

June 2–5, 2025. Conducted by Eumma Gaengkkaeng (EUMMA), Seoul, South Korea.^[1]
Co-sponsored by UNIMA-USA and the University of California, Santa Cruz.

An immersive workshop in Seoul, South Korea, organized in early June 2025 by members of theatre company EUMMA, led by master artist, Eum Dae-jin, introduced twelve foreign theatre practitioners to traditional Korean puppetry. Titled “Korean Traditional Puppet Deolmi International Workshop,” instruction focused on participants gaining a basic understanding of the history and significance of the traditional puppet theatre and allied performing arts of Korea, including drumming and mask dance-drama, as they carved and built their own traditional-style puppets and learned the rudiments of performing with them. The workshop included three field trips: a performance that included scenes from the Korean mask play (deotboegi) and the puppet show (deolmi) at Seoul’s cultural center dedicated to traditional Korean performing arts; a workshop of Songpa Sandae mask dance-drama at the Seoul Nori Madang; and to Andong, a visit to Andong, a UNESCO World Heritage Site of Korea’s Hahoe mask tradition.

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Figure 1. Traditional Korean *deolmi* puppets at EUMMA. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)

Introduction

Following the twenty-fourth UNIMA Congress^[2] (May 26–30) and the Chuncheon World Puppet Festival (May 23–June 1), both events held in Chuncheon, South Korea’s city of puppet theatre, a four-day workshop took place in Seoul. The “Korean Traditional Puppet *Deolmi* International Workshop” was a fitting capstone to the many memorable puppetry events held in May as part of the 2025 UNIMA Congress.

In 2023, Kathy Foley pioneered the idea of organizing hands-on introductory workshops of the local or traditional puppetry arts of those countries hosting UNIMA Congresses and Councils. Such workshops would take place immediately after the conclusion of these large-scale UNIMA events, with their accompanying world puppetry festivals. The

workshops would provide an extra opportunity for those fortunate few who had attended the UNIMA meetings and watched performances at the festival to get a more in-depth understanding of the local traditions. The first workshop of this nature followed the UNIMA Council held in Denpasar, Indonesia, in May 2023.[3]

The workshop on traditional Korean puppetry was held this year in Seoul from June 2 to 5. The event was conducted by Seoul-based theatre company Eumma Gaengkaeng (or EUMMA) and led by master artist, Eum Dae-jin.[4] Eum was assisted by two of his troupe members, Lee Dongh-hyeon and Bang Sungh-hyuk, with Kathy Foley, Mina Kyoungnye Kwon, and Jungmin Song coordinating. The immersive workshop attracted a dozen international enthusiasts, puppeteers, academics, and teachers from the USA and Australia,[5]to learn of Korea's traditional puppetry and allied performing arts.



Figure 2. Bang Sungh-hyuk with EUMMA *deolmi*: (left) the concubine Deolmeori-jib

and (right) Pak Cheomji. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)

The goal of the workshop was for the participants to gain a basic understanding of the history and significance of traditional Korean puppet theatre while they carved and built a traditional style Korean puppet. Participants were also free to use their own imagination in creating their puppet with the building techniques on offer. They then learned the rudiments of performing with their puppet.

Interspersed with the puppet making, the workshop also offered an introduction to the drumming, dancing, and singing elements that accompany the traditional Korean puppet show, one part of this UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage multi-artform, *namsadang nori*.^[6] Indeed, traditional Korean rod puppetry or *deolmi*, also known as *kkokdugaksi noreum* () and *Pak Cheomji noreum*,^[7] is just one element of Korea's traditional *namsadang* performers' acts, which also includes mask plays and popular entertainments.

Traditional Korean Puppetry and *namsadang nori*

The term *namsadang* () refers to the traditional itinerant Korean performers: *nam* (male) and *sadang* (entertainer/acrobat), indicating the all-male nature of the tradition which was a low-class entertainment whose performers often also participated in male prostitution during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). While there were many more categories, today the repertory of the *namsadang* companies include the following six: *pungmul* (drum and dance), *deotboegi* (mask dramas), *eoreum* (tightrope walking), *deolmi* (puppet plays), *salpan* (floor acrobatics), and *beona* (saucer spinning).^[8] *Namsadang* performers use puppets, various hand props, stages, and sets in their *deolmi* puppet plays, which feature lively interaction between puppets and a backchat drummer who plays the hour-glass drum (*jangu*).

