America. They wanted to advertise their car products and loaned their cars to college students who would be “Daewoo Campus Advisers.” About ten of my friends joined this program and each had a Daewoo. One day we all met up and ate at In-N-Out. We were bored and had nothing to do since it was late, around one in the morning, so we decided to race. However instead of racing our modified cars, we decided to race our Daewoos. Th[is] idea was...quite funny. So we all drove to Gary’s house since he has a lot of tools and car parts. We turned into a bunch of hack engineers and modified different aspects of the Daewoos ... After our modifications, we raced our Daewoos. The Korean cars were so pathetic and lacking in horsepower that our modifications . . . [did] not . . . result in any noticeable increase in torque or power.

In this story, the Korean automobiles become objects of derision, rather than nationalistic pride, and the modification of a Korean-made car is considered more an amusing distraction than a serious attempt at “Koreanizing” this pursuit.

Despite its ubiquity, car modification is by no means inexpensive, and several informants mentioned acquaintances who had spent extraordinary sums on their cars, at times investing an

⁷ For example, older friends are generally treated with a certain deference and referred to as “hyóng[s]” (elder brother[s]).

amount equal to the original purchase price on its subsequent modifications: "Some of Jeff's other Korean friends have spent even more than \$10,000 on their cars. Jeff's close friend Eric who lives in Fullerton spent close to \$20,000 on his Toyota Supra Twin-Turbo." The motivations for automobile modification are closely linked to notions of in-group status as well as the benefits that seemingly accrue—at least in narrative—to someone who has high status. As one informant mentions:

I ... don't mind the extra attention I get from superficial Koreatown girls who only go for guys because of the cars they drive. My friends always want to drive my car. I guess having a fixed-up car, especially as a Korean American living in L.A., is a symbol of status. The better your car looks, or the faster your car runs the quarter mile, earns you respect. [*sic*]

While car owners modify their automobiles to garner respect within their peer group, the large amounts of money used for the modifications and the close link between their cars and Koreatown nightlife, a scene marked by extravagant spending and parking lot brawls, result in an intriguing correlation between Korean American culture in Southern California and the fabled *Orange-jok* of Seoul.⁸ Although nobody drives the streets of Koreatown offering women oranges—a rather amusing image given the ubiquity of oranges in Los Angeles where they are more associated with poor Latino street vendors than extravagance—the emphasis on conspicuous consumption across both groups is clearly evident. However, while the almost mythical *Orange-jok* are generally an object of scorn in Korea and held up in narrative as a representation both of the creeping decadence of the younger generations and the corrupting evils of excessive wealth, the critique in the Korean American community of related practices such as car modification and expensive nightclubs is not nearly as severe. Perhaps the response is attenuated by the excess that characterizes all of Southern California. After all, in Los Angeles, conspicuous consumption does not run counter to the culture dominant, as opposed to the clear sense in South Korea that the *Orange-jok* represent a subculture that has eschewed the rules governing acceptable behavior. Or perhaps the critique is lessened since numerous other ethnically defined groups engage in remarkably similar endeavors. Whatever the case, car modification is seen by many as an accepted part of Korean American culture, in contrast to the subaltern status of the *Orange-jok* and other similar rumored groups in Korea.

Automobile modification among Korean Americans does not center exclusively on Koreatown nightlife, nor does it occur in a vacuum. Many of the stories that surround the modification and, more importantly, the racing of these modified cars, focus on in-group membership, determined primarily by ethnicity. As in Eric's comments concerning the varying car modification practices of different Asian American groups, stories told by Korean Americans frequently center on their confrontations with racers from other cultural groups. At times, the

⁸ The *Orange-jok* or "Orange tribe" existed probably more in narrative than in real life. In stories about the excesses of people with newfound wealth, the *Orange-jok* were perhaps the worst of the lot, driving in their expensive, imported automobiles in the fashionable districts of Seoul and engaging in casual sexual relationships.

