

**WRESTLING WITH SSIREUM:
KOREAN FOLK GAME VS. GLOBALIZATION**

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTOPHER A. SPARKS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2011

Major Subject: Anthropology

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Chair of Committee,
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ABSTRACT

Wrestling with Ssireum: Korean Folk Game vs. Globalization. (August 2011)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Thomas A. Green

Ssireum is a Korean form of grappling. Wrestlers grip sashes that are looped around their opponent's waist and thigh while competing inside a sand circle with the goal of making any part of their opponent's body above the knee touch the ground. In Korea ssireum is understood to be a national sport developed during the country's modernization in the early 20th century that has origins as a thousands-of-years-old folk game. By the start of 21st century ssireum's popularity had waned and a once prosperous professional league collapsed. The effects of globalization are frequently cited as the cause. However, the sport continues to be played at various levels throughout the public education system in addition to semi-pro and amateur leagues.

This dissertation asks the question, "What does it mean collectively to play ssireum?" The answer comes from fifteen months of participant observation and interviews in Korea's collegiate ssireum league. The goal is to establish the first major body of academic information about ssireum and to place it within the larger cultural context of contemporary Korean society. Fieldwork data is interpreted using theories drawn from Roger Abrahams, Fredrik Barth, Pierre Bourdieu, and Eric Hobsbawm. Ssireum's ritualized use of symbols appropriated from the past is a means of maintaining

the boundaries of an ethnic identity that allows everyone involved to assume they are ‘playing the same game’. Ssireum is a vehicle for negotiating, performing, and evaluating a unique identity. For those involved, playing ssireum makes Koreanness.

Ssireum dramatizes a traditional identity which has incorporated distinctly modern ideologies about the world. The relationships of people within ssireum are inextricably linked to existing protocols for social interactions in Korea; recruitment of talent, training regimens, competition events, future careers, and industry solvency could not be maintained otherwise. Globalization, frequently invoked in the rhetoric about ssireum, fills contradictory roles of boogeyman and savior, and misdirects attention away from counterproductive internal processes damaging the industry.

DEDICATION

For Papa, Billy, and Andres

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my committee chair, Dr. Green, and my committee members, Dr. Balfour, Dr. Dickson, and Dr. Werner, for their guidance and support. It would not have been possible to write this dissertation without their expert advice and insight. I could not have asked for better mentors. Though I am in their debt, the final responsibility for the accuracy of this work remains mine alone.

I also wish to extend my gratitude to the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, the Korea Science and Engineering Foundation, the L.T. Jordan Institute for International Awareness, the National Science Foundation, and the Texas A&M Anthropology Department for funding this research. I would not have been able to conduct fieldwork without their funding.

Thanks also to the Anthropology Department faculty and staff for supporting students without hesitation. This is especially true of Cynthia Hurt and Rebekah Luza, two people who should be acknowledged for the vital and often thankless work they perform without fail.

In Korea, I would like to thank MBC ESPN Korea, the Korea Ssireum Association, and the Korean University Ssireum Federation for their support in providing access to ssireum events. I would also like to thank Seoul National University, especially Kim Young-aie for her kindness and closeness. Special thanks to Dr. Seung-Han Park of the Korea Ssireum Research Institute for his enthusiasm, confidence, and

support. And my eternal gratitude to Dr. Yong Huh and Iron Kim, for without their earnest friendship and disabuse I would have surely been doomed to labor in vain.

While I would like to thank all the Korean universities, colleagues, and friends that so generously opened up their worlds to me, I cannot properly and openly do so without nullifying their confidentiality. Such is my regret. Please accept my humble thanks for sharing your stories with me. I could not have done it without you.

Special thanks must go to my anthropological colleagues, Kiho Kim and In-Huck Choi. Their support and feedback have always been invaluable. But above all I appreciate their friendship.

Lastly, I want to thank my friends and family, on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, for everything they have done to support me. My education is not so much an individual accomplishment as it is the fruits of the collective bonds of kinship. Above all else, I could not have come this far without the love and sacrifice of my parents, wife, and precious son. Long will I endeavor to be worthy of your care.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: GRAB THE BELT

This chapter discusses the basis of the research. It briefly describes *ssireum*¹, the general state of the sport, what questions *ssireum* raises, explains how those questions will be answered, situates the contributions of those answers, describes the unit of analysis, how it was investigated, the limitations and biases of the methods involved, and concludes with a description of a *ssireum* competition to orient ensuing discussions.

TRANSLITERATIONS, NOMENCLATURE, AND VOICE

Transliterating Korean in English is frequently improvident because it does nothing to enable readers to contextualize Korean vocabulary or locate the Korean references used in a non-Korean work. For example, authors' names and the titles of works can vary so wildly in transliteration (or translation) that it renders them impossible to locate outside of the work in which they are cited. The reality is that if one wishes to actually locate a Korean text or properly grasp a concept one simply *must* use Hangeul, the indigenous Korean alphabet, or Hanja, Sino-Korean logograms.

However, transliteration is a necessity because not everyone is able to read Korean scripts and thus they should be rendered in English for greater accessibility. Several systems for achieving this end exist, though none are without flaws. Both

This dissertation follows the style of *American Anthropologist*.

¹ 씨름: 漢字없슴: *ssireum*: Korean-style belt wrestling; see the end of this chapter as well as the figure on page 158 for descriptions of a contemporary match.

the McCune-Reischauer and Yale Romanization involve diacritical marks which make them cumbersome for general typographic purposes and casual reading. The Revised Romanization of Korean (RRK), the current national standard in the Republic of Korea, uses a simple Latin alphabet better suited for general audiences. However, this latter system produces awkward transliterations for glottalized consonants and consonant clusters as in the case of the traditional form of belt-wrestling known as ssireum - the subject of this dissertation.

In light of the limitations surrounding the transliteration of Korean into English, this dissertation adopts the lesser evil of the RRK. This provides greater overall readability at the cost of a handful of inelegantly written words, the most prominent of which is conveniently located in the title of this work. As the RRK system of transliteration does not facilitate the acquisition of Korean language sources, this dissertation employs an appendix which presents the sources used herein in their original script. Regarding the transliteration of persons' names, the RRK recommends that family names follow common preference or precedent even if it deviates from the RRK system whereas given names should follow the RRK system regardless. All Korean names in this text obey this guideline.

All translations appearing in this text, such as reference titles or quotations, are my work and should be understood as an effort to provide greater readability in English. However, the full cultural linguistic impact of Korean terms is sometimes lost when translating. I have taken pains to indicate which linguistic nuances are important by discussing them in-text and also presenting translations alongside original Hangeul or

Hanja through footnotes whenever a Korean word is introduced. Additionally, the terms in the footnotes found throughout the text are compiled in an appendix which functions as a Korean glossary for easy referencing in the native script.

Regarding nomenclature, the term “Korea” is used to refer to the Republic of Korea (ROK), commonly known as South Korea, and these three terms are treated interchangeably. Any references to the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, are made specifically as such. The term “Korean” refers to the cultural providence of the population of Korea and any of the antecedent peoples having lived in the same space unless otherwise noted.

The world of ssireum is comprised of tightly knit social networks. Because of the intimacy of the industry it is possible for people to inferentially identify their cohorts through minute pieces of information. Simply mentioning a person’s hometown or age could expose their identity. In order to maintain the confidentiality of sources I have altered the names of townships and cities. I have also blended biographical details discussed in-text into composites and assigned them all the ubiquitous Korean surname ‘Kim’ along with a title to represent their relative connection to ssireum. This incidentally serves the purpose of imparting to readers a modest sense of immersion in Korean society. Everyone in Korea has at least one title which reflects their social status and the use of personal names is used only among close friends of the same age. I feel comfortable using this method of describing persons in the text because I am not imposing it as an external system of categorization; Koreans already identify themselves in this way. Data drawn from sets of interviews does not use surnames and instead

follows only titles. So for example, when reading about “Coach Kim” it should be clear that this is a persona carefully written to be representative of the set of people I interviewed who were indigenously categorized as coaches. Likewise, when reading about “sireum coaches” it should be clear that this set of individuals is the range of source used to composite “Coach Kim”. When discussing persons whose identities are matters of public or historical record I use their full names in order to maintain the accuracy of the data they represent.

Lastly, I have a few words about ethnographic voice. Ethnographies are, in a sense, like photographs. Within them are snapshots of specific moments in time and place. But while their contents are transient, photographs and ethnographies themselves are transcendent. They persist long after the moment is lost. Unlike photographs, ethnographies rely upon language and this presents unique problems. If written entirely in the present tense it implies that the moment is perpetually happening when nothing could be further from the truth. If written in the past tense it implies that the contents were somehow outdated before they were written, a contradiction in purpose. Why write authoritatively about things we know to be inaccurate?

To address the limitation of voice I shift between past and present tense as a means of directing the reader’s attention. When discussing fieldwork and previous research the past tense is used to reify that these events have definitively concluded and may no longer be the same. When discussing ideas and results specifically generated by fieldwork I shift to present tense because that information is continuous and immutable within the confines of this dissertation. For example, during fieldwork I observed that,

‘Ssireum was always played within a sand circle,’ and concluded that, ‘Part of the aesthetic of ssireum is the interaction of players with the sand.’ This shifting in tenses highlights an important fact: ssireum will inevitably change over time, but this dissertation will not.

WHAT IS SSIREUM?

Ssireum is a Korean form of grappling in which wrestlers attempt to topple their opponents starting from a standard grip around each other’s waist. Ssireum’s history prior to the 20th century is scattered and piecemeal, but available archaeological and historical evidence suggests that it has been played in Korea for at least two thousand years. It is also clear from the same evidence that ssireum has been played quite differently over time. Contemporary ssireum is based on the selective retention and interpretation of some of its previous forms along with the addition of novel, modernized features. Much of what ssireum is popularly said to represent at present is based on homogenizing local views of history in the Korean peninsula. For example, the rule structure that prohibits strikes and kicks extends the metaphor of ssireum as a nonviolent contact sport in accordance with the portrayal of Korea as a peaceful nation.² Ssireum became an extremely popular national sport during Korea’s modernization, but an international financial crisis all but destroyed it in the late 1990s. Industry leadership has continually

² Ssireum is distanced from other contact sports such as boxing, Olympic wrestling, judo, rugby, and so on in terms of how it is played. There is no striking allowed in ssireum, nor any type of body manipulation that would cause an opponent to yield from pain. Ssireum is a vigorous grappling contest of strength and skill that ends when one player is toppled. Thus there exists a level of contact force (i.e. people being thrown to the ground), but the “violent” nature of that force is mitigated by the method of play - usually *both* players fall as a result of using belts for grappling and falling concludes competition as opposed to representing yet another stage in competition.

sought ways to redevelop ssireum. At present, this includes exporting ssireum to foreign countries in order to create a global league. This study is concerned with how a traditional understanding of competition has come to appropriate modern ideologies in its performance.

BACKGROUND

It would be difficult to argue that ssireum represented an ethnic identity prior to the 20th century. There is no evidence to support such a position aside from contemporary claims that became attached to the sport through its transformations during the modernization and global market integration of Korea. Considering the sport in context, the issue is what its evolution tells us about Korea in particular and globalization in general.

The economic development of Korea in the 1950s after its civil war is popularly viewed as a remarkable feat enabled through the power of modernization; this transformation is sometimes referred to as “The Miracle on the Han”³ (The table on page 24 shows estimates of this rise.⁴) Using Polanyi’s (1957) perspective on the proliferation of market ideology and double movements as a point of departure, it can be asserted that

³ 한강의 기적: 漢江의 奇蹟: *Hangangeui Gijeok*: “The Miracle on the Han”, a phrase used to refer to the “miraculous” modernization of Korea, especially Seoul, following the Korean War; this is an appropriation of “The Miracle on the Rhine” (*Wirtschaftswunder*) which refers to West German and Austrian economic recovery following the end of World War II.

⁴ The difference in the two estimates results from different methods used to adjust the value of the international dollars. For details on how they were calculated refer to Angus Maddison’s *Historical Statistics* (www.ggdc.net/maddison) and the IMF’s *2009 World Economic Outlook* (www.imf.org). Maddison’s work is included here because it is longitudinal while the IMF’s is included because it is more accurate over the last three decades.

global economic integration in Korea was culturally disruptive and Koreans responded accordingly. The rapid series of nationally transformative events starting in the early 20th century fundamentally altered the day-to-day lives of Koreans, what Abraham (1978) would call their ‘life-in-common’, and forced the renegotiation of their collective identity. Social contact with different groups was becoming a way of life in Korea. As Barth (1969) wrote, people’s categories are more strongly affected by interaction than contemplation and, “...revision only takes place where the categorization is grossly inadequate.” New prescriptions for Korea’s interaction with the global market were required.⁵ Ssireum’s place in Korean society over time has made it a barometer of these prescriptions.