While it was suppressed during the Japanese colonial era (1910–1945), the *namsadang* artform was revived in the 1960s and, in 1964, designated as South Korea's National

Intangible Cultural Heritage Property No. 3 (see <https://wepa.unima.org/en/namsadang/>). Key to this recovery was the work of Nam Un-ryong who reorganized what remained of the old *namsadang* tradition. The current puppet drama is a play in eleven scenes which, according to Nam Un-ryong's restoration, includes dancing, singing, storytelling, hunting scenes, funerals, etc. These depict shamanic rituals and dances, satire on depraved Buddhist monks and aristocrats, rivalry between wife and mistress, and the lives of ordinary people. Women were accepted into the art by the twentieth century. In fact, Nam's wife, Park Kae-soon, succeeded her husband as troupe leader upon his death. The *namsadang* form has inspired various theatre pieces and movies.[9]

Eumma Gaengkaeng, EUMMA Studio, and Eum Dae-jin

Eum Dae-jin is an exponent of the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Korea, *deolmi* rod puppetry, with its stock characters and satiric dialogue. Eum is a relatively young puppeteer and an experienced puppet builder. He is the student of Nam Ki-moon, a renowned puppeteer and puppet maker from a family of traditional Korean puppetry exponents. Both Nam and Eum received UNIMA International's Heritage Awards at the recent 2025 UNIMA Congress, honoring their work in preserving puppetry heritage in their country.

According to its website (<https://www.puppet-eumma.com/ABOUT>), EUMMA continues the legacy of the traditional Korean arts. Its repertory embraces a number of *namsadang nori* performances: including the mask drama (*deotboegi*) and the puppet show (*deolmi*)—both combine Korean history, tradition, faith, and folk elements and satirize the lives of ordinary people and the *yangban* (aristocrats) from the Joseon Dynasty—; and *samulnori*, the dynamic Korean percussion music genre performed by a quartet of traditional instruments.[10]

As its website also states, the group is equally committed to expanding the repertory

with new creations and innovations. The full name of the company “Eumma Gaengkkaeng” is significant:

“Eumma” meaning “touching the sound” to create music and “Gangkkaeng,” an onomatopoeia for the sound of a blacksmith’s workshop. It means that we as a group is [*sic*] committed to the creation of what’s needed for performances such as puppets, puppet stages and scenery and instruments. While preserving the lineage of traditional Korean puppetry, we also aim to widely promote Eumma’s creative puppetry, which explores combinations with various genres and contents.... Eumma is actively promoting its outstanding works to gain widespread recognition.

This includes using their rod puppets to perform feats of spinning disks or playing drums as well as creating new, full-scale productions. The company’s performance of *Buddhist Temple and Traditional Architecture* at the Chuncheon World Puppet Festival during the week before the workshop was an adaptation and modern creative extension of the traditional Korean puppet show, an exciting and elaborate production with live performers, musicians, dancers, and puppets.







Figure 3. Eum with a EUMMA puppet. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)







Figure 4. An EUMMA puppet. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)







Figure 5. Mechanism to lift the hair of an EUMMA *deolmi* puppet. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)

The Workshop

For many of the workshop participants, the Korean performing arts were initially something of a mystery. Kathy Foley, Mina Kyoungnye Kwon, and Jungmin Song had the most prior knowledge, which they offered their fellow participants (Foley 2014; Kwon 2019, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2025; Song 2025). This proved helpful, as the three teachers had limited English and most of the participants lacked Korean. These facts, however, did not lessen the three instructor-artists' ability to teach puppet making, drumming, dancing, and singing—creating a most cordial and valuable learning experience in the process.

