

CLEO QIAN

# COMMON TIME

*or, When I Was a Korean Folk Drummer*

**1. ONE CREATION MYTH** from a school of Hindu philosophy says that before the universe began, there was eternal silence. Then the universe formed from movement, and the primordial sound—OM!—was forced out of that silence.<sup>1</sup>

**2. ON NASA'S WEBSITE**, there is a sound file of the waves that first passed through our early universe. “13.8 billion years ago,” the website reads, “our universe was just a ball of hot plasma—a mixture of electrons, protons, and light. Sound waves shook this infant universe . . . much like patterns made by waves on the surface of a pond into which a stone has been dropped.” The sound file, ten seconds long, is a low and rhythmic *woosh*.<sup>2</sup>

**I USED TO BE** a conductor in a Korean samul nori troupe called the Koong. This is more surprising when you consider that (1) I am not Korean and (2) I am not musical. Samul nori is a type of traditional Korean percussion music played with four instruments: a small gong (the kkwaenggwari), a larger gong (the jing), a distinctive hourglass-shaped drum with two sticks (the janggu), and a heavy, resonant barrel drum (the buk). Originally, it was performed for farmers and peasants. The janggu represented rain, the kkwaenggwari thunder, the jing the wind, and the buk the clouds.










I saw the Koong perform at a Korean cultural show in the fall of my first year of college. There were ten people on stage, wearing black clothes with white sleeves, with tricolored ribbons tied from shoulder to waist. Their arms *pounded* sticks against drum skins. They played with their whole bodies, their torsos, their heads. The word *dynamic* comes to mind. Also *boom*, and *vigor*. The thudding rhythms and lusty chants, which I could not understand, vibrated through my body, my blood. Looking back, I wonder if I was experiencing, for the first time in my life, true stillness. Soon after, I emailed them asking to join.

I started on the janggu, the hourglass-shaped drum. They gave me a score that had circles and lines, all in boxes; it didn't look anything like

the sheet music I read on piano, composed of clefs, bars, and stacked black chords. Throughout my time in the group, the syllabary of symbols sometimes changed as they tried to nail down notation that was more exact, perfectly legible—single circles turning into double circles or diagonal accent marks turning into mathematical greater-than signs. Consulting an old legend now, I see notes that presaged the futility of explaining what was fundamentally nonverbal in form: “Rolling sound,” the text next to a three-dot symbol declares, and in parentheses after, “(best understood in demonstration.)”

EXPLANATION OF SYMBOLS

1. JANGGU

	Both Sides(양)
	The left side with left hand (the round stick/둥채)
	The right side with left hand (for left-handed, vice versa)
	The right side with right hand (the light stick/얇채)
	The right side with right hand, but weak
	A  followed by a  (best understood in demonstration, but probably won't appear)
	Smaller circles mean weaker sound
...	Rolling sound (best understood in demonstration)

**BEFORE THE KOONG**, for quite a long time, I was trained in piano. I was not musically inclined. Rhythm was my particular weak spot. My piano teacher regularly stopped mid-lesson to turn on the metronome and tap the accents on the seat with the flat of her hand. I was, and continue to be, impatient. During the rests, I never counted properly, always stumbling forward to get to the next note. I didn't understand how a song worked, how to contextualize notes and phrases, the arc of a piece. When I performed, I relied on muscle memory: if you stopped me after I started, I couldn't go on.

The Koong met in the basement of a large hall on our Gothic campus, a three-story building far from the library and main classrooms. It had once been a women's gymnasium, styled like a Tudor English manor house. The first floor was all chandeliers and thick, dusty carpets, which muffled the sound of our drums.

The president's name was Kayeon. It's cheesy to say, but her face, when I first saw it, made me think of patience. She had long-suffering eyes, and indeed, she bore up with my quick frustration. In our first practice, she took me and the other new member aside, tapped out the first beat on the janggu, and we copied her. She tapped out the next part, and we copied that, too. It wasn't long before I hit a wall. I lost track of the count, I couldn't remember what came first, what came after. I had never heard a song made just from rhythm; I didn't even know there could be such songs. What was it telling me? Was it sad, was it happy? What was happening in the middle? What was the conclusion? What was the point?

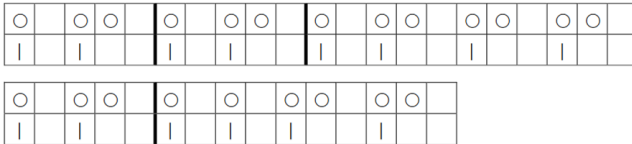
I didn't really understand, despite having played music for twelve years, what rhythm really *was*.