This historical disruption of Korea is *sine qua non* for understanding contemporary Korean society and identities (Kim 2006). Essentially, it raised the issue of what it meant to be Korean (Han 2003). Drawing upon Abraham’s (1978) view of group change, it was most likely the revision of organizational structures in daily life that pushed through the redefining of their collective identity. A chief means of adapting to such changes is what Hobsbawm (1983) dubbed the invention of tradition, the invocation of a fictitiously invariant past in the present to provide reassurance and help

⁵ What Jansen (1959) would term esoteric and exoteric factors. Esoteric refers to a group’s self-image as well as how the group believes outsiders see it; exoteric in turn is the view of an outside group as well as how that group is thought to see itself. For example, Korean esoteric folklore would include their founding origin myth (discussed in Chapter III) while their exoteric folklore would include comedic stereotyped portrayals of Japanese (discussed in Chapter IV).

structure modern life.⁶ According to Hobsbawm, “Where the old ways are alive, traditions need neither be revived nor invented.” Accordingly, disruptive societal changes such as Korea’s modernization almost inevitably produce new traditions and new traditions almost inevitably draw upon the existing symbolic library of a group. This appears to be the case with ssireum.

Western sports had established their dominion over the athletic scene in Korea even before modernization. The Protestant missions and schools which sprung up during the 1880s are reported to be the first to bring Western sports, including soccer, to Korea (Ha and Mangan 1994). The first public Western sports tournament was held in 1896 at the Foreign Language School under the direction of an English headmaster (Im 1962). Within a few decades Western boxing would be widely adopted in Korea under Japanese imperial rule and this would become an important conduit of Korean athletic participation in global sports (Svinth 1999; Svinth 2001). The development of modern sport in Korea had become intrinsically linked to changes in the nation’s political, economic, cultural, and social climates (Ha and Mangan 2002). Interestingly, under colonial rule in Korea ssireum was the first local sport to be played alongside Western alternatives at the national level.

⁶ “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983)

After national liberation and post-civil war reconstruction a dialog emerged which first began enumerating the features of Korean culture.⁷ The renegotiation of the boundary for Koreanness occurred during this period as the *raison d'être* for new customs was couched less in practical terms and more through the appropriation of symbols drawn from the past - especially Confucian and shamanistic ideologies. National symbols, such as the Korean flag and its Taoist motifs, sought to emphasize homogeneity within the boundary of Koreanness while still linking it to the outside in such a way that the Republic could rightfully assert itself among its new peers on the world stage. The role of this emergent identity was to allow people to assume that they were all, as Barth (1969) might say, 'playing the same game'. Because ssireum's early formalization coincided with this period it came to evoke a sense of ethnic identity among Koreans. It had become a way to perform Koreanness and maintain the continuity of the group. Ssireum falls within this scope as the public performance of traditional competition.

The usefulness of sports in understanding culture is indisputable. Sports are laden with values (Horne and Manzenreiter 2002; Tomlinson and Young 2006). They meet social demands, and different sports reflect different needs (Bourdieu 1978). They are an essential sphere of social interaction in which dramatic tensions yield *communitas* (Turner 1986). Examining the ways in which they are organized and their skills transmitted along their symbolic ritual and ceremonial features yields insight into the

⁷ See Han (2003) and Yi (2003) for a more extensive discussion.

cultures in which they are practiced (Peterson 1983). Wrestling is a widespread vehicle for performing identities (Alter 1992; Levi 1997; Levi 2001; Sériba 2005). Especially when it comes to defining the “traditional vs. modern” tensions frequently discussed in globalization (Chehabi 1995; Hershiser 1998; May 1999). Wrestling seems to speak to some essential dramaturgy, perhaps because it clearly frames the human form in competition with itself (Feigenbaum 2000; Jenkins 1997; Mazer 1990; McNeil Saunders 1998; Rickard 1999; Workman 1977).

During Korea’s economic growth of the 1970s and 80s ssireum’s popularity boomed as mega-corporations created teams to populate a professional league, a symbolic gesture of the nation’s emergent largesse. Ssireum had tapped into something unique. In Korea, indigenous sports once included archery and ball-games (Lim 1986); however, none of them survived into the millennium and discussions of intrinsically Korean sports seemed relegated to the pre-modern past (Nah 1986). Taekwondo⁸ had been entering its own phase of development alongside ssireum in those decades, but unlike ssireum it relied upon heavy government backing by the military for its development, was actually of relatively modern Japanese origins, and did not include *communitas* as a value in its performances (Burdick 1997; Capener 1995). Ssireum was prospering and had become the most popularly viewed sport in Korea. Its formalized aspects had taken on philosophical connotations and it was said to embody traditional

⁸ 태권도:跆拳道: *Taekwondo*: A Korean martial art.

Korean aesthetics by harmonizing oppositional forces and bringing people closer together.

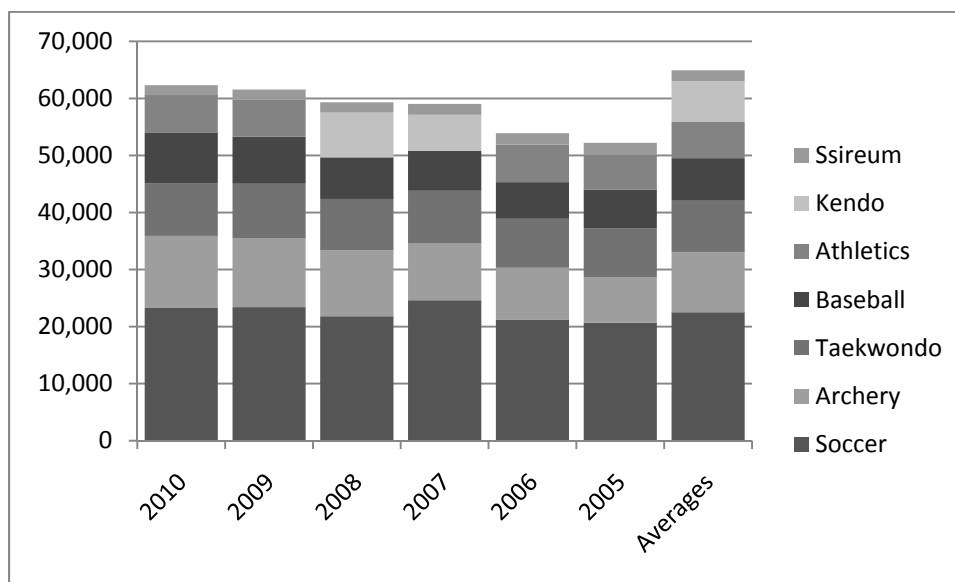
By that time modernization and global market integration had become popularly associated with Social Darwinism and Neoliberalism in Korea, an association which still persists (Kang 2000; Shin 2003; Shin 2006). The government expressed a shifting emphasis on individuals engaging competition that exists outside national boundaries first through ‘New Korea’, then ‘Internationalization’, and finally ‘Globalization’ (Kang 2000). Eventually the dominant political ideology in Korea had embraced globalization as a force for ‘Koreanization’ (Shin 2003). In a 1996 speech then-president Young-Sam Kim proclaimed, ‘We cannot become global citizens without a good understanding of our own culture and tradition... We should march out into the world on the strength of our unique culture and traditional values. Only when the national identity is maintained and intrinsic national spirit upheld will we be able to successfully globalize.’ The rules in ssireum that prohibited strikes and kicks extended the metaphor of tradition’s superiority as a nonviolent contact sport in accordance with the portrayal of Korea as a peaceful nation. Traditional competition was prevailing in modern Korea.

The professional ssireum league that had developed in the decades after Korea’s reconstruction completely collapsed in the wake of Korea’s 1997 IMF crisis.⁹ The decline

⁹ The heyday of the professional ssireum league serves to explain an implied, though rarely directly stated, position in the rhetoric of ssireum’s decline. People familiar with ssireum always assume that more people should be playing now because *more people were playing before*. In context, it is a reasonable assumption though it disingenuously skews attention towards the professional end of the ssireum spectrum. The details of the league’s collapse and its effects will be discussed in more depth in the history section.

of ssireum has been attributed to the loss of corporate financing, the modernized tastes of sporting audiences, the low status of the sport, or some combination thereof (Hong 1997a; Hong, et al. 2000; Hong, et al. 2001; Hwang 2002; Shin 2007). Non-Korean sports went on to enjoy more support and greater participation than ssireum.¹⁰ (Tables 1 and 2 illustrate ssireum's status across the last five years.)

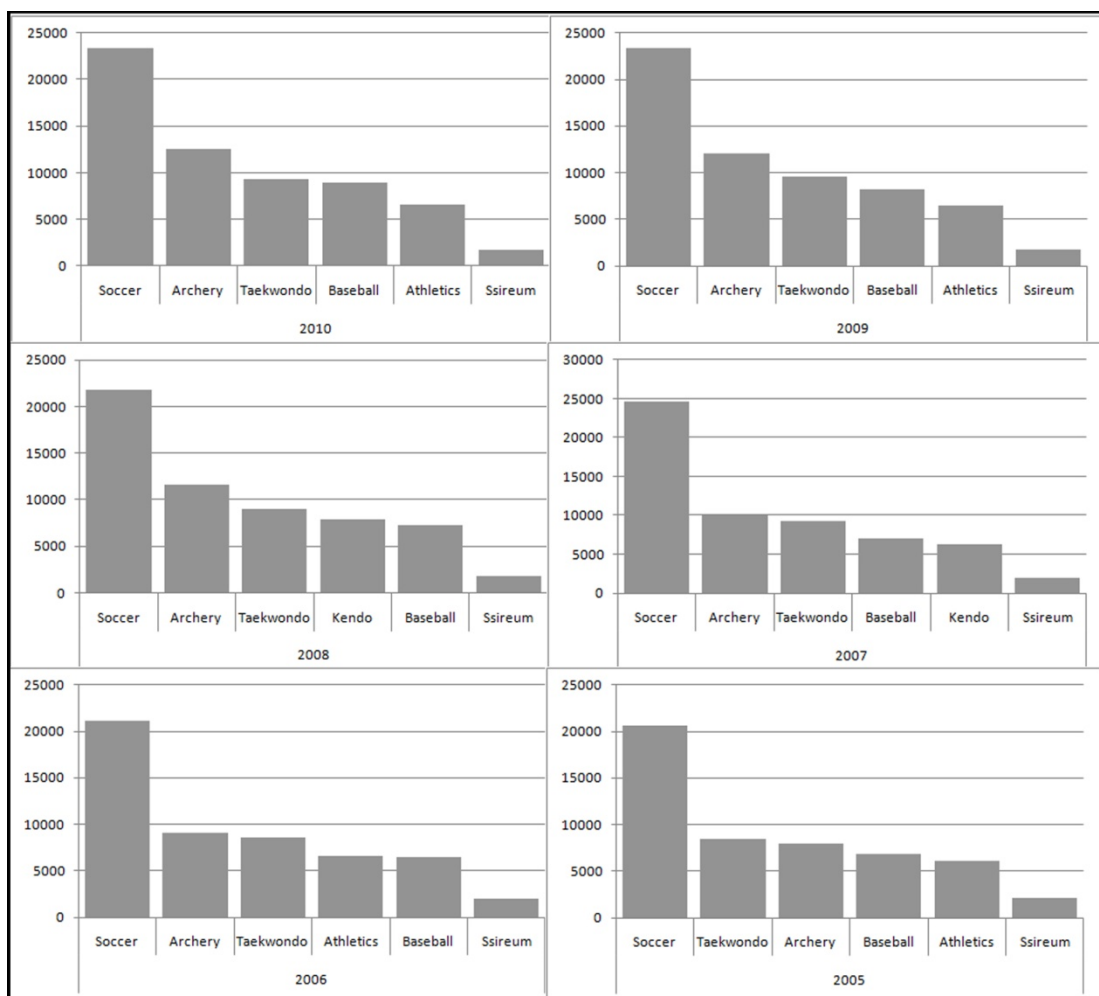
Table 1 - Top Five Sports and Ssireum Relative Contributions 2005-2010



¹⁰ Numbers drawn from public data published by the Korean Department of Education showed that in 2007 there were over 4,000 soccer players across 123 teams and 400 ssireum players across 30 teams at the high school level, and 2,500 soccer players across 72 teams and just under 250 ssireum players across 18 teams at the college level. Those level illustrate the relative popularity of ssireum to soccer.

These tables give a sense of how ssireum compares to other sports around the time of this study, but keep in mind that this dissertation does not encapsulate the entire, complex landscape of Korean sports.

Table 2 - Top Five Sports and Ssireum 2005-2010



During that time ssireum's contribution to the total number of athletes *at all levels*¹¹ in Korea dropped 20% while soccer increased 12% and baseball 30%; a combination of ssireum losing talent and total sports participation selectively increasing in other areas. In relative terms, the ratio of soccer players to ssireum players in 2005 was 9.75 and it jumped to 13.69 by 2010. In absolute terms, in 2005 there were 20,680 soccer players (#1 sport) and 2,119 ssireum players (#23 sport) compared to 23,346 (still #1) and 1,709 (now #24) in 2010 respectively. Across those five years soccer has consistently retained about 17% of all sports participation and ssireum about 1%. (The following tables give a sense of how ssireum compares to other sports around the time of this study, but keep in mind that this dissertation does not encapsulate the entire, complex landscape of Korean sports.)