We each made our own rod puppet, ostensibly based upon the stock *deolmi* characters. Over the four days, with assistance from the EUMMA staff, Eum and his colleagues, we carved our puppet's facial features on a pre-cut wood blank of a head and neck on the puppet's rod, which we had to first design on paper. Some of us added a mouth that would open and close, which was carved separately and then hinged onto the puppet's face. We painted our puppet, attached hair and dressed it in the costume made by Eum's team, following our individual choice of colors and fabric appropriate for the character we each had built.



Figure 6. Carving in progress. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)



Figure 7. Jungmin Song carving her puppet. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)



Figure 8. Dmitri Carter demonstrates his puppet's hinged mouth. (Photo: Karen

Smith)

We learned how to use the array of carving chisels. Some of the surprising techniques included using shoe polish as “paint” for the puppet’s face and then, with a blow torch, “burning” the face to “fix” the wax contained in the polish. Broom bristles or paint brushes became male puppets’ whiskers. Sheep skin formed the “wig” of white hair for the old man character, Pak Cheomji. The puppet’s “arms” were made with two strips of wood threaded through holes and attached to the puppet’s “shoulders” in such a way that the arms (within the sleeves of the costume) would go up and down, much like a jumping jack or *pantin*.







Figure 9. Dave Heesen “shoe polishes” his puppet’s head. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)



Figure 10: Eum helps attach a hair bun to a female puppet. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)

We were thus introduced to the making of some of the iconic *deolmi* characters, such as Pak Cheomji (“a pompous old man”^[11]), his wife Kkokdu Gaksi,^[12] his concubine Deolmeori-jib, and his nephew Hong Dongji. This last character, naked and red from head to toe, is the spokesman for the common people, known for his direct, vulgar language, and spraying audiences with his water to represent urine.

Our group finished the workshop with one Black Pak Cheomji, along with a number of traditional-looking ones, three versions of the seductive concubine Deolmeori-jib, one pock-marked example of the old wife Kkokdu Gaksi who is rejected by Pak Cheomji, several innovative versions of other stock characters, and one Hong Dongji (sans the spraying penis).



Figure 11. The finished *deolmi* puppets made by the workshop participants. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)

While we had worked on our puppets, we learned associated arts: Korean drumming, basic Korean mask dance movements, and singing. This included melodies that accompany both mask dance and puppet dance, including the *tteiru*, the chant that signals the start of the *deolmi* performance. Learning as a group to drum three rhythmic sequences within an hour, and at a relatively fast tempo, was exhilarating. It prepared us for our final “performance” when we got to play with our puppets behind a screen and make them move, gesture and dance in keeping with the drum rhythms.



Figure 12. Drumming class led by Bang Sungh-hyuk on *janggu*, the hourglass-shaped drums. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)

Thus, we were learning to tell stories through the dance-like movements via the arms and the swaying movements of the puppet's body. And, also, to improvise with our puppet, to get an idea of how to blend tradition and modernity, to come up with short, simple situations and movements that would convey a character.

For some of the workshop participants, the traditional Korean puppets had initially appeared quite basic, their faces fixed, and their movements limited—mainly flinging arms, animated singly or together by means of a string attached to wooden “arms” hidden within the sleeves of the traditional clothing worn by both male and female characters and activated under the dress, and their seemingly simple forward, backward, and figure eight body movements. Yet, through the experience of carving our

own puppet, we all gained an appreciation for the traditional puppets. And when we practiced animating our puppets, “dancing” them in sync with the rhythms of the drums, we gained an appreciation of the challenges involved.

Field Trips and Conference

A closer introduction to two of the six performance elements of *namsadang nori* was also on offer on the fourth evening of the workshop. This took place in Seoul’s cultural center dedicated to traditional Korean performing arts. The evening performance was offered by Master puppeteer-performer, Nam Ki-moon (mentioned above), and company.^[13] To open the evening presentations, the audience was introduced to one scene from the four-scene Korean mask play (*deotboegi*), accompanied by musicians. Before the introduction to the second part of the evening program, a sample of *deolmi* puppetry, folklorist Dr. Heo Yong-ho gave an introduction (with English translation by Mina Kyoung-hye Kwon) on the history, aesthetics, and significance of *namsadang nori*. Finally, before the puppet show segment began, along with Master Nam Ki-moon, the audience practiced the “*tteiru*” (the chant we had learned in our workshop “singing” session earlier that day). The *tteiru* signals the start of the *deolmi* show. All the elements introduced to us during the four-day workshop came together that evening in this sample of a *namsadang nori* linked performance.