Recently, I read a definition: "Pattern is the seed of rhythm . . . Rhythm is created by alternating sound and non-sound over time." That was not something I understood back then either.<sup>3</sup>

7 (Chil) Chae

①x2—②x2—③x2—④x4—③x4(softly)—⑤(softly)—⑥(crescendo)—⑦/'Mute'—②—③—④x3—①x2

①



SOME PROPOSITIONS

1. A drum is a skin stretched around a hollow.
2. A drum cannot produce sound without an empty space.
3. Grief is the opening of an empty space.

**I WENT TO COLLEGE** in a place that was very cold. (It was Chicago.) The winters were black and full of snow. As the sun went out like a snuffed lantern at the end of the year and the trees became thin, brown, and cadaverous, I spent most of my evenings late in the library basement, with its brutalist walls and fluorescent overhead lights.

Outside of the Koong, I spent most of my time catching up on a civilization's worth of reading. Euripides and Nietzsche, Plato and Socrates that first year; Locke and Hobbes and Tocqueville and Du Bois. Once someone asked me my favorite book, and I said *Dubliners*, by James Joyce, even though that was not true; I had never even finished it.

There was a racial divide among the majors. In economics, for instance, you would find mostly Asians, or you could also look in biology. I wanted to be a writer, so I was in English, and later, also political science. At that age, I did not possess a strong sense of racial consciousness. When I entered my classrooms, those old-fashioned halls with all the wrinkled hands dried from handling printouts, the majority-white, cultured, socioeconomically spry young classmates looked down at me with those terribly well-read eyes. I was empty in front of those eyes, I knew nothing, I was like a dry glass through which one could simply see the background. I knew I was not very competent, that I was, at best, diligent. I knew I was not a genius. I knew my ideas were all, from the start, a little bit wrong.

I cannot say exactly how this feeling of gap started, whether it was related to those white faces and indifferent eyes or if it could be traced back to earlier, dark-swaddled rooms in the realm of childhood. Is there ever only one original wound? Emptiness can start from anything and eat away at everything. My emptiness was an endless, gulping panic I fed language and more language. I could summarize for you how Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* expressed, in novelistic form, the relativity of time; the effects of postwar social leveling on individual subjectivity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*; what Adrienne Rich was looking for when she dove into the wreck. I could not tell you if I liked what I read. I could not articulate to you what I was feeling. I barely knew if I was hungry, tired, or in pain. I could not tell you that I was unhappy.

I remember the color of those library basement lights or the apartment I walked back to past midnight by the pale, neutered light of too few streetlamps: cheap and drafty and cold, with mice that scurried into the bookshelf. Inside, the wood was all dark and dusty. There was one light that turned on over the narrow kitchen sink. In my room, the lofted bed swayed, unsteady on its secondhand nails and white metal legs, like a lifeboat on a midnight sea.

I remember the mirror in the bedroom in which I looked at myself, pulled down my V-neck, and made a cut two inches long, diagonally

bisecting the top of my left breast. I remember the dreamy stillness around me, the compulsion that came from under my skin, the skin stretched around the peculiarly shaped, frightened hollow vessel that was supposed to be . . . me?

That winter, I wrote a poem. It began:

My veins are now drums.  
Oh, bodies are scary.  
He slips inside and all  
over I burn, smiling shadow  
in my abode of bones,  
rattling a rhythm till froth  
foams at the mouth—  
get out, get out.  
And I have to stop, stop the shaking.  
Get Band-Aids for patches: one box,  
a whole box, is enough to go crazy.

**THE OFT-CITED** trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, MD, writes that so much of the traumatized body is *out of sync*. In his book, there was evidence, including charts. The charts had five horizontal lines, like a musical staff, and measured heart rate variability and breathing patterns. A wavy graph showing heart rate was overlaid on top of a similarly wavy gray area that showed the peaks and valleys of breath. For a well-regulated person, the peaks in the heart rate graph corresponded to the peaks in the breath graph. In the chart of the shut-down person with chronic PTSD, the peaks in the heart rate wave were out of sync with the peaks and waves of breath.

Would it be too obvious to say I looked at these charts and saw something that could be a score?

For the out-of-sync body, experts like van der Kolk found value in “breath exercises (pranayama) and chanting to martial arts like qigong to drumming and group singing and dancing.” And why? “All rely on interpersonal rhythms, visceral awareness, and vocal and facial communication, which help shift people out of fight/flight states [and] reorganize their perception of danger.”<sup>4</sup>



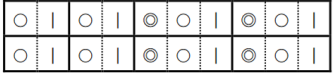

After months of private practice, memorization, and frustration in the basement, I sat with the other janggus in the Koong as Kayeon started the full rehearsal for our first performance. The jing opened.