The soccer industry in Korea was never financially solvent and it survived the crippling effects of the IMF crisis (Kim, et al. 2007). In part this reflected a stigma attached to contact sports, but also included a number of other factors. Soccer and baseball provided settings which could encompass broader types of group conflict from regional to international; the globalizing nature of soccer to convey national messages as well as local interests is an integral part of its history in Korea (Horne and Manzenreiter 2002; Lee, et al. 2007; Manzenreiter and Horne 2007). Golf was unique because it was

¹¹ Elementary, middle, high school, college, amateur, semi-pro, and professional.

the highest status individual sport in Korea.¹² At the opposite end of the spectrum were contact sports such as martial arts; little, if any, special equipment was needed to play, participation involved the risk of traumatic injury, training consumed time that could be used for academic pursuits¹³, player physiology made it difficult for them to pass in nonathletic social circles, and the (mis)perception that few lucrative careers in those sports exist. Despite having been popularly played, ssireum was strongly associated with low social status.¹⁴ This appeared to be reflected in players' feelings of marginality (Jeon 2004).¹⁵

The ensuing discussion of ssireum tends to typify the relative dearth of material on Korean culture. The first formal attempts at documenting Korean culture did not come about until Japanese colonization when Korean academics were educated and

¹² The mountainous geography and premium cost of real-estate in Korea make even basic driving ranges prohibitively expensive to build and maintain; the majority of driving ranges were penthouse affairs built on the roofs of skyscrapers in urban areas. Being able to afford membership enrollment and dues is an extraordinary luxury as is the leisure time to play, not to mention the time and expense involved in learning to play well.

¹³ It is difficult to overstate the popular Korean mania for education and the disapproval of anything that interferes with it. Oh (2010) explains this attitude in great detail, noting along the way that Korea spends more on private education than any other country in the world. The reasons why some sports would be tolerated better than others when it comes to education is explored in later chapters; for now, the point is that status trumps provided sports are engaged with as much fervor as would have been given to school.

¹⁴ While ssireum players have a reputation for abnormally large body types, they are still generally considered mannerly. The popular persona of judo players, in contrast, is violent and rowdy - evidence of which is demonstrated by their ubiquitous affliction with cauliflower ear. In actuality it is their training regimens which give them "dumpling ears" and not street fighting, but the reputation still stands.

¹⁵ My own research tended to corroborate ssireum players' feelings of marginality, that people do treat them as exceptional or atypical and not always in a good way. I frequently heard larger ssireum players described as "animals" because of their exceptional physiology and (undeserved) reputations for prodigious appetites, including Iron Kim being called a "beast" and a "cow" (the latter an animal frequently associated with ssireum). I was also privy to a running jab at a former wrestler pursuing his PhD who was sometimes called "Professor Cow" (소박사: *sobaksa*) in reference to both his size and eventual title. While these comments could run from good-natured ribbing to earnest insults they all expressed both awe and derision.

trained by Japanese historians.¹⁶ The majority of research about Korea has been in the economic and political mode, presumably reflecting a Neoliberal view of Korea's relative worth. Until recently there was little research on Korea by Koreans, explained in part by the once culturally logical assumption that it was unnecessary: Koreans intuitively understood Korean culture because they were Korean.¹⁷ Within the last couple of decades a reflexive examination of Koreanness has developed to challenge that, particular with regard to changes in tradition stemming from globalization. This has covered marriage practices (Kendall 1996), religion (Kendall 2003), populist movements (Yea 1999), festival (Jeong and Santos 2004; Moon 2005), education (Finch and Kim 2009; Kim and Cho 2005; Lee 2009), and arts (Lee, et al. 2010). These studies all advance the connection of globalization's effects in daily life, often with nationalism and tradition as mediating agents. For example, the Korean Minjok Leadership Academy (KMLA¹⁸) and its synthesis of tradition and globalization in the pursuit of, '[Producing] global leaders who are equipped with Korean national spirit'¹⁹ (Finch and Kim 2009). Sports should have also been an important part of such discussions. Mangan and Ha (2001) said quite distinctly, "...the history of Korean sport entered a transitional period,

¹⁶ Palais also noted that an unfortunate side-effect was the inclusion of Japanese colonial ideology in many works of that era.

¹⁷ Kim (1993a) encountered such thinking in her research and remarked that many Koreans considered their daily life an appropriate subject for study only among non-Korean scholars because of its exoticism (or, presumably, their foreignness). Her observation was that many Koreans thought it was superfluous for them to study Korean culture because they already knew what was "right and natural".

¹⁸ 민족사관고등학교:民族史觀高等學校: Korean Minjok Leadership Academy, an elite private boarding school in Korea.

¹⁹ "민족 정신으로 무장한 세계적 지도자 양성."

which proved to be a turning point in the associated evolving culture...” Yet local sports were largely ignored as many had died out and the attention was increasingly paid to Koreans in Western sports; the issue of how people came to be involved in ssireum and the reasons they played were went unaddressed. Next to no academic literature on ssireum exists in English; in Korean nearly all of them are kinesiology studies²⁰, historical accounts (discussed in later chapters), or proposals for revitalization (Hong, et al. 2001; Hwang 2002). The revitalization studies echoed the Social Darwinism and Neoliberalism enmeshed in globalization rhetoric. Ssireum should change over time to stay relevant (Hong 1997a; Hong, et al. 2000). Failure to adapt would be fatal (Chang 2000). Popularity, profitability, and export were critical to its future (Hong, et al. 2001; Hwang 2002; Lee 2004; Oh 2010b). These were the first to apply market ideologies to ssireum as an identity and the association has stuck. Competition had come to be emphasized over communitas.

Despite the adversity it encountered, ssireum continued to be played at all levels

²⁰ The list of works covering ssireum in the vein of kinesiology is prolific and tends to focus on ssireum players as a special research population. While this dissertation is interested in the cultural importance of ssireum, readers with an exercise science bent may be interested in the following works: Chang (1985); Choi (2004); Choi (1987); Choi, Son, and Lee (2001); Go (1997); Ha and Choi (1996); Ha and Kim (1995); Hong, Lee, and Park (1999); Hong (1988, 1997); Hong and Change (1995); Hong and Jeong (1991, 1996); Hong, Lee, and Lee (1998); Hong, Shin, and Jeong (1997); Huh (2004, 2008); Hwang (2002); Jang (1984); Jo (1999); Kang (1976); Kim and Shin (1990); Kim (1986); Kim, Park, and Kim (2000); Kim (1988); Kim and Han (1988); Kim, Yu, and Kim (1997); Kim (2002); Kim, Han, and No (1999); Kim (1986); Kim (2003); Kim and Kim (2001); Kim and Woo (2001); Kim, Do, Kwan, Park, Jang, Park, Kim, and Lee (2000); Kwan, Park, Kim, Kim, Kim, and Kim (1994); Kwan and Park (1998); Lee, Park, and Park (1999); Lee, Lim, and Kim (1985); Lee and Choi (2003); Lee and Kim (1988); Lee and Lee (1999); Lee (1982, 1988); Lee (1970); Park and Lee (2002); Park (1985); Park (1977, 1984, 1993); Park, Jeong, and Park (1993); Ryu (2004); Seong, Lee, and Lee (1998); Shin, Im, Kim, Park, and Kwon (2003); Song (2003); Yang, Hwang, and Yu (1999); Yu and Burton (1998); and Yu, Kim, Son, and Kim (2002).

of compulsory education in Korea. Active collegiate and semi-pro teams filled the void left by professional ssireum. Currently, industry leadership considers the globalization of ssireum integral to its future; the objectives are to establish ssireum in other nations and have it designated an Olympic sport. In this sense, ssireum seeks the globalization of tradition, or more specifically, the globalization of an invented tradition; this dissertation explores why and to what purpose.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

While there are many ways Koreanness is construed, contemporary ssireum is unique because: it is a highly specialized embodied form of understanding; it is the oldest extant indigenous physical competition in Korea; it is strongly associated with an agrarian, low-status, pre-modern folk past; it ritualizes the human body in an expressive, symbolic capacity; it represents a non-violent philosophy of competition and community; and participation is voluntary. No other forms of Koreanness synthesize elements in this way nor do they have their sights set on internationalizing participation like ssireum. The most popularly referenced forms in Korea are structural, compulsory preconditions for membership that actually preclude universal participation.²¹ Thus ssireum is not ordinary Koreanness - it is unique even by Korean standards.

²¹ Kinship, language, diet, education, geographic residence, national policy, and so forth are ostensibly non-negotiable Koreanness - though in practice they become the basis for the categorization of Korean subcultures. It remains to be seen if ssireum can transcend these points and truly “Koreanize” outsiders through participation. There is an implied presumption that it can (or else why globalize it?), though it might serve only to make outsiders “more Korean” rather than “fully Korean” - an interesting prospect.

One of the original founders of the professional league, in his 70s when I met him, elaborated on this point during an interview. Founder Kim had first asked me, “What do you want to know about ssireum?” I asked him to tell me about how ssireum had changed in the last 50 years and why it had lost popularity in the late 1990s. Without directly answering either question Founder Kim explained, “People don’t know what ssireum is. Ssireum is the essence of human movement, always in evolution, refining and changing over time. But people are always arguing²² about what ssireum is, what it is supposed to be. They don’t understand. You don’t understand. And ssireum lost popularity because people follow trends without understanding them. People never understood the true meaning of ssireum as a philosophy. They just followed it because it was trendy and they left it behind when the trend switched.” The conversation shifted. “There was a Japanese guy, Tanaka, who was Minister of Physical Education in Korea in 1938. He tried to change the name ‘ssireum’ to ‘gakhui’, but those Chinese characters have different meanings in Japanese. That’s not ssireum. Ssireum is not just pushing, pulling, and balancing. It is a philosophy of human movement.”

²² The particular expression Founder Kim used was *입씨름* (*ip ssireum*), literally “mouth wrestling”. It was an elegant turn of phrase considering the topic of conversation and illustrates how ssireum is used idiomatically in regular conversation to refer to a kind of struggle. As in, “to wrestle with something”. This is one of the rare instances between Korean and English where equivalent words have equivalent figurative uses, though the image it conjures up is culturally specific. “To ssireum with something” has a hands-on feeling of being worked over while at the same time struggling to come out on top.

Within the same conversation ssireum had been described as essential (the essence of *human* movement) versus ethnically unique (cannot be expressed in Chinese or Japanese), adaptable (constantly evolving) versus immutable (cannot be renamed), and ephemeral (a popular trend) versus enduring (a philosophy). These ideas capture the tensions in ssireum, the difficulty in resolving the particular with the universal. The question is how one sport can come to embody so many seemingly contradictory dimensions in such a natural way.

While there are diverse interpretations of Koreanness I am less concerned with the existential content of ssireum and where it fits within such a spectrum than I am with how it is developed and circulated. I assume that all systems of meaning are subject to revision and inherently change according to context; a major theme in this research is discussing ssireum as a continuously revised system of understanding framed by a particular type of physical competition. Inevitably I must cover some of the systems of meaning in ssireum but I do not wish to present them as immutable or incontestable for that is the exact opposite of what they are.

Play is inherently social. The understandings within it are subjective (Csikszentmihalyi 1981) and the content culturally specific (Miracle 1992). Yet among participants ssireum has recently assumed a very expansive notion of play. My focus is on how ssireum universalizes a particular understanding of competition by appropriating ideologies embedded in globalization, presumably for the expression of a novel collective self. The goal is to identify the ways in which this understanding has

appropriated the universal²³, and how such understanding is acquired and legitimized. In other words, how is playing ssireum seen by participants as something both culturally specific and universally appreciable? The end-game is to arrive at ideas about how the individual experience in ssireum is bridged with the world view that it perpetuates.

THESIS²⁴

Playing ssireum makes Koreanness. Through ssireum we can see how the advent of globalization disrupted the life-in-common of Koreans and emergent ethnic identities developed to maintain boundaries, power dynamics, and values that have come to appropriate once threatening forces into their ideologies. Furthermore, while the collective and individual understandings of competition in ssireum appear very different, they are integrated through the circulation and evaluation of values between the small group of participants that perform them and their larger audience. The adoption of

²³ I use “universal” as broadly derived from modernization and Neoliberal market ideology, the idea that everyone and everything can be encompassed within a particular mode of exchange.

²⁴ I originally composed the title of this dissertation in Korean to evoke this thesis and then translated it into English. *Wrestling with Ssireum: Korean Folk Game vs. Globalization* was actually born *씨름과 씨름하다: 민속놀이 대 세계화*. But the literal “Ssireuming with Ssireum: Ethnic Game against Koreannization” was unwieldy and missed the point entirely. “Wrestling with ssireum” uses ssireum as both a noun (씨름) and transitive verb (씨름하다) to imply the sport is contemplatively grappling with its condition. “Folk game” uses “folk” (민속) in the vernacular sense; while it *can* refer to a broad amalgamation of people in Korea’s agrarian past it tends to conjure up vague images of the lower strata of Joseon society - the people most iconically connected to ssireum, the last vestige of pre-modern Korea. “Game” (놀이) carries with it a sense of unimportance, a diversion, play. “Versus” (대) works much the same way as it does in English by implying a competition between two parties. Lastly, “globalization” (세계화) uses the Sino-Korean neologism coined in the 1980s to emphasize the dispersal of Korean culture throughout the world. Thus the title connects ssireum’s introspection with the tension between a pre-modern life-in-common and the call to Koreannize. When read in Korean it should be clear that this is a critical reflection about contemporary Korean identities. The present title in English strikes the right balance between capturing that feeling while still being readable.

universalizing rhetoric in the ideologies of ssireum and how it is shared in daily life underscore this point.

