

# Korean Identity in Cross-cultural Improvisation

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## Abstract

This is a brief analysis based on true experiences of music creativity through improvisation by Korean American composer/komungo improviser Jin Hi Kim ([www.jinhikim.com](http://www.jinhikim.com)). Kim's genuine crosscultural improvisation brings out questions how such work has been valued. 1) How the Korean identity has evolved for three decades through worldwide performance experiences? 2) What is true experience and process as a Korean musician in a cross-cultural improvisation? 3) What contribution is required for Kim's crosscultural musical creativity?

## A brief History

1. I started my first komungo improvisation when renowned avant-garde guitarist Henry Kaiser approached me to try free improvisation in San Francisco in 1985. Soon I was introduced to many leading experimental musicians in the USA and Europe. Many of these musicians whom I met were trained as European classical musicians with a highly liberal and innovative approach to music and some were brilliant jazz musicians without a classical background. My task was to communicate well with these innovative Western instrumentalists through my komungo. Early on I was labeled as an 'avant-garde komungo improviser' by some of these musicians. I was also deeply inspired by American composer John Cage's liberal spirit in music creativity through spending time with him in person and listening to his concerts. In 1990 when I was invited by the Gugak National Center (former National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Art), I brought American avant-garde oboist Joseph Celli to Korea and improvised with him, and No World Improvisations LP and CD were released by Warner Music Korea. [1]

This story has three important aspects to point out: 1) The freedom of individual expression became available to me now that I was far away from the peer pressure of my Korean colleague musicians resulting in my being challenged by this new and unfamiliar territory of American new music. This new environment inspired a great deal of creativity that resulted in my komungo becoming a new instrument in this liberal and contemporary music zone as I began playing non-traditional ways on this ancient instrument. 2) I was one of very first Asian traditional musicians who became active in this adventurous environment with no precedents for me to look up to who was doing East-West cross-cultural improvisations. I had a strong desire to communicate with Western musicians and fearlessly pioneered my own creative path. [2]

3) Prior to 1985 no Korean traditional musician was pursuing cross-cultural and avant-garde improvisation; that was seemingly a shocking and unfamiliar experience for Korean audiences at that time. The majority of my Korean musician colleagues did not yet embrace the pursuit of individual expression and experimental improvisation. Their history remained incased in a long tradition of oneness in the group in contrast to the individuality of the West.

2. During the past three decades I have been touring around world presenting solo improvisations and collaborating in improvisation ensembles with contemporary musicians, jazz musicians and world musicians. My book *Komungo Tango*, published by Minsokak in Korea in 2007, describes my musical thoughts regarding improvisational process with each of these different musicians. [3] As I toured worldwide and met new artists my sensibility has changed. When I concentrate deeply in unfamiliar sound from different musicians on the spot of the improvisation, I evidently create new musical vocabulary for the necessary communication. Through this experience I engaged in a deep dialogue with strangers. Therefore I called it 'Komungo Tango'. Through many years doing spontaneous improvisation, I learned to accept all kind of

sounds and react to them promptly and urgently. This on-going practice is a path toward technical development in new articulations and new sonic materials on the komungo, which is an essential tool for my cross-cultural improvisations. My intention is not to work with existing Korean traditional music or adapt partner's language, but rather to create a new musical language together. (Reference: 3. Influence and Inspiration)

3. I conceived structures for cross-cultural multimedia improvisation, in which artists from India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Tuva, America, China, and Africa are able to merge. I created these structures in a way that allowed participants to share many different traditions as well as create a high quality new music. Through these collaborations I learned that finding a momentary common sense is very important to make a successful collaboration. Sharing different cultures requires understanding different attitudes of making music rather than the theory of music, for which difficult or uncomfortable sonic materials are not marginalized but respected. The unification of various cultures becomes possible when everybody is willing to contribute to that purpose which is based on agreement of structure. [4] (Reference: 4. Technical Development in Improvisation)

4. Being inspired by Western advanced art technology I developed the world's only electric komungo with computer system resulting in cutting-edge, live interactive improvisational performances. The computer program MAX/MASP was custom designed for live interactive duo improvisations with my performance on the electric komungo. With this system, I created multimedia projects with musicians, visual media artists, dancers, and sound designer. This cross-cultural work utilizes American advanced computer systems in juxtaposition with ancient Asian myth. Thus I have lost some tradition in komungo, but I also gained myth and magic in electric komungo. In such big projects art technology enhances the possibility of sonic materials beyond the reach of the traditional komungo sound. [5] (Reference: 2. Individual Identity: self evolution)

## **Path and Process**

### **1. Korean Identity**

As a trained Korean traditional musician, the practice is deeply embedded in my soul and physical performance habit. In addition to the komungo it is common musical background that I share with all Korean musicians that includes janggo and singing. This Korean artistic sensibility has evolved over centuries by a deeply rooted society with a profound musical tradition. In our ancient Korean music tradition, music is a collective activity rather than individual expression and reflected in the lack of composer recognition but the emphasis on 'our' music. The music was made by all of us for all of the society to enjoy.