encounters are with the dominant culture, embodied in the following short narrative about an encounter with a California Highway Patrol officer, a representative of the state's apparatus of control:

My buddy Andrew got pulled over by the CHP one time when he was in his heavily modified car. Now the funny part of this story is how the police officer wrote up his girlfriend's ticket. Since Andrew's girlfriend is a minor, she does not have a driver's license or any ID. She was not wearing her seat belt either, and California law dictates that the driver receives the ticket for under-aged minors that are in their car. Therefore Andrew received his girlfriend's ticket for not wearing a seatbelt. However, the police officer decided to ask her for her ethnicity. "Are you Chinese?" "No." "Are you Japanese?" "No." "Are you Vietnamese?" "No." "Are you Filipino?" "No." "What are you then," asked the puzzled peace officer. "I am Korean," replied Andrew's girlfriend. "Oh," answered the cop, "Here's your ticket and have a good evening." On the ticket, under race was not Korean but "Oriental."

Korean Americans often mention that they are the "forgotten" Asian group—although this is less and less the case—a perception emphasized by the police officer's surprising racial designation on the ticket. This story thus serves to reinforce notions among Korean Americans of their status as an immigrant group that is frequently misidentified, misunderstood, or simply ignored by the dominant culture.

Far more common than these rather innocuous narratives are ones that concern violent confrontations between "insiders" (read Korean Americans) and "outsiders." While there are occasional narratives of in-group races that end in confrontations, these stories focus primarily on negotiating status within the group and, in some cases, sub-group membership. The majority of narratives, however, center on dangerous confrontations with other ethnically defined groups, frequently Filipinos:

James was driving home from a party and was waiting for the signal light to turn green. However, a minivan pulled up next to him and started "revving" on him. So James laughed and floored the accelerator and, when his turbo spooled and kicked in, he beat the minivan down the street by a block. At the next signal, the minivan caught up and instead of "revving," out jumped five Filipino thugs. Two of them pull out the heat and tell James to "Get the fuck out of my car." James, not really wanting to expire prematurely, obeys and gets out of the car. However—this is the horror part of the story—instead of getting into the car and driving away with the whole car, they decide to teach James a lesson. They don't shoot him or beat him, that would be too easy. They take him in the van...and they drive [his car] to an alley where they strip the car ... Not only do they strip the car, they make James strip it as well ... Then they let James sit with his car and they drive off, probably selling all the parts for half price. Very sad.

In this narrative, which is reminiscent of the surfer's narrative presented earlier, Daniel establishes a clear distinction between insiders (Koreans) and outsiders (Filipinos). The Filipinos are characterized as "thugs" who do not play according to the accepted albeit unwritten rules of car

racing. Despite the ability of the Korean American insider to win the impromptu race, he ultimately loses when his antagonists strip his car—a clear metaphoric challenge to James's identity. Bright mentions that "To destroy a car is to hurt someone in two ways. It wounds his pride which is invested in producing his car. It is also expensive" (1998, 416). I would add a third way, namely the clear challenge to identity implicit in the destruction of the car.

P'UNGMUL AND CHISIN PALPKI

Establishing a clear sense of identity within the diffuse culture of Southern California is perhaps one of the greatest concerns among "1.5" and second generation Korean Americans. It is this desire to develop a clear sense of identity that also motivates the young men and women who join *p'ungmul* groups, usually at their colleges or universities. As noted earlier, part of the motivation for reviving folk traditions stems from an interest in maintaining a link to one's parents' homeland. Many of the *p'ungmul* group members made comments similar to those of one informant who said, "I think *p'ungmul* is a bridge that links me to my motherland. It is like a constant reminder that no matter how far I am away from my motherland, I will be at heart always a Korean." Skinner and Hendricks note that, "Studies of immigrants from rural areas to towns in various parts of the world have demonstrated that a common adaptive strategy involves emphasizing rural-based ethnic roots" (1979, 25). But the motivation for joining *p'ungmul* groups does not derive entirely from a longing for a rural Korea that paradoxically no longer exists. Rather, it is also closely related to developing a sense of identity in a wider Korean American community in Los Angeles. Spanning both of these concerns—the desire to make a link to Korea and a desire to develop close ties to an emergent Korean American community—one member of a *p'ungmul* group describes his motivation for joining the group as follows:

I wanted to get into the Korean Community and I found what I wanted in *Han Ool Lim* [sic]. I found a sense of community. When I play the drums with all those people who have a passion for the same beat, it makes me feel strong. We can go on forever and ever, it's like these people are your family. *P'ungmul* gives me a sense of identity, a role to play.

By accessing a sense of history and connection to Korea, while at the same time developing ties to a community in Los Angeles, many of the students who join these groups engage in the dynamic reformulation of the *p'ungmul* tradition. While *p'ungmul* was originally a rural practice, it has evolved in contemporary Korea to be an expression not only linked to Korea's long agrarian history but also, in recent years, to political dissent. Now, in the United States, it has become a simultaneous expression of nostalgia and ethnic identity.

Most of the *p'ungmul* groups' activities take place out of the public eye. Once a year, during the *Chisin Palpki* celebrations, the groups move into the very public space of Koreatown and other

Korean dominated business centers in Southern California. In fact, at least one member of a *p'ungmul* group mentioned that it was one of these performances that led him to join the group:

Early this year, I went to the *Chisin Palpki* in Koreatown with a *p'ungmul* group to help them in carrying the traditional flag. After an entire day of moving with the rhythm of *p'ungmul*, I developed an urge to try an instrument myself.

The practice of *Chisin Palpki* in rural Korea incorporates a physical remapping of the village by the wandering *p'ungmulp'ae*. By visiting each of the houses of the various hamlets of a particular village, the group's singing and playing clearly identify in-group membership and delimit the boundaries of the village. In the revived and transformed Los Angeles celebration of the event, the focus of *Chisin Palpki* is no longer on domestic space and the literal and figurative position of village families as part of a greater whole. Rather, the focus has shifted to the small businesses that have been in the vanguard of the prodigious gains made by Koreans in America and that also serve as a touchstone for the basis of the Korean American identity. In this shift from domestic concerns to business concerns, the Los Angeles *Chisin Palpki* draws an intriguing equivalence between a Korean village and a commercial area. Through this metaphoric equivalence, the concept of *leobyang* (home town) becomes mapped onto the commercial district of Koreatown. At least symbolically, the urban is made rural and what was otherwise an undifferentiated part of the city becomes clearly circumscribed and identified as a wellspring for the formation of Korean American identity.

At U.C.L.A., the best known of the Korean drumming groups is *Hanullim* (Han Ool Lim) a group dominated by "1.5" and second generation Korean American students. The group focuses not only on learning the traditional rhythms that comprise the general repertoire of a *p'ungmul* group, but also on studying aspects of Korean tradition. Likely receiving their impetus from similar study groups common at Korean universities, *p'ungmul* groups at American universities generally espouse progressive politics, occasionally lending their sonic services to protest marches and demonstrations. But American university groups such as *Hanullim*, although casting an eye back toward Korea through the revival of folk traditions, have their political feet firmly grounded in the concerns of the Korean American community, as so clearly evidenced in their reformulation of the *Chisin Palpki* tradition not as a rural tradition emphasizing the domestic sphere, but as an urban tradition emphasizing an extra-domestic economic sphere. Consequently, the political deployment of *p'ungmul* emphasizes the role that the Korean American community plays in the economic landscape of multiethnic Los Angeles.