The questions that frame this research are as follows:

1. In what ways does the history of ssireum reflect the anxieties and interests of Korean society?
2. Who are the people participating in ssireum, to what ends are they using it, and how do they interact with each other and society?
3. To what extent does ssireum's particularized understanding of competition appropriate the concept of universalizing forces?

To answer these questions I review the available history of ssireum, the selective processes of crafting meaning from that history, how those meanings are exchanged within the community of participants, what attempts are being made to extend those meanings beyond their boundaries, and why circulating meanings outside of the community is considered an inherently important aspect of their contemporary existence.

SIGNIFICANCE

Modernization was a term originally used to describe national revolutions in industry, democracy, and mass-education (Inkeles 2001).²⁵ It emphasized breaking with the past in the pursuit of 'progress' (Arnason 2001); a proverbial 'call to fulfillment' (Bauman 2001). The early presumption was that the explosion of market ideology would

²⁵ For example, Garcia (1995) referred to these extensively when characterizing Latin American modernization.

homogenize the world (Featherstone 2001) as modernization crossed borders and extended throughout the entire world (Ben-Rafael and Sternberg 2001). Yet contextual diversification continued (Eisenstadt 2001) and the concept of multiple modernities emerged to explain this outcome (Arnason 2001). Globalization in turn arose as a means of discussing modernization in the aggregate (Featherstone 2001; Smolicz 2001). In the social sciences globalization was applied to both the scope of planet-wide interconnectedness among humans (i.e. modernization) and their continued distinctiveness (i.e. multiple modernities), in essence enlarging the discussion of modernization (Featherstone 2001).

Lewellen (2002) explained, “Globalization is the increasing flow of trade, finance, culture, ideas, and people brought about by the sophisticated technology of communications and travel and by the worldwide spread of neoliberal capitalism, and it is the local and regional adaptations to and resistance against these flows.” Unsurprisingly, theories and descriptions of globalization often lack agreement. Eriksen (2003) observed that globalization, “...is a promiscuous and unfaithful word engaging in a bewildering variety of relationships, most of which would be better off using more accurate concepts.”²⁶ Featherstone (2001) and Schuerkens (2003) simply noted that globalization could encompass many topics. Globalization has been theorized as a historical phenomenon (Hall 1991a; Hall 1991b; Hannerz 1992; Hannerz 1996; Pieterse 1995), a

²⁶ In what is best described as a meta-reference, Croucher (2004) quipped that similar commentary is almost guaranteed to preface any discussion of globalization. This is perhaps the most precise observation available on the topic.

condition (Appadurai 1996), and a process (Friedman 1990; Friedman 1995). Its characteristics have been described as centuries old (Smolicz 2001), decades old (Lewellen 2002), logical (Robertson 1992; Robertson 1995), cyclical (Friedman 1990; Friedman 1995), novel (Appadurai 1996), and disjunctive (Hannerz 1992; Hannerz 1996).

Disagreement about globalization has extended to the utility of its study. It has been accused of perpetuating the problem of ‘the newness of our time’ (Ben-Rafael and Sternberg 2001) and, “[giving] a false answer to a badly posed question’ (Amselle 2002). It has also been said that the contrasts and tensions implied in globalization evaporate in real-life settings (Eriksen 2003) and the phenomena globalization purports to explain may be better attributed to mundane life decisions (Markowitz 2004).

The central debates within these differences focus on explaining how the world has become more similar in some ways while increasingly differentiated in others, if the attending processes and outcomes are novel, and what the big picture means along with the best way to describe it. Ensuring discussions are usually expressed using economic, political, sociological, or cultural terminology. Interestingly, ssireum posits an alternate understanding of these same topics, but in its own idiom as participants make the claim, ‘Ssireum is ours,’ alongside, ‘Ssireum is a philosophy of human movement,’ and ‘Ssireum is for all people.’

Using ssireum to study globalization in Korea engages some of these debates by answering calls for better ethnographic exploration of the topic (Brumann 1998; Featherstone 2001; Lewellen 2002; Marcus 1995; Senčar 1999). The introduction of

globalization in Korea may have roots in deep historical processes, but its most profound effects are definitely proximate (Han 2003; Kim 2006). Likewise, despite any cyclical aspects of those processes they have created novel issues and solutions (Han 2009; Kang 2000; Kim 1993; Lee 2006a; Park 2005). Moreover, participants in ssireum treat globalization as a real process and a global market as a real entity; whether academics agree with the appropriateness of their views or not is irrelevant - the concept of globalization is clearly influencing their actions.²⁷ Anthropology has the ability to detail the ways in which diverse material of various origins are expressed in daily life (Eriksen 2003). Much like Lewellen (2002) took this to mean anthropology is uniquely qualified to illuminate the experience of globalization, I maintain that an ethnography of ssireum will account for some of the ways Korean globalization is informed by the daily life situations there.

The processes which produce uniformity alongside differentiation are so conflated that each one is often appropriated as a means to achieve the other. We see this in ssireum, where a local sport evolved a novel form of understanding which both asserts an ethnic identity and claims that identity is universally appreciable. In an abstract sense this seems to represent a clinal conceptualization of identity whereby absolute boundaries are less important than the gradient of similarity; ssireum cannot make people Korean, but it can make them more Korean. In the confines of daily life this

²⁷ To paraphrase Thomas (1928), if situations are defined as real then they are real in their consequences.

simply involves people coming together to play the same game with the understanding those who give the game the most time, attention, and seriousness constitute the heart of the community.

In terms of the literature, this dissertation is the first major English language work to write about ssireum and the first work to write about ssireum from an anthropological perspective. It contributes a novel thread to the growing body of research on Korean modernity and globalization. And it extends the literature on sport by adding a case study of Korean wrestling.

UNIT OF ANALYSIS

In *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth cautions against defining a culture by means of its “culture bearingness” because this position mistakenly prioritizes continuity in time as well as the factors believed to have determined the form of a culture, inevitably leading to the enumeration of the features of a culture as its objective nature. However, many cultural traits cannot be considered continuous as they are subject to change over time. It is tempting to use national borders or language as delineating features, but these are equally problematic as the former did not exist a couple of centuries ago and the latter exists in a state of perpetual mutation. Ethnicity is another proxy, one which will be discussed shortly. In all cases, these are simply attempts at imposing homogeneity upon a population. Barth’s position on culture is that the presumption of homogeneity in a group, its continuity in time and space, is ultimately contradictory and such overly institutional forms should be disregarded as the criteria for defining any group of people because they obscure the unit of analysis.

As an alternative to content and continuity, Barth offers categorization - the way people explain themselves and others. Categorization lacks objective criteria and instead is subject only to the qualities members determine as relevant to themselves.²⁸ Belonging to a group implies being a certain kind of person and this extends to being evaluated by one's self and others on the criteria which define that membership. Barth describes categorization as being governed by two orders of processes: signs, the features that are used to express an identity; and values, the standards by which enactments of identity are judged. In viewing groups as being defined by their boundaries as opposed to their content Barth dispenses with the shortcomings of continuous homogeneity. While the criteria of a boundary may change across time and space the existence of the boundary can still be continuous. And only socially relevant factors are needed for consideration as objective ones are nonexistent. Different circumstances will favor different criteria, thus creating ranges in which an identity can be successful as well as where it cannot exist. The status of identity, then, is an issue of performance and alternatives. According to Barth, boundaries allow everyone inside them to assume they are "playing the same game".

The ensuing data presented in this dissertation are in this vein and similarly organized. This chapter introduces the core context and arguments while later chapters expand upon them. Chapters II and III are primarily historiographic; Chapter II covers the historical sources used to establish a past for ssireum and Chapter III covers the

²⁸ Barth cautions that the investigation of ideal and actual criteria not treat the two as different systems nor confuse them with one another; rather, the connections between the two should be emphasized.

development of ssireum as an organized sport. Chapters IV through VI discuss the content and context of ssireum in light of its functions; Chapter IV covers its symbolic boundaries, Chapter V the authority it legitimizes, and Chapter VI the socialization of participants within the preceding systems. Lastly, Chapter VII summarizes the major findings of the research and includes an applied component.

METHODS

This dissertation describes how an ethnic identity is performed through sport and interprets numerous aspects of that performance. This involves connecting a wide array of data that runs from the extremely technical, such as how a wrestler's belt is tied, to the extremely abstract, such as the romantic symbolism of the *satba*²⁹, by explaining how it is all contained within the production of an enlarged sense of being. The existential feeling of being part of a larger whole begs for hermeneutical treatment since they are both forms of contextualizing the specific to the general. Because Koreanness, a form of such understanding, is the unit of analysis this dissertation is intrinsically non-positivist. As Coach Kim said to me, "You can't understand anything without sand on your feet."

The goal is to explain this form of understanding by charting ssireum using the relationships which constitute it, documenting the mundane workings of a social consensus as it were. The assumption is that human interactions are the source of understanding ssireum imparts as opposed to any characteristics, ascribed or imposed,

²⁹ *삿바*: 한자없슴: *Satba*: The belt worn around the waist and thigh by ssireum players during competition; a key component of this unique style of play.

the agents in action might possess. Lacking a predictive agenda there was no compelling motivation to pursue testable dimensions. I settled on using qualitative methods as the best means of working with the subjectivity of Koreanness.³⁰ In general I relied upon the ad hoc use of historical sources, participant observation, and interviews.

The first major step was identifying the scope of information surrounding ssireum and the sources upon which it was based. To that end I used two popular Korean internet portals introduced to me through Korean friends in the United States to conduct searches with the keyword “ssireum” in Korean.³¹ Through these portals I identified popular media (e.g. newspaper articles), academic papers, official league and association websites, and the Korean Ssireum Research Institute (KSRI).³² I also emailed associates at Seoul National University for help in getting copies of academic work on ssireum using their library databases. Through these efforts I amassed and sorted through a collection of material which oriented me with the publicly available, largely impersonal knowledge of ssireum. I later amended this material with additional sources as they presented themselves during my fieldwork.

The second major step was designing fieldwork. Because of the importance of interaction in the (highly subjective) type of understanding imparted through ssireum and the need to document it I wanted to become immersed in the day-to-day experiences

³⁰ Some aspects of ssireum are amenable to empirical investigation. I leave the possibility of those types of inquiries open for the future, but at the moment they are not within the scope of this dissertation.

³¹ Specifically, I used <http://www.naver.com> and <http://daum.net>. This is roughly analogous to using Google to search for a particular topic, though the results are localized by language and their visual presentation and organization are slightly different.

³² 한국씨름연구소: <http://www.ssireum.org>

of the sport. Ideally, training for a year with a collegiate ssireum team would allow me to interact with a wide variety of insiders across a range of settings. It would also give me the opportunity to interview people in different roles about their involvement with the sport.

In looking at leads for fieldwork it seemed that the KSRI was a good place to start; I cross-checked the appropriateness of this lead with Korean friends and they suggested I follow up on it. I located the KSRI director's contact information and with the help of associates at Seoul National University made contact with him.³³ After I explained my fieldwork goal the director of the KSRI, in turn, put me in contact with Professor Kim at Dae-Hak University, a tenured faculty member in kinesiology and former wrestler.³⁴ Again, after listening to my proposal Professor Kim offered me access to the ssireum team at his university and support with the logistics of my stay. Specifically, Professor Kim introduced me to Iron Kim³⁵, another former wrestler who was actively employed in the business and production side of the ssireum industry. This typical path of snowballing network movement essentially settled the details of my fieldwork.

³³ It was already my experience that cold-calling in Korea was an unusual concept and could make people uncomfortable. The preferred method of making new contacts was to be introduced by a mutually known or otherwise vetted third party.

³⁴ See the section on nomenclature in the beginning of this dissertation for an explanation on pseudonyms.

³⁵ Iron Kim is a variation on the name of a character in the folklore of the athletes with whom I trained. They would often exchange stories relayed to them by their seniors about Iron Dragon Kim's exaggerated and frequently grotesque exploits as an athlete, usually a judo player in pursuit of maximizing his stamina. These friend-of-a-friend tales never revealed Iron Dragon Kim to be a specific individual and while some persons do carry that name I feel using it as a pseudonym in this case is befitting of the spirit in which their stories were shared.

Iron Kim agreed to host me for a year in his Spartan third-floor, two-room apartment in the same small city as Dae-Hak University in exchange for private English language instruction and conversation practice. Iron Kim was able to offer this arrangement because he was unmarried and we were both close enough in age to comfortably spend time around one another, though I was older by a few years. In addition to a place to stay, Iron Kim offered another entry point into the ssireum industry by suggesting I attend the competitions with him at which he works. Through Iron Kim I would have access to a broad network of ssireum insiders that included players³⁶, coaches, and industry personnel at various levels. By Professor Kim and Iron Kim's accounts the exchange of accommodations and introductions for language instruction was equitable. I checked this point with other Korean friends and colleagues and they agreed; they indicated that the market rate for one-on-one instruction was relatively high and the status conferred through improved English would be likewise valuable to Iron Kim. Thus the basic logistics of fieldwork were set. The year I would spend living and attending competitions with Iron Kim while training with the Dae-Hak University ssireum team would be the vantage point from which I would collect data.