Figure 13. A scene from the four-scene Korean mask play (*deotboegi*), accompanied by musicians. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)



Figure 14. A scene from the *deolmi* puppet show. (Photo: Kay Yasugi)



Figure 15. Building the Buddhist temple, a scene in the traditional *deolmi* puppet play. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)



Figure 16. Nam Ki-moon and company. (Photo: Mina Kyounghye Kwon)

The second field trip was to see some examples of Korean mask dance or *talchum*. This was a performance-cum-workshop at Songpa Sandae Mask Dance Drama Workshop at the Seoul Nori Madang (). This version of traditional mask performance had been further refined by members of the elite and was inscribed as a National Cultural Heritage Property in 1973. During the workshop, we both watched the teachers perform, with live musical accompaniment, and tried out the basic moves ourselves. This allowed us to compare the folk versions of puppet dance and instrumentation with the more aristocratic and mask versions of characters appearing in related scenes.^[14]



Figure 17. Songpa Sandae mask dance-drama workshop. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)

Some of the workshop group also journeyed to Andong, a UNESCO World Heritage Site of the important Hahoe mask tradition (Important Intangible Cultural Asset No. 69),^[15] where we interviewed company leaders and designated heritage masters, saw performances, and visited the Hahoe Mask Museum which contains examples of most Korean mask traditions as well as many international masks. Another activity was a visit to the National Folk Arts Museum and a recreation of palace ceremonials of music (*gugak*) and dance dating to the reign of King Sejong (r. 1418–1450)—annual rituals and music of the Joseon Dynasty.



Figure 18. Andong, Hahoe Village. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)



Figure 19. Andong, Hahoe Village. (Photo: Claudia Orenstein)



Figure 20. Parade at Andong. (Photo: Mina Kyoungnye Kwon)

The Seoul workshop included a conference in the afternoon of the first day, with presentations offered by eleven workshop participants who shared their own work or ongoing research. The presentations let the teachers and participants understand aspects of one another's work and fueled conversations throughout the workshop.

Conclusion

In closing, one must note the charm and calm stemming from our hosts' and teachers' magnanimity and generosity. We are fortunate to have shared this experience with Eum Dae-jin, his wife Park Mih-hyang, and fellow studio members Lee Dongh-hyeon and Bang Sungh-hyuk. We are also grateful to all who made the Seoul puppetry workshop such a success.

One hope is that following the UNIMA Council in 2027 and the 2029 UNIMA Congress in Prague, UNIMA-USA, University of California, Santa Cruz, or other new sponsors will find

local masters to teach similar hands-on workshops which ground the festival participation in a challenging, embodied learning experience that allows the global artist to learn about the local tradition and play within it.

Notes

[1] The EUMMA Studio is located at 3F 14, Sanseong-daero 582 beon-gil, Jungwon-gu, Seongnam-si, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea. Email: pogri1@hanmail.net.

[2] The world puppetry organization, Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA), has around seven thousand members from over ninety national UNIMA centers. Every four years, a five-day UNIMA Congress and World Puppet Festival is held. Between each Congress a UNIMA Council takes place, also with its attendant international festival. See <https://www.unima.org/en/>.

[3] A six-day workshop conducted by Balinese master I Nyoman Sedana (see Smith 2023).

[4] Korean personal names consist of a family name followed by a given name, which will be the format used in this report. The two Sino-Korean characters for given names have specific meanings. For consistency, hyphens will be used here for all Korean given names.

[5] Dmitri Carter (Northwest Puppetry Center), Bradford Clark (Bowling Green State University), Kathy Foley (University of California, Santa Cruz), David Heesen (former USAID), Josh Herman (Josh Herman Magic Circus), Phil Jasen (Alabama State University), Pascale Josephson (Roberto Clemente School), Mina Kyounghee Kwon (University of North Georgia), Claudia Orenstein (Hunter College), Karen Smith (Past President UNIMA International), Jungmin Song (Ballard Museum, University of Connecticut), and Kay Yasugi (Puppertoos, Australia).