At no time was this more evident than in the immediate aftermath of the riots of 1992. Among the most notorious of the images from the riots were pictures of masked Koreans defending stores and gas stations with handguns and rifles. Among my informants were several members of the *Hanin Ch'ongnyöndan*, one of the best organized of these groups. In my interviews with the members of the group, I discovered that many of their narratives constructed an exclusionary notion of in-group membership surprisingly similar to the stories told both by the Korean American surfers and the Korean Americans who modify and race their cars (Tangherlini 1999). In these stories, the Korean American in-group is clearly threatened by an unpredictable, violent, and ethnically defined out-group. Yet, as with many other Korean American groups,

members of the *Hanin Ch'ongnyōndan* frequently discussed aspects of identity and the need to develop a clear sense of a Korean American identity that would reconcile a relationship to Korea with an identity firmly rooted in Los Angeles and Southern California. As with many other Korean Americans, the riotous onslaught directed at Koreatown was seen by the *Hanin Ch'ongnyōndan* as a direct challenge to this emergent Korean American identity and required an equally forceful response, hence their initial move to the barricades.

On May 2, several days after the worst of the rioting, a large "Peace Rally" was held in Ardmore Park, followed by a procession through the streets of Koreatown. Among the groups that participated in the march were, among others, the *Hanin Ch'ongnyōndan* and numerous *p'ungmul* groups from area universities. These *p'ungmul* groups were of course the same groups that venture into Koreatown at the New Year to play the *Chisin Palpki*. As I have noted elsewhere, the participation of the *p'ungmul* groups made a simultaneous gesture toward Korea—in the political deployment of folk tradition, particularly *p'ungmul*, as part of the expression of the disenfranchised *minjung* (proletariat)—and toward the businesses of Koreatown (Tangherlini 1999). Just as the businesses support the *p'ungmul* groups with donations during the *Chisin Palpki* celebration, the *p'ungmul* groups came out to show their support for the Koreatown merchants. However, the rally did not emphasize Korean expressions to the exclusion of the other ethnic groups which contribute to the dynamic ethnic vitality of Koreatown. Alongside the Korean drumming groups were various African American drill teams which also make use of drumming, as well as various Latino drumming groups.

This parallelism provides an intriguing corollary to the hybridization already identified among the young Korean Americans who modify automobiles. In both cases, the pursuit of similar yet distinct folkloric expressions allows for a greater possibility of cross-group interaction. Surprisingly, the *Chisin Palpki*, a tradition derived entirely from the traditions of Korea, has become a vehicle for such cross-group interaction while car modification, with its roots in a surprisingly egalitarian, cross-ethnic pursuit in the 1920s and 1930s, contributes instead to the troublesome exclusive behaviors characteristic of ethnocentrism and, as the 1992 riots taught, ultimately lead to destructive encounters with the groups that make up Los Angeles (Thompson 1989; Banton 1983; Barth 1969). Although the 1992 Los Angeles riots left an important scar on the Korean American psyche, they also marked the beginning of a significant turning point in the development of the imagined village of Korean America. Rather than turning an exclusionary back toward the other ethnic communities that comprise the Los Angeles cultural landscape, Korean Americans began to actively engage in the process of building bridges to the other communities that comprise the rich cultural fabric of Los Angeles. The result has been an invigoration of the community across all generations, leading to intriguing hybridizations, adaptations, and revivals of folk traditions that focus on Southern California while keeping a nostalgic eye on Korea.

The *Chisin Palpki* has come to a close: the last store has been visited, and the remaining food has been eaten or packed away. In the fading light, the members of the *p'ungmul* group make their way back out to the parking lot. Drums are packed into their blue nylon cases, and many discard their *hanbok* in favor of sweatshirts and jackets—a chill has crept into the air. After packing their

equipment into cars—mostly Acuras, Integras, and Civics—the group decides to celebrate the successful *Chisin Papers* by meeting at a café in Koreatown. From there, they will decide what to do with the rest of the evening—perhaps head off to a nightclub, perhaps to a *norabang* (singing room; *karaoke*), or maybe they will decide to go bowling. And so, with a clear first destination in mind, the members of the *p'ungmul* group hop into their cars and, with the growl of a modified engine or two punctuating the otherwise steady hum of the passing traffic, their cars pull out of the parking lot and head toward the heart of K-town.

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