³⁶ 선수:選手: *Seonsu*: Literally, player. Referring to those who play ssireum as wrestlers does not quite capture the feeling of what they do. Player feels more appropriate.

Data was a combination of: historical sources and literature; detailed descriptions of events, persons, and performances; semi-structured confidential interviews through snowball sampling of wrestlers, coaches, executives, and audiences; a small selection of representative life histories; and personal reflections based on my own experience and interpretation of ssireum.

Historical sources and literature covered a large swath of Korean history and perspectives thereof. Among other things they included iconography from 5th century tomb paintings, royal court documents spanning hundreds of years, roughly 40 years of academic articles and books, ssireum association documents, and popular media such as newspaper articles and television shows.

Descriptive notes generally followed the SPEAKING model put forth by Dell Hymes (1974). While Hymes developed the mnemonic for the analysis of speech events it is also useful for analyzing performances in general. The components of the mnemonic are explained below in Table 3. In general, descriptions of events such as training or competition presented in this dissertation follow this model when deciding what information to include.

Table 5 - Dell Hymes (1974) SPEAKING Mnemonic

S	setting, scene	Time and place of a performance
P	participants	Performers and audience at the performance
E	ends	Purpose of the performance
A	act sequence	Form and order of events in a performance
K	key	Tone of a performance
I	instrumentalities	Forms and styles of performance
N	norms	Social rules directing the performance
G	genre	Type of performance

Interviews started with demographics such as age, education, etc, and then continued with a basic set of 16 open-ended questions which were broadly applicable to anyone who played, or had previously played, ssireum. This solidly covered at least two of the four target populations as wrestlers, and former wrestlers, by definition play or played ssireum and all coaches were former players. This also broadly covered ssireum professionals as nearly all industry executives were former players, though low-level industry workers or subcontractors were not necessarily former players. While many audience members were also amateur ssireum players this was not universally the case and so they were asked a reduced set of questions. The questions are presented in Tables 4 and 5. Questions were amended ad hoc to pursue additional topics on a case-by-case basis. All interviews were conducted individually and in private whenever possible, though this was an ideal condition as opposed to a practical one; it was nearly impossible to comfortably isolate subjects for any length of time. It was also difficult to direct conversations with individuals older because of the effect that age hierarchies placed on social interaction in Korea. Both of these points are discussed in more detail in the limitations section.

Table 6 - Basic Set of Player and Former Player Interview Questions

1	How did you start playing ssireum? What did your family think?
2	What did it feel like when you started playing ssireum?
3	How long have you played ssireum? Why did you keep playing?
4	Did your friends play, too? What do they think about ssireum?
5	Do you have a girlfriend? What does she think about ssireum?
6	Have you been injured through ssireum? How? Where? What happened?
7	How long will you play ssireum? What will you do afterwards?
8	If you were not playing ssireum what would you be doing?
9	What things do you like least about ssireum?
10	What things do you enjoy most about ssireum?
11	If you have children would you let them play ssireum? Why or why not?
12	What makes ssireum special?
13	Do you ever think about ssireum? What do you think about?
14	What makes a good ssireum player?
15	What should people know about ssireum?
16	Tell me a good story about ssireum...

There were also countless conversations and informal interviews with persons outside of the industry. These were particular easy to conduct because people would routinely approach me out of curiosity nearly everywhere I went; it was simply a matter of introducing myself to steer the conversation towards ssireum. The results of these exchanges underscored the point that while outsiders have a vague sense of ssireum as traditional Korean culture they do not possess any depth of knowledge on the subject; this includes audience members I met at competitions. The majority of people I met outside of competitions had never been personally exposed to ssireum (i.e. never played, never watched) and typically explained they had not had the chance.³⁷ Unless someone

³⁷ This runs counter to the conventional industry assumption that people are disinterested in ssireum by suggesting they are simply unexposed. Moreover, the people most likely to describe ssireum as boring were players. Apparently too much inside knowledge of the players in the sport is a bad thing.

played ssireum, or had an immediate attachment to someone that did, they were unlikely to have much to say about the sport. Even when talking ssireum with people who had played it there were lacunae in what they could say about the subject.

Table 7 - Basic Set of Non-Player Questions

1	How and why do you watch ssireum? How long have you watched?
2	Do you watch other sports? Which ones? Why?
3	What do you like least about watching ssireum?
4	What do you enjoy most about watching ssireum?
5	If you have children would you let them play ssireum?
6	What makes ssireum special?
7	Do you ever think about ssireum? What do you think about?
8	What makes a good ssireum player?
9	What should people know about ssireum?
10	Tell me a good story about ssireum...

Among the four target populations there were three that had the most to say about ssireum. Near the end of fieldwork I selected representative individuals from the player (n = 3), coach (n = 1), and executive populations (n = 1) and collected life histories from them. The histories loosely followed the interview questions, but focused on the subjects' relationships with ssireum through major life transitions such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, education, marriage, parenthood, and career. Because of the length of time I had spent with these individuals and my rapport with them I was already familiar with their general personal histories and had spent time with their immediate family members. In each case I entered the life history interviews with the subjects' personal histories already sketched out and filled in missing details while

amending the information with their recollections of ssireum. All of these interviews were conducted in private settings.

Lastly, I kept an on-the-fly journal of my daily experiences during fieldwork such as where I went, with whom, what we did, and so forth. This included questions or points for further inquiry as well as recording my personal reactions to events. These ruminations on ssireum raised an important point about my role in this research. How subjective are the data and interpretations presented herein?

LIMITATIONS

Being immersed in the daily life of ssireum yielded a detailed account of the expectations, performances, and evaluations of Koreanness contained within the sport. However, there were limitations as well. Logistically there was not enough time or capital available for interacting with every college team. Conflicting schedules and competition between teams would have also precluded an informative level of openness. Thus I was only able to interview the Dae-Hak University team. Arranging to live with Iron Kim and train with Dae-Hak University was a gamble, but after six months of contact with people inside and outside the site I felt assured it was as normal a situation as any alternative. While the focus of this dissertation is qualitative the initial fieldwork experience could be used to develop quantitative instruments for the entire league, or even multiple sports leagues in the future.

Snowball sampling raises the profile of researchers among the target population as more and more people become aware of their presence. Latent relationships among a population can mean that interacting with some people precludes or inhibits interacting

with others. Competition between ssireum teams and individuals was sometimes bitter. My affiliations affected how others interacted with me. Fortunately, my “good” reputations and status as an outsider meant that most people were eager to share information.

Being an outsider definitely produced a positive reception effect, though at times it was difficult to assess how much so or in what ways. Speaking English and Korean, coming from America, America’s national standing relative to Korea, holding academic credentials, and being in a position to potentially further expose the non-Korean world to ‘Korean culture’ by way of profession all seemed to contribute to generally positive rapport. My (low) socioeconomic status did not appear to be factored into these warm receptions as both elite and working-class people were open to meeting with me. By contrast, my tattoos, dark complexion, and unshaven face sometimes gave people pause as all were considered undesirable markers in Korean society. Informants often wanted to know why I was bearded (i.e. uncivilized) and marked (i.e. criminal). One man a few years my junior subversively asked in public if I was related to any of the North African or South Asian people we saw working in Korea - an obvious dig implying racial inferiority.³⁸

³⁸ Outside the scope of this dissertation, but germane to this point, is that there is no shortage of Koreans being described as racist. Myers (2010) essentially categorized the DPRK regime as one built around an ideology of racial purity (owing in part to a similar message being established during Japanese colonization). Even the (South) Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare has looked into the issue of racism (as summarized in Kim, 2009) and found that aversion to mixed and non-Koreans starts as early as middle school. Obviously this does not describe every Korean individual, but on several occasions I was told by informants that some aspects of Korean culture intuitive for those of Korean blood were just not intelligible to outsiders; in the event that I grasped such a point I was usually told it was because I must have been “half Korean” or “Korean in a past life”.

The age and gender stratification of Korean society limited access to informants. It was difficult to meet up with older persons or observe them in daily-life contexts outside of ssireum events. I lacked the authority to commandeer their time or space. When schedules did align older persons were more likely to discuss ssireum at length because of my subordinate age. People with the same age and gender were the freer and easier to connect with in accordance with ideals about friendship. Younger people were the easiest to access because I had the social authority to intrude in their lives, though their polite speech and deferent mannerisms made me wary of abusing that authority. I had ample opportunity to observe children playing ssireum and have included that data, though no interviews were conducted with persons under 18.

It was impossible to access women alone outside of communal events because of gender segregation norms that would have distressed everyone involved.³⁹ As someone married to a Korean I could not circulate freely among other women without invoking both public and personal discomfort. I was able to interview three amateur women wrestlers as well as two women industry workers, though all within the context of competitions. In other mixed settings I could ask questions about ssireum to women, such as Iron Kim's mother or my wife's friends, but I cannot confidently account for a distinct female experience of ssireum should it exist. Ssireum is a male dominated realm,

³⁹ 남녀칠세부동석: 男女七歲不同席: *Nam nyeo chilse budongseok*: "Men and women older than seven do not sit together". An aphorism which succinctly proscribes normative gender segregation. In practice, when a man and woman are seen together in public people automatically infer they are somehow romantically or sexually entangled. Unless one is ready to declare such a relationship considerable energy goes in to obfuscating it; for example, group dates involving three or more people.

but those men are not isolated - they still have mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters, and daughters that affect their lives. I can make some comments about how the roles of those women overlap with the men in the industry, but nothing conclusive. It is possible that important perspectives on ssireum are missing by not being able to assess the differences, if any, of gender experiences. The interaction between gender and sports in performing collective identities is something future studies should consider. However, a female researcher would not have had the same degree of access to men in ssireum as I did.

Meeting ssireum insiders was easy because of Iron Kim's introductions and simply attending competitions with him was enough to put me in contact with the inner circle of players, coaches, and executives. Outside of competitions I lived in a setting that cross-cut various athletic fields and sections of life. There was a near limitless supply of people approaching me out of curiosity from whom data could be mined. Engaging in interviews was not problematic. There were no specific questions that were especially difficult to ask as the general Korean tendency was to simply ignore uncomfortable inquiries. The two most difficult parts of talking to people about ssireum were navigating language and age-rank gaps.

Regarding language, high-level conversations felt circumlocutious and disadvantaged me in advancing nuanced philosophical topics. They were difficult to follow and to respond to because the tendency to nest clauses in English does not exactly facilitate the translation of complex ideas to and from Korean. The general dropping of parts of speech, especially subject nouns or pronouns, was confusing at first because I was not sufficiently attuned to how heavily context is used in conversation. There is a

certain amount of telepathy needed to converse naturally in Korea. Lacking that I must have appeared quite dull at times, though no one ever suggested it. The mixing of indigenous and Sino-Korean vocabulary seemed strange until I equated the use of the latter as one of formality, akin to the difference between saying “eye doctor” and “ophthalmologist” in English. Because I originally studied standard Korean (Seoul dialect) it took time to adjust to the southeastern dialect as it frequently simplified compound vowel sounds and favored more colloquial grammar.⁴⁰

Regarding age-rank gaps in conversation, it was easiest to talk to people within my age-rank or those within a couple of years because of the reduced distance in social authority. When age-rank gaps widened it moved the conversations and grammar from a relatively egalitarian footing to a much more stratified level of interaction. This meant that when talking to younger persons I felt as if *they felt* compelled to answer questions as succinctly, politely, and pleasingly as possible. I cannot recall a single interview with a significantly younger person in which they steered the conversation with any conviction. This created situations in which I could not be sure if people were withholding their thoughts or if they had none to share. Conversely, interviewing older

⁴⁰ It is difficult to convey this point in English as American dialects do not as frequently produce alternate vocabulary when shortening vowel sounds. In Korean if this action does not render a word unintelligible it will radically change its meaning. For example, if the compound vowel in the first syllable of “to pass through” (관통하다:貫通하다: *gwantonghada*) is shortened by dropping the second sound it changes the meaning to “to commit adultery” (간통하다:姦通하다: *gantonghada*). This can be a frustrating phenomenon for a non-native speaker, though native speakers’ ability to catch non-standard Korean “mistakes” suggests they can still infer what a word was *supposed to mean* through context. Native Koreans would be unlikely to actually misunderstand someone who used “adultery” instead of “passing through”, though it would be a remarkably humorous gaffe in the eyes of standard Korean.

persons was difficult because I felt they were usually attempting to steer the conversation by telling me what they thought I needed to hear as opposed to answering what I had asked. Older persons consequently needed very little prompting to expand upon topics they thought were important. It was also difficult to make personal inquiries to older persons because directness is a privilege of authority. The cumulative effect of age-rank gaps gave the impression that younger people, especially wrestlers, approach ssireum from matter-of-fact if not callow perspectives while the tendency to discuss ssireum in philosophical or romantic items increased with age.

BIASES

Because the design and methodology of this research were non-positivist this dissertation is, in a meaningful sense, telling a story. This is akin to how interview subjects were also telling stories about ssireum. Of course there is considerable divergence in the stories people told and at no time was there a unanimous consensus about how ssireum ought to be. Disagreement was the norm. Doubtlessly someone could disagree with *any* story I write about ssireum and attribute my reasoning to some kind of agenda. Indeed, ssireum is a story I want to tell for reasons personal and professional, but what that means is that I feel a tremendous responsibility to get the story “right”. It is necessary to present both empirical and subjective points in ways that clearly delineate them. It also means keeping the focus on ssireum as opposed to on me. Accordingly, objective data is presented in third-person whenever possible so that the use of first-person will alert readers to potentially subjective areas. Thus first-person is used only when necessary.