Unlike Western music tradition, no composer was recognized until end of 19<sup>th</sup> century when *Pansori* and *Sanjo* were established. A revolution of Korean music occurred in the late 19th century, when two new forms were created: *Pansori*, an epic drama song and *Sanjo*, a solo improvisatory instrumental form. Although much material of *Sanjo* melodies is derived from the village group improvisational creativity lies in a Shaman ritual *Kut*. Finally, through these new solo forms, the individual expressivity and freedom in Korean music began to merge and be recognized. This was a dramatic change in a culture that valued group activity and to a large degree suppressed individuality. This emerging improvising legacy was similar to early American jazz.

Korean Music was severely impacted during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and subsequently by the Korean War. During the Japanese occupation the Korean Yi dynasty court was completely demolished and leading master musicians lost their freedom. After the Korean War European classical music and American pop music were predominantly imported to Korea and fondly embraced among educated people and began to overpower the ancient Korean music.

Meanwhile National Gugak Center in Seoul persistently preserved the late 19th century Yi dynasty court and folk music and dance tradition. The National Gugak Center has been touring the traditional performing arts worldwide. The younger generation has been able to learn traditional music at universities since 1958 throughout the country.

In the 1970's, influenced by the Western classical orchestra music, a new direction for the traditional Korean music orchestra emerged and became a sensation with audiences. This new type of orchestra music is conducted by counting the time throughout the music in contrast to the heterophony structure of traditional court orchestra music that allows the individual freedom in time. This reliance on a Western approach to performance and composition has been politically supported through education at universities and by professional music presenters in addition to being commercially supported by radio and TV programs. The institutional support of this activity limited individual styles of new and emerging music. This political process was a back step from the individual music revolution when *Sanjo* soloists opened up the new direction of improvisational music creativity. Under the music education at universities *Sanjo* became a fixed repertoire with a written score and lost much of the spontaneous vitality of improvisation in performance.

However, as Korea responds to globalization in all aspects of life, this is also occurring in the creative music world. In addition to the promotion of Korean traditional music to new generation on national radio and TV broadcasting, newly created ensembles and bands are successfully beginning to dominate the national music scene. In the 21st century, as the society rapidly changes, Korean identity and differing values of popular culture brought in through recordings, film, and of course the internet, has resulted in a new direction of improvisational creativity with a flourishing range of groups and musicians defining a strong individual identity.

## 2. Individual Identity: Self-Evolution

The well-established improvisers are brilliant soloists who have cultivated their own unique performing concepts and techniques. Even though artists may be performing on the same instrument they develop totally different approaches in pitch, nuance, tone quality, articulation, sonic textures, improvisational spontaneity, personality, and spirituality. For over three decades my work has reflected my dual identity between ancient Korean and contemporary American culture. My goal was to establish my own identity as a uniquely creative komungo performer. My individual identity is the result of:

1) My creation of a unique musical vocabulary on the komungo. [6] A creative komungo player requires an original vocabulary on komungo. My tone quality is distinguished from other komungo players and techniques on the komungo that I have developed is to create sonic and rhythmic textures at the same time by repetitive fast fingering gestures and rapid stick motions. My solo improvisations become structured compositions when they are repeatedly practiced over the years. Some of them remain as komungo solo repertoire. [7]

2) I co-designed a revolutionary new electric komungo and komungobot (algorithmic robotic instrument). In 1989, I had an experimental electric komungo with metal strings without a soundboard, which was plugged in a sound processor. In 1998, I co-designed new one with Joseph Yanuziello that is built with an acoustic sound board and uses original komungo silk strings with peizo pick ups. This represents a radical departure from the traditional instrument and became a precursor to subsequent instrument innovations throughout Asia. For the electric komungo, sound designer Alex Noyes and I have been collaborating in developing interactive MAX/MSP program for electric komungo sounds for over 25 years. The new komungo sound is processed live through a personal computer program that is triggered by MIDI foot pedal. Without the computer programs, the sound is simply amplified komungo.