Then the buk. The wind gathered, the clouds. Then the janggu joined in—with me! How good it felt to follow the pattern! How good it felt to hit the drums, feel the rhythm vibrate up my arm, and make the song come alive with the rest of the troupe!

A lover once told me about women who eat gray clay during pregnancy, a practice called “geophagia.” The cravings, popular knowledge suggests, may point toward an instinct to supplement missing nutrients, like iron or other minerals, or be related to anemia. The body knows, folk wisdom implies. It will be drawn to what it needs to survive.

**IN ONE OF** the Koong’s openers, “6 (Yuk) Chae,” we started with the jing, rolling in with its slow, ponderous ring. Then the buk gathered: steady, low, sturdy, supporting the jing, establishing the motif. As the pattern built, the janggu joined, with its bright, light sound, quickening the pace, repeating the motif, and then the sound of the kkwaenggwari was added, quick and high, leaping in like a dancer, summoning all the parts together, taking the lead, then we were off, off, galloping, we went!

### 6 (Yuk) Chae

Order in original sheet	JANGGU	Repeat
1) Intro by Jing	(Jing: original rhythm X 2)	
2) Buk comes in	(Buk: original rhythm X 2)	
3) Janggu comes in ( <u>Original Rhythm</u> )		X 2
4) Kkwaenggwari comes in		X 4
5) Variation	 Loud Soft	X 8
6) Back to original rhythm		X 6
7) Playing in turns	(Buk: original rhythm X 2)	
		X 2

In another song, “YoungNam,” we repeated a rhythm, one—two—  
one & two—one & two & one & two—one & two—one & two—one  
& two & one & two—before pausing and shouting, in unison, a four-  
part chant. At the end, we all raised our voices ecstatically in a single  
long, high-syllable *nae-*. A half-pause, a beat of silence while our voices

faded. Then the kkwaenggwari flashed up, bright and gold, the stick rang out, da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da!

Ten years after I picked up a janggu for the first time, I can still use both hands to tap out the janggu's part in "YoungNam." I can still recite the opening lines of the chant: *Haneul bogo byul eul tta go ttang eul bogo nongsa geet go . . .*

When looking at our old sheet music, I asked my friend Sophie, who had been in the Koong with me, to finally translate what we had been saying:

*Haneul bogo byul eul tta go ttang eul bogo nongsa geet go*  
 Look at the sky and pluck the stars, look at the ground and till the earth  
*Olhaedo-daeppong ee yo nae nyun eh do poong nyun eel sae*  
 This year is a good harvest, next year will also be bountiful  
*Dal-a Dal-a balggun dal-a dae nnat gatchee balggun dal-a*  
 The moon, the moon, the bright moon, it's as bright as daytime  
*Eodoom soggae bool beech ee-oo lee nae eul bee cho joo nae--!*  
 In the darkness the light, it illuminates us all--!

**ON MIDSUMMER** during my twenty-ninth year, deep into the cycle of my first Saturn's return, that astrological transit which purportedly knocks your life askew every three decades, I hosted a party where we ended up talking about grief.

That year, my body had been hollowed out by grief. It was amazing how much space pain could take up inside of you; it defied physics. It swelled from the inside like a deadly hot gas. Sometimes I had a sensation of floating. There was so much of it that it hardly seemed possible it could all be in me, in my little body frame of arm bones and finger bones and hip bones and toes.

I had lost a relationship in a betrayal so sudden, hurtful, and brutal that I was still, so many months later, in a state of amazement. It was amazing that time was still passing, that I was living. I wasn't actually living, I thought. There was no way this was my real life. Whenever I was on a subway platform, I felt my ex was a mere phone call away, that she would just show up in half an hour if I dialed, like before.

The relationship was marked by hope, pain, volatility, and a loss for words. The adjectives I hesitantly reached for felt completely inadequate, like trying to use the alphabet to notate a beat: *She got angry. It's been unstable. We got into a fight. I'm confused.* She wasn't diagnosed, but I thought it pretty likely she had PTSD. Later, after the end, I thought I might have it too. Later, after the end, I realized I'd been abused.

In the wake of that rupture, everything else, as they say, came home to roost.

I had lost my writing, I couldn't read. I could barely look at text on a page. I had hundreds of books, all in boxes, and touching them gave me an electric shock that traveled up to my sad, tired, twitching heart. My poems—my fiction—my journals—so what? Words! I had written thousands, read millions of them through my whole life, and what had they ever done for me? They had prevented nothing, protected me from nothing.