Korea had several national sports teams, most of which were divided into men's and women's groups with the exception of racing, baseball, cricket, rugby, and water polo. Racquet sports were perhaps the most popular co-ed endeavor. Taekwondo and boxing were open to women, but the professional sports leagues of soccer, baseball, and basketball had no such participation. The premiere professional sport for women in Korea was also the highest status in every case - golf. Images of women as Olympic athletes in figure skating, power lifting, and so on were common in all public media. Still, Korean society was publicly and ideologically male dominated.⁴¹ Ssireum was no exception and I never encountered women in public positions of authority in the industry. No women ever played professional ssireum before the league collapsed. Women had yet to play collegiate or semi-pro ssireum. But women were free to play amateur ssireum and regularly did so. While ssireum was certainly conservative with regard to gender equality I realize that my idealized views of open participation are not practical within the broader context of Korean society. Still, I think that gender is potentially important to ssireum's future. I would not have given this topic much thought without my biases and I believe they helped me arrive at some views that are novel to ssireum.

⁴¹ I once broached the topic of women in the military with a Korean naval captain. He insisted that gender was not an issue - women were every bit as capable as men - though he personally resented their presence aboard his ship because it made him responsible for them in a system that was not designed to accommodate them. That opinion aptly represents the gender divide in Korea - society exists in such a way that absolute gender equality would be more disruptive than integrative. Gender is not so much a determining factor of ability as it is a criteria for understanding how things should be organized.

My primary identification with ssireum was at the individual level. The only way I came to appreciate it was by playing. This colored all of my views about the waning connection of audiences to the sport. There is good evidence to support my views, but I cannot personally discuss the non-playing audience reaction to ssireum because I never experienced it. Likewise the team dynamic of ssireum was an intellectual exercise for me in that I could see the connections and roles of individuals though I did not always empathize with them. The nearest I came was the closeness and affection I developed for the people with whom I worked. I began to feel as if our individual success and failures were mutually influenceable, but not in the sense that we were working towards a collective goal. We were not. We were more a family than a team.

This extends to my relationship with Iron Kim as well. Despite our agreed upon arrangement our interactions quickly evolved to a typical Korean social dynamic because of our modest age difference. I became Iron Kim's senior, or *seonbae*⁴², and he my junior, or *hubae*⁴³. This became the basis for much of my insight on how the social interactions found in daily life sustain ssireum and derive considerable meaning from it in turn. Age-rank hierarchies are all-pervasive in Korean society and hard-coded into the

⁴² 선배:先輩: *Seonbae*: Senior; a person older than the referent, superiors in a social network; not to be confused with the kinship or educational meanings of the word in English.

⁴³ 후배:後輩: *Hubae*: Junior; a person younger than the referent, subordinates in a social network; not to be confused with the kinship or educational meanings of the word in English.

language's vocabulary and grammar.⁴⁴ One of the first pieces of personal information exchanged when meeting someone is age; the second is occupational title. In most given situations the relative age of persons present will decide the immediate social authority and responsibilities.⁴⁵ If age should conflict with other sorting criteria it will tend to make the persons with juxtaposed authority uneasy. Efforts are made to correlate corporate authority with age as much as possible. Older people are intuitively assumed to be leaders in a situation and most people act accordingly. This means that the seonbae assume responsibility for the welfare and development of their hubae and the hubae in turn should attend to the practical needs and instructional advice of their seonbae. The paternalistic logic of age-rank hierarchies serves to redistribute both labor (the role of the hubae) and goods (the role of the seonbae) to the mutual benefit of all involved. These responsibilities induce specific concerns based on relative relationships. Seonbae fret about having enough capital to provide for their hubae and hubae stress over fulfilling labor demands. Successful accomplishment of these expectations creates positive evaluations while failure to live up to them can make one appear stingy or lazy.

⁴⁴ Using the wrong terminology or formality when speaking to people outside of one's age-rank can range from comical to deadly serious consequences. For example, one never refers to senior individuals by their name. The appropriate action is to use either their occupational or kin title depending on the relationship. Even then, people tend to avoid using "names" and employ them only when absolutely necessary. Reductionist explanations attribute this to Confucian legacies, though age-ranks are one of the most commonly implemented hierarchies across cultures.

⁴⁵ There are exceptions, such as school grade rank, military rank, or intra-office rank. These are unique corporatized systems and as noted in the text they can cause psychological distress when subverting the "natural" rank conferred by birth order.

To that end Iron Kim was a most dutiful junior and constantly anticipated things which would benefit me. His eagerness was almost excessive at times and I felt negligent as if I could not possibly repay his efforts. Consultation with Iron Kim on the subject was not helpful as criticizing his performance as a hubae would have been disingenuous. The truth was he was excelling at the role, not failing. Our collective seonbae suggested, in accordance with the logic of our initial arrangement, the best way I could fulfill my role was by pushing Iron Kim to use English as much as possible. According to them it was the most important benefit I could provide him. I supplemented that by treating meals as often as I could and, where appropriate, counseling him about life as I would my own younger brother. Over time the rigidity of our performances as seonbae and hubae relaxed to a more natural level. The excellence and quality of our relationship never suffered and I personally came to appreciate the kinship between us. Iron Kim gave me a greater sense of the depth of social relations in Korea. Spending extended time with someone in Korea means you are assuming roles with strong expectations. Failure to meet those expectations can result in negative evaluations that can spread quickly across networks. People are often reluctant to build non-strategic relationships because they run the risk of becoming over-extended or crossing purposes with existing relationships. Being able to control the flow of reputations is a form of capital in those networks. Secrecy and inferential guessing are common. However, Iron Kim was always above board with me and I appreciate the inestimable value and trust that represents.

THE GAME

Before beginning a kind of deconstruction of ssireum by looking at its history, development, and constitute parts it would be beneficial to have a sense of how contemporary ssireum is practiced as a whole. This would accomplish several ends. It would: establish the context in which ssireum is performed, present the elements that are used for aesthetic interpretations, and create a basis for the ensuing juxtaposition of the sports history with its present.

Unlike most ssireum events, there was no opening show for this particular competition. But like most of the season, the gymnasium had been slow to fill that cold winter day. People trickled in and by the time the event commenced there was a sizable crowd of old men in parkas, some sitting in groups while others sat with their wives and grandchildren. Few adolescents or young adults attended, possibly because it was a weekday. I watched as the director, dressed in purple colored traditional winter clothing, paced around the emcee table behind which I stood. Almost without warning he gave a hand signal as the event commenced in earnest. Loud brassy music began clanging out of the gymnasium's speakers and pyrotechnics launched themselves into the air. One screaming rocket became lodged on its guide wire and sat a few meters from our faces howling as it spewed sulfuric fumes. The music suddenly cut to a 1980s American heavy metal track. Teams of wrestlers burst into the arena, paraded in around the circle with standard bearers, assumed positions facing outwards towards the audience, bowed, and departed.

As quickly as the procession had left the first two scheduled competing teams filed back in and stood in their staging areas with their coaches. The coaches wore solemn darkly colored robes and bright scarves evocative of a traditional design. The players were barefoot in long pants and parkas which they quickly doffed to reveal their competition wear. Both shirtless, one player was dressed in blue spandex boxer-briefs and a red belt while the other was an inverted image with red shorts and blue belt. Blue and Red had their names printed down one side of the shorts with their team across the back. Bare-skinned aside from their shorts and belts I thought the players must have been freezing despite the portable heaters near their staging area, but neither shivered in the least. The two coaches counseled their wards, drew them a ladle full of water from the clay jar at each staging table, and sent them into the circle.

As Blue and Red stepped up into the circle the head referee in his white period garb with red and blue color-coded cuffs blew a whistle, directed the young men to bow to each other, and called them into the center of the circle. The men complied and knelt with their knees touching each other before the head referee to assume their grips on one another's belts. The two assistant referees looked on from the sides to ensure that no dirty work was afoot. The gripping stage is the longest stretch of any competition as the players are trained to jockey for as advantageous a position as possible. Since their right hands reach around their opponents to grip their satba at the waist players will try to assume as large a reach as possible, often attempting to get their grip near the small of the opponent's back. The longer reach gives them better control in the opening moves of a round and every player and coach knows this can be a deciding factor in victory. At the

same time players use their left hands to grab the portion of the satba looped around their opponents right thigh. Again, maximizing the grip to extend as far around as possible is a key staging tactic. Since this is not secret knowledge players also spend a good bit of time stretching their backs and extending their buttocks as far back as possible while in the kneeling position in order to prevent their opponent from acquiring too strong a grip. Consequently, the kneeling phase entails watching players jockey against one another for the best possible handhold. Ssireum officials widely regard this as a period in which audience interest can quickly wane and have established rules that will penalize players for excessive monkeyshines or delays.⁴⁶ Referees spend a good bit of time supervising, adjusting hand placement, slapping players' backs to coax them into compliance, verbally warning them, and occasionally carding them for failure to keep things moving.

In this case Blue and Red took their grips relatively quickly. The referee instructed them to rise, which they did by extending only their legs in a standing motion so that their upper bodies were bent at 90 degree angles at the waist with their torsos in-line with each other and parallel to the sand floor. The ready position is the second most important part of staging a round. Experience and training have imparted the knowledge that staying as low to the ground as physically possible while still keeping one's balance evenly split between both legs will determine whose center of gravity has the greatest

⁴⁶ The actual means of gripping is fairly uniform across players, so much so that the digest of their hands are often deformed in predictable curves from habitual training and play. While the key is grip placement, it is possible to alter one's hold in "dirty" ways to pinch skin, torque muscle and bones, or pressure nerves in order to weaken an opponent.

starting advantage. Getting lower provides leverage that can be used to break an opponent's balance while also distributing a player's mass in such a way that their balance is more evenly distributed. Provided his legs are kept in a steady position it is impossible for a player to be pushed or dragged down. This point is emphasized throughout training as players stretch each other in practice maneuvers designed to help them realize the most extreme distributions of their mass possible before their balance is broken.⁴⁷ This training also helps to strengthen the delicate muscles, tendons, and ligaments of the lower back which hold the vertebrae in correct contact and alignment.⁴⁸ Keeping a proper ready form also allows one to keep an opponent at a more comfortable distance. This is important because if players should find themselves in an upright position facing one another the player with the greater mass has an immediate advantage in leveraging the smaller one; this is especially true for players whose mass is concentrated in their trunk and thighs as opposed to more evenly distributed throughout their body. It is also in the ready position that players can easily fatigue an opponent with minimal exertion

⁴⁷ Iron Kim drove the point home with me when teaching this concept as he would test the strength of my ready position by applying all of his considerable mass to me at various angles to see how readily I would wobble. Any disruptive tilting in my hips would lead to an inevitable collapse. But provided I was low enough with my back in proper alignment the balance of my hips would remain unbroken and I could easily support his 300lb frame. In theory there is an ideal ready form that is undefeatable. In practice it is difficult to maintain this form as once competition begins it is no longer an issue of supporting a 300lb man but doing so as he is attached to your belt and actively using his mass to try to disrupt your delicate balance and alignment.

⁴⁸ Unfortunately there are limits to this training. More than half of the former players over 35 years old that I met had debilitating chronic back injuries, usually spondylolysis and spondylolisthesis. The mechanics of keeping the body at a low right angle stress the spine in a way for which it was not designed. Human spines are arranged like towers as opposed to the suspension bridges of quadrupeds. Compounding this stressful position with the sudden impact and torque of squireum play accordions impact force through the spine and acts like a nutcracker creating stress fractures.

by resting their weight at the point of contact between their shoulders in much the way boxers might hug each other during a match though unlike boxing this contact is standard play.⁴⁹ Players can also use the points of contact to compress an opponent's arms or shoulders as well.

Looking like some kind of Siamese sawhorse Blue and Red were no doubt already gauging each other's balance. Satisfied with their position the referee shouted for the match to begin and stepped back. Immediately Blue pulled in with his arms while moving his hips forward. His stomach extended out, his shoulders back, and his torso rotated about 80 degrees in elevation effectively pulling in Red and lifting him up. This type of explosive opening move is characteristic of ssireum. Most matches are decided within a few seconds of their start. Big openings are frequent because the longer a round continues the more muscle power is lost as oxygen and glycogen are depleted at a tremendous pace.⁵⁰ The longer a player waits to execute an attack the less power he will have available to ensure its success. Blue had an apparent advantage as his body type was low and wide while Red, roughly equal in weight, was tall and lanky. The belly lift would have been an excellent opening move if not for Red's leg skills. Bracing his right foot against the inside of Blue's left calf and his left shin against Blue's right thigh near the satba, Red moved his weight backwards in such a way that Blue was holding him

⁴⁹ Imagine being bent over and having to support a couple of hundred pounds of sandbags on your shoulder across the acromioclavicular joint with your arm extended.