We are currently developing a new komungobot, which relies on a new interactive computer program and works in tandem with my electric komungo. This new instrumental design was necessary for my expanding musical sensibility as well as real time spontaneity to multiple computer programs. The new computer program is designed as a trio with my live performance, interactive electric komungo and interactive komungobot. The live interactive improvisations on these instruments are not possible to notate, because the nature of sonic materials is not as conventional as notes and rhythms that are used on the acoustic komungo. The electric komungo's sonic possibilities are expanding further than the original nuances on the instrument especially when the improvisation is part of a multimedia context. [8] (Reference: 4. Technical Development in Improvisation: 2) New Sound)

### 3. Influence and Inspiration

We are born free and music should be a free expression true in its self. True freedom is when other's freedom is equally respected as much as my own. My work has required me to expand from my profound Korean tradition and open to a wider world of sound, culture, traditions and experiences. I found my way to new understandings through observation, study, research, and analysis of other human conditions and cultures. Through the liberal and open mind to non-Korean musical elements I was inspired to create a range of new performing possibilities on komungo and in my music. These influences are not a path of imitating other cultures but expanding my range of performance possibilities and expressive range. Influence is a slow process of penetrating a field through understanding many aspect of musicality such as instrumental architecture, tone quality, acoustic phenomena, human condition, spirituality, personality, time sensibility, myth, energy, life style, environment, etc. As I was being influenced by new environments, both my Korean identity and individual identity was melding into a pool of subconscious sensation, emotional connection, cultural diversity, expanded sensibility, and electronic and computer artificial intelligence.

In my cross-cultural improvisation practice, Korean elements are introduced to my collaborators indirectly without demanding Korean melodies or rhythmic patterns. My work is to create new music without depending on the existing Korean improvisational forms. I do not force traditional musical materials such as *Sinawi* or *Samulnori* to non-Korean musicians, instead I work with basic Korean musical aesthetic such as tone fluctuation and elastic time sense. When I worked with Korean traditional musicians, I had to integrate non-Korean time sensibility in the ensemble to break up the typical rhythmic cycles (*jangdan*). Otherwise the creativity would be limited by familiar musical materials. [9] For my chamber and orchestral music compositions written for Western instruments and Korean instruments, I have developed my compositional concept of 'Living Tones' based on Korean tone quality. [10] In my improvisation practice, I do the same utilizing basic Korean musical aesthetic tone quality and time sense, however I can't control the Living Tones' concept throughout the piece, because I cannot tell the collaborator what to do in the improvisational creativity.

The improvisation experience is seen as unlimited possibilities, and the outcome is unknown until the very moment of particular individual identities merge together. Most of my collaborators have a similar background to me and have been well-trained traditional musicians as well as innovative soloists who have expansive consciousness. Collaborating with such highly sophisticated artists is a precious condition to make a high quality cross-cultural improvisation. Korean, Japanese, Chinese or Indian musical traditions are blended through individual identities.

In the process Korean musical elements naturally get altered in order to communicate with other musical elements. At the end a new musical birth takes place that emanates from the original traditional but becomes its own original manifestation of the collaborative music. Therefore, Korean and non-Korean elements produce something unexpected that may result in a variety of unplanned and unexpected tone quality, sonic shapes, new textures and rhythmic intrigue and time space. Korean rhythmic patterns and Western absolute beat can be scrambled, juxtaposed, dissolved or adhered to with a surprising result in

each improvisation. This exhilarating process is not repeated or memorized with a surprisingly different outcome for each performance. The music is tangible and it is a momentary composition.

Critics may have a range of concerns and questions concerning this creative work. Questions such as, 'How to balance between different cultures?' or 'Are there enough cultural flavors in the music?' These questions can be answered from many different perspectives but obviously there's no singular opinion or way to measure a perfect balance of different cultures in these cross-cultural improvisations. Instead we may conceive that the possibilities and outcomes may approach infinity. [11]

#### 4. Technical Development in Improvisation

Listening more than playing is key for improvisation. When I am listening to a collaborator I am bringing forth the combined sound of this person and my reaction with an unborn sound that is about to burst out. The last one is momentary thought and it is an instantaneous silent sound inside my mind. These three sounds come to my ears almost simultaneously with a remarkable and highly alert concentration that happens only in spontaneous improvisation. The moment of reacting to unfamiliar and strange sounds is most crucial opportunity to create a new performing expression. At that crucial moment things can be erupted and evoked. When it is erupted the awkward moment is instant hesitation. When it is evoked the new possibility grows for a long time. And the initial positive experience leads to another possible new material. Once new material is evoked the initial element stretches to a direction of developing bigger phrases and sonic textures. This is the way new musical vocabulary built up, which then evolves little by little with pitch nuance, articulation, finger gestures, sonic materials, emotion, energy, time space, aesthetic and myth.