[6] *Namsadang nori*, the arts of wandering entertainers, was named a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009. See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/namsadang-nori-00184>, accessed June 17, 2025.

“*Namsadang nori* is a traditional performance and recreation passed down through a group of professional performers called *namsadangpae* (itinerant performance troupe). It is a comprehensive performance including song and dance, music, and play,” including puppetry. See https://www.aks.ac.kr/cefia/webzine/2112/focus_eng.html, accessed June 27, 2025.

Also see https://geedesign.co.kr/program_20250604.html and https://english.khs.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?ctgryLrcls=CTGRY167&nttId=58072&bbsId=BBSMSTR_1205&mn=EN_03_02, accessed June 27, 2025.

[7] Various romanizations of the three above-mentioned Korean terms include: *deolmi*, *dolmi*, *dulmi* and *tolmi*; *kkokdugaksi noreum*, *kkoktu-gaksi noreum*, *kkoktu-gaksi norum*, *kkoktu gaksi norum*, *kkoktugaksi norum*, and *ggokdu gaksi noreum*; *Pak Cheomji noreum*, *Pak-Chomji norum*, *Pak Chomji norum*, and *Bak Cheomji noreum*. For this report, the following spellings will be used throughout: *deolmi*, *kkokdugaksi noreum*, and *Pak Cheomji noreum*. See <https://wepa.unima.org/en/kkoktu-gaksi-norum/>, accessed June 17, 2025.

[8] “Each of these separate acts was conducted one by one seamlessly over the course of a long program. While the dish spinning and tightrope walking were acrobatic feats that required highly trained skills, the four-act mask drama and puppet play resemble comic satires of society and social issues.” See https://english.khs.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?ctgryLrcls=CTGRY167&nttId=58072&bbsId=BBSMSTR_1205&mn=EN_03_02, accessed June 27, 2025.

[9] Perhaps best known is the 2005 film, *The King and the Clown* (), also known as *The Royal Jester* in English, directed by Lee Joon-Ik, adapted from the stage play *Yi (You)* by Kim Tae-woong, which depicts the homosocial world of *namsadang*, as a

performer, who is co-opted by the palace, becomes the male lover in a fictional reimagining of a fifteenth-century ruler whose reign outraged the Confucian magistrates.

[10] Instruments include *janggu* (hourglass-shaped drum representing rain), *buk* (barrel drum symbolizing clouds), *kkwaenggari* (small, high-pitched, hand-held gong representing lightning or thunder), and *jing* (large gong producing a deep, resonant sound, symbolizing the wind).

[11] See Mina Kyounghe Kwon, “Three Notable Puppeteers of Traditional Korean Puppetry and Beyond.”

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19YLa6iNo9KEM60jLWWUmJ-NGsRwRT0z-/view?usp=sharing>, accessed June 27, 2025.

[12] The Korean word “*gaksi*” translates as “wife.” Thus, “*kkokdugaksi noreum*” is literally “the puppet wife’s play,” a more generic term for this puppet genre. The term “*Pak Cheomji noreum*” signifies a puppet play about the character Pak Cheomji performed with rod puppets, the only traditional Korean puppetry that has survived to today.

[13] See https://geedesign.co.kr/program_20250604.html, accessed June 27, 2025.

[14] See

https://english.cha.go.kr/chaen/search/selectGeneralSearchDetail.do?mn=EN_02_02&sCcebKdcd=17&ccebAsno=00490000&sCcebCtcd=11&pageIndex=1&ccebKdcd=17&ccebCtcd=, accessed June 17, 2025.

[15] “*Hahoetal* (Korean:) are traditional Korean masks worn in the *Hahoe byeolsingut talnori* ceremonies that date back to the 12th century. They represent the stock characters needed to perform the roles in the ritual dance dramas included in the ceremony.... They are counted among the treasures of South Korea ...”

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hahoetal>, accessed June 27, 2025).

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