⁵⁰ Iron Kim once told me that it is not unheard of to lose 6kg of body weight during an extended match.

aloft without being able to throw him. This complex counter measure only works when used swiftly and can devastate an opponent by forcing him to maintain a partial lift supporting the weight of a body he only expected to lurch off balance. While Blue was struggling against the extended exertion of lifting Red the latter was coolly standing in a balanced position against the former, conserving energy in the process.

Blue shifted his footing by lifting his right leg slightly and shuffling it forward, an attempt to create an opening for dropping his opponent as he abandoned the belly lift. But the instant Blue's right foot broke contact with the sand Red slipped his left leg around the inside of it and stepped back slightly, planted his formerly braced right foot in between Blue's legs, and rotated his right hip forward while matching the movement with his hands along Blue's satba. The effect was instantaneous. Blue's balance broke and he careened into the ground in a small whirlwind pulling Red down on top of him and spraying sand several meters outside of the ring. It was a classic inner leg trip and the wrestler's final position on the ground made an easy call for the head referee. He blew his whistle and raised his left hand, the one with the red cuff, into the air towards Red's staging area indicating the results of the first round. The crowd cheered. Red, Blue, and the referees went about resetting for the second round.

I sat next to Iron Kim and nudged him. Who will win? He stared intently as the men assumed the ready position. "That guy [motioning towards Red]." How do you know? "Mm, look at the other guy's [Blue's] back. He's arching up too much. He might be tired or injured from when he couldn't lift him [Red]. But he's probably just not a very good player." The referee signaled the start and Red barreled forward while lifting up on the

satba with his left hand his right leg in-between Blue's legs. The explosive burst of forward energy combined with Blue's weak posture bowled him over, again pulling Red down on top of him and sending up a cloud of sand. With the match decided in his favor Red jumped up and tossed a handful of sand in the air while letting out a victory cry. Red then turned, extended a hand to help blue up, and brushed the sand off of Blue's back. The men returned to their respective staging areas at the edges of the circle, bowed at the referee's signal, and exited. Iron Kim reset the timer for the next match and tabulated the score in the record book, satisfied with his prediction of the outcome.

CHAPTER II

SOURCES OF TRADITION

The current incarnation of ssireum studied in this research was unprecedented in the history of the sport. This chapter begins a chronological review of sources of knowledge about ssireum, focusing on pre-modern Korea.⁵² The contents described in this chapter are the basis of the idealized collective past ssireum represents. Chapter III describes the development of the modern industry. Both chapters discuss changes in the role of the sport over time.

TRADITION MEANS THREE THINGS

In his approach to tradition, Hobsbawm (1983) explicitly discussed the concept with regard to function (i.e. symbolizing group membership, legitimizing authority, and inculcating belief systems), method (i.e. repetition, ritualization), and rationale (i.e. invariance as a response to change). The use of “traditional” by insiders in ssireum to describe the sport is not dissimilar. This type of understanding imparts a particular feeling of attachment based on three unarticulated implications.

First, traditional implies the origin of the action or thing in question. Calling ssireum traditional meant that it came from Korea. This isolates it from other possible sources or influences, in effect setting up a boundary that distances it from other types of

⁵² I am using “pre-modern Korea” loosely and only to refer to pre-colonial dynastic Korea. The division of Korea into pre-modern and modern histories coinciding with colonization and how that relates to ssireum will be more fully discussed in the next chapter.

wrestling. While similar belt-wrestling traditions exist in China, Japan, Mongolia, and Russia any time an informant told me ssireum was traditional wrestling they were saying, “Ssireum is ours.”⁵³

Second, traditional implies continuity in the action or thing in question. In this case, the tradition of ssireum possesses deep history. Historical sources do indicate a tradition of wrestling in Korea. Conventional knowledge of ssireum traces it all the way back to the primordial inhabitants of the peninsula, thus conflating the origins of Korean peoples and their wrestling with an almost geological timescale. This extends the range of the boundary implied in the feeling of origin.

Third, traditional implies an ideal of invariance in the action or thing in question. Again, the idea is that ssireum has been abiding throughout its entire history, somehow fundamentally recognizable at any given point. Informants familiar with the specific history of ssireum freely admitted the paucity of historical information indeed showed some variation. But that variation over time was surmounted by the unchanging essence in ssireum. Considerable debate about how to adapt ssireum as a sport accordingly focused on minimal change in the present in attempts to set a more secure future.

All of these three points will be brought to bear throughout the review of

⁵³ Sometimes literally. I do not want to over-emphasize the psychological significance of speech mannerisms, but it was common for people to respond to my questions or statements using the first-person plural as the subject (우리는: *urineun*: We) or subject modifier (우리: *urieui*: Our). For example, they would say, “We play ssireum...,” or, “in our country,” when it seemed unnecessary (e.g. the conversation was clearly about their personal views on the sport and not the recitation of conventional understandings). On the surface it is tempting to consider this point significant because it allows for easy identification of collective identity in speech. Certainly I did not feel that informants were including me personally when using “we” or “our”. But this happened frequently enough in different contexts that, again, it seemed like an *ordinary* speech mannerism. No doubt linguists could settle the importance, if any, of this point.

ssireum's history. An empirical reading of the sources indicates enough inconsistency to suggest that, at the very least, ssireum has not been the same for very long and most of the current attributes of the sport condensed within less than a century. Even the indigenous term "ssireum" has unclear origins and was apparently only widely adopted around the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century; historical sources refer to Korean wrestling using assorted Sino-Korean terms.

The point of reviewing the history of ssireum is *not* to deconstruct or invalidate local understandings of the sport. Rather, the goal is to demonstrate that the limitations of what is verifiable about ssireum are subsumed by the conventional knowledge that presently explains it. Despite a history defined by change, ssireum has nevertheless become emblematic of ethnic origins, continuity, and invariance.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

It is important to note that the material in this chapter and the next includes both objective and subjective material. Much of the knowledge about ssireum is verifiable from multiple sources or stems from historically authenticated documents. However, this is only a small portion of what is "known" about ssireum. The interpretations and speculation about ssireum's history fall into the folk knowledge category. These points are commonly held to be either reasonably or objectively true by people when discussing ssireum though no means of authenticating the knowledge exists. In fact, some folk knowledge about ssireum is contradicted by historical evidence. The value of this knowledge is not where it resides in the spectrum of truth and belief but that it is shared

and can be utilized.⁵⁴ For the purposes of this dissertation, knowledge about ssireum is the basis for the narrative of identity which comes from enacting it. Along these lines it will be clear when knowledge is being drawn from specific sources as those sources will be named. In the absence of a specified source it should be assumed the knowledge was culled from either interviews or reports of distant sources.⁵⁵ Again, the point is not to become laboriously involved in ferreting out what is “authentic” about ssireum. The point is to say, “If you lived with ssireum as part of your life this is some of what you would come to know about it.”

Sources for what is known about ssireum can be loosely categorized as primary, secondary, and folk. Each category represents a different time span and sets of strengths and weaknesses. Primary sources include the most ancient examples of ssireum, though they are generally the most ambiguous with the exception of various contemporary ssireum association documents; the latter were created with the literal intention of instructing people how to play ssireum. They are the most technical and specific sets of knowledge about ssireum; curiously they also assume a high degree of familiarity with the sport among potential readers. Secondary sources include the most well-researched and longitudinal knowledge, however much of it is very narrowly focused and de-contextualized. Folk sources of knowledge about ssireum encompass the areas from

⁵⁴ Is ssireum primordial, an activity practiced by the earliest Korean ancestors? Many believe this even though it requires an untenable assumption about those ancestors’ identity. Still, it may be true. Is it “knowledge” if those people are correct in their belief by sheer chance? My reply is that it doesn’t matter. What makes the primordial view of ssireum knowledge is that it is a shared and provides a basis for action.

⁵⁵ What might otherwise be known as friend-of-a-friend (FOAF) stories.

which the collective sense of ssireum is most strongly derived. Talking to people about ssireum revealed that many persons were not particularly familiar with the primary or secondary sources of knowledge, but all possessed some level of understanding rooted in folk knowledge.

There is accreting overlap between these three types of sources. They build upon each other in layers of interpretation and understanding. Primary and secondary sources are the bedrock of ssireum as their unerring status stabilizes the legitimacy of the sport. The signs and symbols of the past are cemented in these primary and secondary sources while the folk knowledge is the most active and contextually adaptable. They all converge with the invention of contemporary ssireum. (See Table 6 for a summary of these points.)

Table 6 - Categorization of Sources of Knowledge about Ssireum

<i>Primary Sources</i>			
Example	Strength	Weakness	Time Span
Artifacts	Oldest Sources	Most Ambiguous	Prehistoric
Ancient Works	Most Authenticated	Socially Stratified	14th to 19th Century
Association Documents	Demonstrate Codification	Technical Focus on Play	20th Century - Present
<i>Secondary Sources</i>			
Example	Strength	Weakness	Time Span
Academic Works	Highest Quality	Narrow Focus	20th Century - Present
Popular Media	Prevalent	Insubstantial	20th Century - Present
Almanacs	Longitudinal	Acontextual	20th Century - Present
<i>Folk Sources</i>			
Example	Strength	Weakness	Time Span
Conventional Wisdom	Collective Expectations	Untraceable	Atemporal
Interpersonal	Conduit of Transferral	Context Specific	Biographical
Personal	Most Evaluative	Most Variable	The Present

A primary source of knowledge about ssireum would be any persistent artifact that can be independently verified and comments directly on the sport solely by means of its contents. Items which are subjective, cannot be authenticated, lost to history, or reflexively discuss ssireum are not included within this scope. This winnowing away removes interpretive works, the meta-conversations about ssireum, and treats knowledge as an entity as opposed to a process. This is an important distinction because other sources of knowledge *are* interpretive or performance based. Primary sources are widely regarded as philosophically and tangibly “real” because they root ssireum in an absolute, undeniable history. In principal they are anchors which connect all the views and interpretations of ssireum to an otherwise objective existence; in practice, what they say about ssireum is a mixture of referential data and inferential meaning. Primary sources include artifacts, ancient works such as historical documents, and association documents. Thus primary sources cover a large swath of Korean continuity.

While primary sources of knowledge about ssireum comment directly on the sport by virtue of their contents, secondary sources do so only because they involve outside information. That is, secondary sources are cross-referential by nature because they interpret, opine, or report. These types of sources are limited to the 20th century or later and cover a much shorter, though no less dense, period of time than primary sources. While considerable information can be inferred from the latter, secondary sources appear to be more explicit in their contents. However, as is often the case, what goes unsaid is equally telling.

Secondary sources, by contrast, are less historically indicative and better suited for a textual analysis of how ssireum has been discussed. As that is not the primary focus of this dissertation the review of secondary sources of knowledge about ssireum is abbreviated to highlight only the major points. Academic works represent some of the highest quality research, though they have typically focused on narrow aspects of ssireum. Almanacs contain longitudinal information about the outcomes of ssireum competitions, but the results are acontextual and allow for only modest inferences based on how the results are categorized. Popular media, including cinema, television shows, radio programs, newspapers, and magazines present some of the most numerous and insubstantial sources of knowledge. Yet they too illustrate at least a few prominent trends.

Folk sources of knowledge about ssireum are untraceable and known only through the personal interaction which occurs in small groups. Such knowledge is unverifiable in the sense that it is subjective, responsive to changes in context, and maintained only through group consensus. This type of knowledge can be ephemeral because it may live and die in a finite moment, and yet it can still be quite powerful as that moment can produce an enduring effect. Folk knowledge is at the aesthetic heart and philosophical mind of the ssireum experience because it circulates and informs nearly all aspects of the sport. Folk knowledge about ssireum is subdivided into three categories. Conventional knowledge is the nebulous sum of untraceable collective expectations which explain how ssireum was, is, and ought to be understood. Interpersonal knowledge is the contextually responsive method ideas use to jump from person-to-

person. Personal knowledge is the reflexive negotiation which evaluates experiences and produces the body of variations which feed back into the pool of conventional knowledge.

Accordingly, the following review of ssireum's history focuses disproportionately on primary of knowledge. A mixture of primary and secondary sources will be considered in the following chapter. The folk sources of knowledge come into play in later chapters when describing the life-in-common of ssireum.

THE TIMELINE

Tables 7 to 10 synthesize the history and status of ssireum into a chronological presentation based on the sources of knowledge that are discussed afterwards. This more clearly demonstrates how ssireum has changed over time. Specifically, that its role within Korean culture, or what is typically construed as Korean culture, has not always been the same. Nothing prior to the modern development of sport ssireum suggests that it was associated with a collective identity. Rather, it appears to have been an important practice that has only recently been imbued as such.