1) Pitch Nuance: The first open string (문현) is basic pitch on komungo. It is frequently played like a drone effect. The fourth, fifth and sixth open strings (청 상중하) are often used as a group and these are the second dominating pitch. Thus the four out of six strings already limit the range of scale and freedom of modulation. Only two strings (유현, 대현) are active to produce a wide range of pitches. However, the finger position on the frets does not allow fast shifting in a wide pitch range. Naturally komungo has a limited pitch range. The fine tuning is mostly done by ears while fingers are pushing strings up and down on the frets. Therefore, in an ensemble with Western instruments, the komungo notes usually co-exist against equal temperament diatonic scale. The pitch fluctuation on komungo fingering shapes the note rather than produces the absolute pitch. Thus when komungo is played in a mixed instrumentation with Western instruments, everybody must adjust to this new acoustic phenomena. Of course, it gets quite interesting when the original sonic quality and tonal gestures are more useful than perfectly tuned pitch itself. In this context the pitch is the enveloped tone that is consisted of texture, color, collage, and fractal landscape of sonority.

2) New Sound: When I treat the komungo as a toy I get to explore many ways to play and new sonic materials are found by accident. The use of komungo stick is as important as fingering gestures for creating sonic materials. However unlike the bowed string instruments komungo has less flexibility of exploring these possibilities. But then there is more to work with than the articulation to contribute to a cross-cultural improvisation. That is unique musical expression on the komungo, which comes from my individual human life experience, spirituality, local environment as well as social, political and philosophical contexts.

In contrast a wide range of sonic materials are available on electric komungo with MAX/MSP program. The more I continue to expand computer programs the more new sounds are available for electric komungo performance. Most importantly the computer program is personalized specifically for the nuances of the komungo and my own musical aesthetic. Otherwise the music on the electric komungo is a computer generated sound rather than a reflection of my creativity. In live performance I create interactive improvisations on the instrument through MIDI computer programs utilizing various sonic alternatives beyond the acoustic komungo sound.

3) Time Sensibility: The natural, organic time sense was practiced in old Korean ensemble music. Each instrument weaves in and out individually in a heterophonic structure without the need of a conductor. The Korean and Chinese traditional solo repertoire allows for irregular time while Japan the music is shaped in a wide-open space. In contemporary cross-cultural improvisation the space is also wide open. In most of the performances the time is relative depending on each person's perception unless we are working within a specific fixed time frames or rhythmic cycles. Indeed within the fixed time frames improvisation has certain limitations that differ from open, free improvisation. In 'free' improvisation or open form the performers must deal with the unexpected change of time sequences without a single time zone resulting in multidimensional time in improvisation.

With the electric komungo the space is even more elastic with no single perceived time or pulse. In this manner I improvise in multidimensional time with computer programs that have been developed based on my musical aesthetic. My performance is one dimension but the interactive computer program produces multidimensional responses with various rhythmic and pulse implications. My performance on a single pitch can result in multiple notes, stretched, extended, delayed or random responses from the computer program. It is a timeless landscape of sonic adventure with multiple time spaces depending on how you perceive the space.

4) Structure: When working with a big ensemble the structured improvisation is necessary for periods of momentary unification.

a) structure for unification: The easiest way of unifying the different sources is to work with a structure based on rhythmic cycles or fixed time frames. The different sources are unified in the fixed time frame. In the practice percussive instruments have no boundary to create complicated rhythmic patterns and nuances utilizing different rhythmic sources. Although the fixed time structure forcefully limits improvising possibility to non-percussive instruments. On the other hand they won't have limitation, if the fixed time frame is used for drone like energy in the ensemble. The different sources from the pitched instruments are unified at a point when the musicians have the same purpose or intention. The purpose can be described by a certain expression or specific musical materials or pre-decided direction. Choice of instrumentation and orchestration is an important consideration when creating a unified acoustic sound, but the choice should be made by the artist musicality first prior to acoustic reason.

b) structure for sharing differences: The differences are perceived by individual sense rather than a group sense. Therefore there are many ways to respect the difference. In the practice, more than two different individual perceptions coexist simultaneously. There is danger when the condition becomes a jungle with different perceptions. In a jungle the sonic materials are formed of fractal shapes. When it becomes uncontrollably chaotic, a soloist could lead the path. We experience that even in a real jungle when a brilliant orchid or an exotic bird is spotted within thick layers of plant growth. In the ensemble a brilliant solo section is a treat. The solo contribution is also outstanding, when the soloist is supported by the improvising ensemble playing in the background. It is exhilarating when virtuosic improvisation takes flight by a brilliant soloist.