I had lost family. I had lost friends. I had lost years. I had lost safety. I felt the bone-chilling cold as I named what I had lived through before: assaults and abandonments, thwarted hope, hospital wards and vomit, eerie bedrooms, emptiness and more emptiness. I was so depressed that I lost hours and days of memory. Pain, a syrupy black goo, filled all that blankness inside me. The emptiness was endless, and the pain was, too. When I took out my scissors, I was stupidly surprised when blood, red, came out, and not the black hurt-ooze of my insides. Why live?

The first time I texted the Crisis Text Line was a March morning near 3:00 a.m. The person who answered, someone named Kathryn, had not much to offer me. "You matter to this world. Good night," she said at the end. "The Crisis Counselor has closed the conversation. You matter. Please answer a few questions about your experience so we can better help others?"

The summer party I was at was in the backyard of Sunny's, in Red Hook in Brooklyn. Sunny's was known for its nightly program of live music. Earlier in the evening, someone had been playing the violin indoors. After the violin player left, a friend, Libbie, came out to the backyard and joined the few people still sitting. She said, "When we are really in pain, no language comes to us. We only have sound." Libbie was going through grief, too.

I met her that winter through a series of house dance classes, led by our teacher, Marianna. House dance is a type of street and social dance, tied to the house music scene, characterized by fast footwork and a way of grooving the torso called the "jack." The classes were crowded. Every Monday, Marianna made us sweat through ninety minutes of Pilates-style warmups, footwork drills, variations, and mirroring with partners. "Play," Marianna enunciated with her Eastern European accent, after showing us the basic pattern of steps for the pas de bourrée, the shuffle, the stomp. Slow down, speed up, go higher, go lower. Copy your part-



ner. Go forward eight counts, then go back. She told us to pause, then start again.

My ex had been a longtime dancer, of a different style, and it was through her I had learned about house. She was passionate and dedicated, or, on the flip side, obsessed. I spent a lot of our relationship traveling to showcases and events to watch her. On quiet evenings, we went to the mirrored studio in her building's gym, where I watched her spread out to gentle music under the white lights. Through the night-veiled windows, a train might shudder past the infant leaves. No one else would come in. When I saw her dancing, I saw how, physically, she loosened. Like she felt happy. Like she felt safe.

During Marianna's classes, the bass from the speakers reverberated through the wood floors, into the streets, up my legs through my sneaker soles. The beat vibrated through my bones. It drowned out everything else. Afterward my body would be exhausted, it would limp going down the stairs, it would be sweat-drenched, spent, and, briefly, too full for grief.

**THE PEAK OF MY** Koong experience was the call and response duet I played on the *kkwaenggwari* as one of the conductors. After three years in Koong, they put me on second *kkwaenggwari*, a small brass gong that guides the other instruments in crescendos and diminuendos, transitioning from one motif to the next—not because I was good, or inspired, but because I was willing, and kept showing up.

I played the *kkwaenggwari* alongside another, far more experienced player. During performances, when we all donned those loose black and white uniforms with the tricolored ribbons, he and I sat at the center of the stage. The call and response duet occurred at a climax in “Hwimori.” We scooted forward and faced one another and alternated for forty-five seconds of agonizing attention, a long sequence of rhythmic motifs.

He played a few measures; I responded with a few measures. He played a few more measures; I responded with a few more. At the end of the forty-five seconds, we scooted back to our original seats, brought our *kkwaenggwari* back in sync with one another, and rejoined the rest of the instruments.

When I rewatched a video of an old performance, I saw it was nine minutes. Nine minutes! I never dropped a single beat.

Not long ago, in the *New York Times*, I read an article about parallel play: a child-rearing concept in which young children play near one

another but aren't actively interacting, like one kid drawing quietly in the same room as their best friend. The article suggested parallel play was crucial for developing security in relationships. One could be independent but build a sense of safety, knowing that if need be, their friend would be there.

I didn't stay in touch with the other members of the Koong. Outside of drumming, we didn't have much to talk about. For a long time, the Koong felt like a kind of inexplicable, odd detour in my life. But it was a long blip—four years. I have still never found anything like it.

During those four years, we had no words. What we had was the pattern. We built the song together and followed the pattern, sound and nonsound, measuring time as it passed. We followed the rhythm until its end, which was silence.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gabriel, R., "Appreciating om: The sound of the universe," Chopra, June 28, 2021. Retrieved July 29, 2022. <https://chopra.com/articles/appreciating-om-the-sound-of-the-universe>

<sup>2</sup>"Sounds of the ancient universe," Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, NASA, March 21, 2013. Retrieved July 29, 2022, from <https://www.jpl.nasa.gov/images/pia16881-sounds-of-the-ancient-universe>

<sup>3</sup>Bradley, S., "3 types of rhythm you can create visually," Vanseo Design. Retrieved July 29, 2022, from <https://vanseodesign.com/web-design/visual-rhythm/>

<sup>4</sup>van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2015)