In East meets West collaborations Western intellect and Asian myth are confronting as well as merging. In the practice Asian time sensibility, nuance of notes, and deeply calm energy are significant sources for embracing organic formation in the improvisation. Asian fluctuation of note and Western intellectual expression on note can be better merging together in a flexible time space or multiple dimensional space.

c) structure for compositional creativity

The goal of improvisation is to make a great musical piece, a momentary composition.

Thus improvisation may be conceived as a composition when there is a progressive and clear direction. A keen sensibility about the right moment of transition is very important to connect to the emerging new ideas

and direction. This turning point arises naturally when the progression is fulfilled or when it gets too tranquil or static. In the ensemble improvisers must trust the flow of musical energy and perceive the whole direction and unfolding of the piece. This is not a pre-decided structure but naturally emerges from the group as the organic responses of well-seasoned improvisers.

## 5. Social Identity

A spontaneous improvisation is a free expression of human's highest consciousness. As we understand endless variety in the universe, we must anticipate that the individual human condition possesses an infinite range and variety in music. Just as life is never static but constantly changing, we do not make the same, repetitive music. We create new music living in a multi dimensional space: past (done), present (spontaneity) and future (imagination).

We are living in new type of social order with new possibilities of easy access to travel, internet connections, and environmental change. In this new contemporary social system, a variety of social identity is formed instantly, which is not so much controlled by nationality, boundaries, religion or institutional identity. Cross-cultural improvisation particularly reflects the contemporary human living evolution in twenty-first century society where we need to respond to rapidly, ever-changing conditions in order to survive. It is a social behavior of humans communicating the spirituality that can't be described in words.

In the cross-cultural improvisation individual musicians participate in a collective activity, which is highly motivated social identity. The social identity is cultivated collectively through contemplation, myth, connection with collective ancestral human spirit through great music and art around the world, discovery of universe and cosmology, imagination of unknown future and so on. Cross-cultural improvisation is a shared collective activity from different cultures with musicians who desire to communicate across artificial land and societal borders. Thus both individual identity and Korean identity gets dissolved in a large social identity within a global village.

In the global village we think more inclusively about the diversity of all of human experience. Not only in terms of the Western way or the Korean way but also as an international gathering in which diverse cultures and traditions and new ideas work together. There is no common language in music creativity, instead we must be inclusive all language on its own, because everyone thinks in their own distinctive history and contexts. Cross-cultural Improvisation is about challenging all people to reason for themselves at a particular time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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2007 <Komungo Tango>, autobiography published by Minsokwon.

2010 *Jin Hi Kim's Self-portrait*, score published by Living Tones

## <Recordings>

Pulses CD: Auricle Records AUR-10 USA (2010). Duos of Jin Hi Kim (komungo & electric komungo) and Gerry Hemingway (percussion).

Komungo CD: O.O. DISCS #70, USA (2001) and Seoul Records SRCD-1470, Korea (2001). Selection of Jin Hi Kim's solo komungo and electric komungo improvisations, and collaborations with Shonosuke Okura, Kongar-Ondar, and Kang Kwon Soon

Living Tones CD: O.O. DISCS #24, USA (1995) and Seoul Records SRCD-1327, Korea (1996). Selection of Jin Hi Kim's bi-cultural compositions.

Sound Universe CD: Living Tones LTS001 USA (2009). Jin Hi Kim Collaboration with musicians from Korea, China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Senegal, Australia, Germany, and United States.

Komungoguitar CD: Nonsequitur/What Next? WN0012, USA (1994). Jin Hi Kim duos with guitarists Derek Bailey, Eugene Chadbourne, Elliott Sharp, Henry Kaiser, and David First.

No World Improvisations CD: O.O. DISCS #3, USA (1990) and Warner Music Korea WEA 9031-75410-2, Korea (1992). Jin Hi Kim (komungo and janggo) with Joseph Celli (oboe, Indian mukhaveena).

#### <Youtube links>

~~Ain San Red in 2013~~ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wlr4L4ww&feature=youtu>

Digital Buddha (2006) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZZAsbAzx6M>

Dong Dong Touching The Moons (2000) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=660P32mLc>

Dragon Bond Rite (1997) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AmPbbp1gx8>

Exceeding (2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PilEdcKecLc>

Flowing Constancy (2015): <http://youtu.be/wPFYws-eRjE>

~~Ghost Komungo (2015)~~ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xId4OZ4ERU>

~~Jin Hi Kim Live in Seoul (2003)~~ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVAx73xGA>

Repulsive Tree (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJwFLZW022Q>

Sanjo Ecstasy (2003) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm4O26\\_og&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm4O26_og&NR=1)