Table 7 - Timeline of Ssireum Events and Trends 8,000 BCE to 1910 CE

Lower Paleolithic, Jeulmun (8,000-1,500 BCE), Mumun (1,500-300 BCE)	
Folk Knowledge	Primordial Korean peoples occupy the peninsula; ssireum is self-defense against animals and people (mythical status)
Gojoseon (2,333-108 BCE), Proto-Three Kingdoms (108-57 BCE)	
Folk Knowledge	Mythical origins of Korea, shamanism and animism dominate; ssireum has both sacred and political uses possibly related to agricultural rituals and events (high status)
Three Kingdoms (57 BCE - 935 CE)	
Folk Knowledge	Geographical political unification and early origins of Korean culture, Buddhism as state religion; ssireum has royal/national affiliation (high status)
Royal Tomb Murals	6th century Two figures wrestle as a third observes them
Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392 CE)	
Folk Knowledge	Confucian education as basis for civil authority established; ssireum associated with military class as training, recreation (low status)
<i>The History of the Goryeo Dynasty</i>	1330 CE, King reprimanded for wrestling with an errand boy
Joseon Dynasty, including Korean Empire (1392-1910 CE)	
Folk Knowledge	Golden era of classical Korean civilization, Neo-Confucianism as state religion, social hierarchies and physical labor have negative linear relationship; ssireum is a commoner's pastime (low status)
<i>The Chronicles of the Yi Dynasty</i>	1430 CE, Man killed while playing ssireum
<i>King Myeongjong's Chronicles</i>	1560 CE, Ssireum banned on palace grounds
<i>King Hyeonjong's Chronicles</i>	1664 CE, Loser stabs winner of ssireum match
Folk-Life Paintings	18th century, men in ordinary clothes wrestling in circles of on-lookers

Table 8 - Timeline of Ssireum Events and Trends 1910 CE to 1953 CE

Japanese Occupation, including UN joint trusteeship (1910-1950 CE)		
Folk Knowledge	Korean culture and martial arts actively suppressed; ssireum used as a cover for secret anti-colonial meetings because it is one of the few types of public gatherings permitted, early standardization (high status)	
Historical Records	1912	First sponsored athletic tournament with ssireum, included as a martial art with judo and boxing
	1915	First ssireum tournament, ox awarded for first place
	1927	Joseon Ssireum Association formed, ssireum competition held at public high school
	1929	Ssireum included in the National Sports Festival (NSF) with high school teams competing
	1935	Ssireum no longer cosponsored at NSF; kendo and judo added
	1936	First national ssireum contest sponsored with media (newspaper) support
	1937	Semi-pro ssireum teams included in NSF
	1946	Joseon Ssireum Association becomes Korean Ssireum Association after national liberation
	1947	NSF ssireum revised as “men’s ssireum”
	1948	College ssireum added to NSF
Korean Civil War (1950-1953 CE)		
Folk Knowledge	Unprecedented destruction and loss of life; few people have the time or resources to play ssireum formally besides children (low status)	
Historical Records	1953	Provincial teams added to NSF (only such entry)

Table 9 Timeline of Ssireum Events and Trends 1954 CE to 1997 CE

Republic of Korea (1954 to present)		
Folk Knowledge	1950-60s	Nation is rebuilt and modernized under military dictatorship with prolific efforts made to identify and preserve traditional culture lost under occupation; ssireum officially labeled “Korean culture” and industry grows (high status)
Historical Records	1958	First National Folk Arts Festival, includes ssireum as ethnic sport
	1962	Cultural Properties Protection Law designated ssireum as an intangible cultural asset (UNESCO)
	1963	First English language academic paper about ssireum published, discusses it as a traditional sport along with swinging and archery
Folk Knowledge	1970s	Dictatorship and economic growth continue; ssireum begins relationship with mass-media and expands (high status)
Academic Studies	1970s	Most studies about ssireum focus on history, a few on kinesiology
Historical Records	1972	First ssireum competition is broadcast on television, irregularly scheduled competitions shown on TV over the next nine years
Folk Knowledge	1980s	GDP in Korea skyrockets as exports grow; Golden Age of ssireum as professional league opens (high status)
Academic Studies	1980s	Some studies continue with ssireum history, most studies swing towards kinesiology and athletic performance
Historical Records	1982	Folk Ssireum Committee formed, ssireum becomes a standardized professional sport with a national league
	1983	First Grandmaster Championship held, the Golden Age of ssireum has begun
	1983	First weight classes appear in the National Sports Festival
Folk Knowledge	1990s	Nascent democracy, continued economic growth, several high profile disasters; ssireum beloved, if not commodified, national sport with potentially successful careers (high status)
Academic Studies	1990s	Studies still split between history and kinesiology early on, but almost completely sports focused at the end of the decade

Table 10 Timeline of Ssireum Events and Trends 1997 CE to Present

International Monetary Fund Crisis (1997)		
Folk Knowledge	IMF	Korean economic prosperity collapses, sweeping economic reforms and austerity measures ensue, stories of personal loss and hardship; ssireum's heydays over (low status)
New Millennium		
Folk Knowledge	2000s	Recovered (but flagging) economy strained by global economic crisis; semi-pro and collegiate ssireum expand but sport still seen as imperiled (low status)
Academic Studies	2000s	Few historical studies, mostly kinesiology with some focusing on revitalization
Historical Records	2003	Korean University Ssireum Federation formed, sport further standardized and collegiate operations extended
	2005	Professional league forced to include semi-pro teams for solvency, intense infighting occurs between national associations
	2009	Nearly all ssireum competitions consolidated under Korean Ssireum Association (KSA), plans made to revitalize ssireum, including Olympic aspirations
	2009	World Ssireum Federation (WSF) formed, efforts undertaken to globalize ssireum across the world, also includes Olympic aspirations

LOWER PALEOLITHIC

Discussions of ssireum's history extend as far back as discussions of Korean people's history, including their prehistoric arrival in the peninsula. The timing of that arrival is not settled. Some sources place it as far back as *Homo erectus*. The oldest radiocarbon dates suggest a range of 40,000-30,000 BCE. Assemblages of mega-fauna and other animal remains have been found associated with stone tools, bifacial choppers, and later hand axes. During that primordial time ssireum was supposedly a form of self-defense useful against beast and men. The theme of defense is a cornerstone of ssireum.

Later archaeological evidence shows two general pottery periods starting around 8,000 BCE. Early subsistence among these semi-sedentary people was a mixture of hunting, shell-fishing, gathering, and small scale plant cultivation. Later sites reveal grain crop cultivation around 3,500 BCE and settlements begin to grow in size over time. Bronze goods appear as early as 700 BCE and elite burials around 500 BCE. Remains of pit houses characterize their period, large multi-generational ones at first and then smaller, more numerous nuclear ones. At one site the pit houses are surrounded by a massive ring ditch some 4m deep and 10m wide, suggesting a defensive structure against intergroup conflict. There are few incidents of symbolic communication (e.g. iconography, inscriptions, etc.), but no specific structures or artifacts are associated with wrestling. Either they had no wrestling or nothing associated with wrestling was preservable. Typical folk knowledge of ssireum contains strong agrarian associations that may come from this period or are being projected onto it. It is possible that these ancient peoples had practices centered around harvest cycles, as are found across most

agrarian cultures, such as observing Spring Planting and Fall Harvest. The animistic ritual use of ssireum supposedly applied in agriculture (e.g. “rain calling”) can be connected to this line of thought. The use of ssireum in personal defense and conflict resolution, sometimes between groups over issues such as water rights, dovetails with the archaeological evidence of this period that suggests group conflict was a pressing issue. Again, this portrays ssireum as defensive or conflict-mitigating.

GOJOSEON

As recorded in the *Archaisms of the Three Kingdoms*⁵⁶, the mythic founding of Korea supposedly dates to 2,333 BCE with the Gojoseon period. The general story is as follows. Hwanung⁵⁷, son of the Lord of Heaven⁵⁸, descended to earth and established the City of God⁵⁹. He retained a court of natural forces such as Clouds, Rain, Wind, etc. Together they instructed human beings in moral order, laws, medicine, art, and agriculture. A tiger and a bear observed this activity and longed to become human. Hwanung instructed them to remain secluded in a cave and to survive off of nothing but 20 cloves of garlic and a bundle of mugwort for 100 days. The tiger quickly lost patience, succumbed to hunger, and abandoned the cave after 20 days. The bear persisted and on

⁵⁶ 삼국유사:三國遺事: *Samguk Yusa: Archaisms of the Three Kingdoms*, a Korean text recorded around the end of the 13th century which contains legends, folktales, and historical accounts of ancient Korean civilizations.

⁵⁷ 환웅:桓雄: *Hwanung*: Divine Regent, the son of the Lord of Heaven and father to Dangun Wanggeom in the Korean origin myth.

⁵⁸ 환인:桓因: *Hwanin*: Lord of Heaven, the father of Hwanung and grandfather of Dangun Wanggeom in the Korean origin myth.

⁵⁹ 신시:神市: *Sinsi*: City of God, founded by Hwanung in the Korean origin myth.

the 21st day emerged from the cave as a woman named Ungyeo⁶⁰. Hwanung eventually married Ungnyeou and they had a son named Dangun Wanggeom⁶¹. Their son assumed the throne and established the Joseon Kingdom.⁶² Dangun Wanggeom ruled for nearly 2,000 years before ascending to heaven as a mountain god.

One interpretation of this creation myth is that it is actually describing the politics of three totemic tribes. The union of a powerful sun tribe and bear tribe which involved the exclusion of a tiger tribe, possibly driving out the latter. The leadership of the new group carried the title of Dangun, possibly meaning religious-leader. While the dates and meaning can be contested the myth carries important motifs - divine natural forces serving human interests, the bear as a symbol of endurance and transformation, and agriculture as the basis for civilization (i.e. morals, laws, medicine, art). Folk knowledge connects ssireum with the bear (or bear tribe) in particular, in this case a transformative physical struggle against impossible circumstances that is decided by perseverance and rewarded with divine perspicacity. Claiming ssireum existed in this period also conflates it with the mythological ethnic origins of the Korean people.

THREE KINGDOMS

The Proto-Three Kingdoms and Three Kingdoms era (108 BCE - 935 CE) represents the start of the political and geographic unification of Korea which included

⁶⁰ 웅녀:熊女: *Ungnyeou*: Bear Woman, wife of Hwanung and mother of Dangun in the Korean origin myth.

⁶¹ 단군왕검:檀君王儉: *Dangun Wanggeom*: Mythic founder of Korea.

⁶² Today the Dangun's Joseon is known as Gojoseon, or Old Joseon, to distinguish it from the later dynasty with the same name.

control over parts of Manchuria as well. The Baekje⁶³, Goguryeo⁶⁴, and Silla⁶⁵ kingdoms were supposedly consolidated chiefdoms that became the inheritors of Korean culture after the fall of Gojoseon. Despite being contemporarily seen as a collective stage in Korean ethnic history, these three kingdoms were engaged in centuries of conflict with one another which suggests they were not disposed to a larger collective identity. The conclusion to their warring was finally decided through a military alliance between Silla and Tang China. Important components of knowledge about ssireum stem from this period as all the terminology used to describe ssireum are predated by artifact images alone.

First, the first images of ssireum come from this period and the absolutely oldest sources of knowledge about ssireum are also the most ambiguous in meaning. This is in part because of the open-ended nature of their context as well as the lack of any official records usable for explaining what they represent. There exists a collection of royal tombs in the former area of Manchuria⁶⁶ that are reportedly from the Goguryeo period in Korean history. According to the 4th century Stele of Gwanggaeto the Great⁶⁷, the founding king and royal progenitor of Goguryeo was Jumong⁶⁸. As mentioned in

⁶³ 백제:百濟:Baekje (18BCE to 660CE), one of the three civilizations of the Three Kingdoms Era of Korean history.

⁶⁴ 고구려:高句麗: The Goguryeo civilization which existed from around the middle of the 1st Century to the end of the 7th Century.

⁶⁵ 신라:新羅: Silla (57BCE to 935CE), one of the three civilizations of the Three Kingdoms Era of Korean history.

⁶⁶ Now known as Tonggou, Jian Prefecture, Jilin Province in northeastern China.

⁶⁷ 광개토태왕:廣開土太王: Gwanggaeto the Great (~374-413 CE), the nineteenth ruler of Goguryeo.

⁶⁸ 동명성왕:東明聖王: King Dongmyeong (37-19 BCE), sometimes known as Jumong or Chumo, the founder of the Goguryeo civilization.

Archaisms of the Three Kingdoms and *Annals of the Three Kingdoms*⁶⁹, Jumong hatched from an egg laid by a river deity when she was exposed to sunlight. Jumong formed the Goguryeo civilization after he was driven by a jealous prince south of a river, inherited a royal title through marriage, and united the tribes in the immediate vicinity. The Steele and historical texts paint Goguryeo as a militaristically driven civilization. The Royal Tombs were constructed at the height of its expansion and reign.

One of these tombs contains a mural strongly suggestive of ssireum as it features two figures in a grappling embrace with a third figure observing them. There is no accompanying inscription and the image has been subjected to different interpretations.⁷⁰ The image is remarkably evocative because of the material and kinetic motifs within it. The two bare-chested wrestlers are clad in shorts and belts with their body postures in stances specific to wrestling. The onlooker wears a traditional style robe and is positioned in such a way that he is clearly observing the combatants. A tree full of birds is to the left of the wrestlers while a nature symbol hovers over the heads of all three figures. It is not unlike a modern competition in its composition (see Figure 1).

⁶⁹ 삼국사기:三國史記: *Samguk Sagi: Annals of the Three Kingdoms*, the oldest Korean historical account of preceding civilizations, written sometime around the 12th century as commissioned by King Injong of Goryeo.

⁷⁰ It has been suggested that the image represents military training, funerary rites, shamanistic divinations, and so on. In the end, all of it is speculation and there is simply no accounting for what the image meant at the time it was made.



Figure 1 - Detail of Ssireum from Goguryeo Royal Tomb Mural

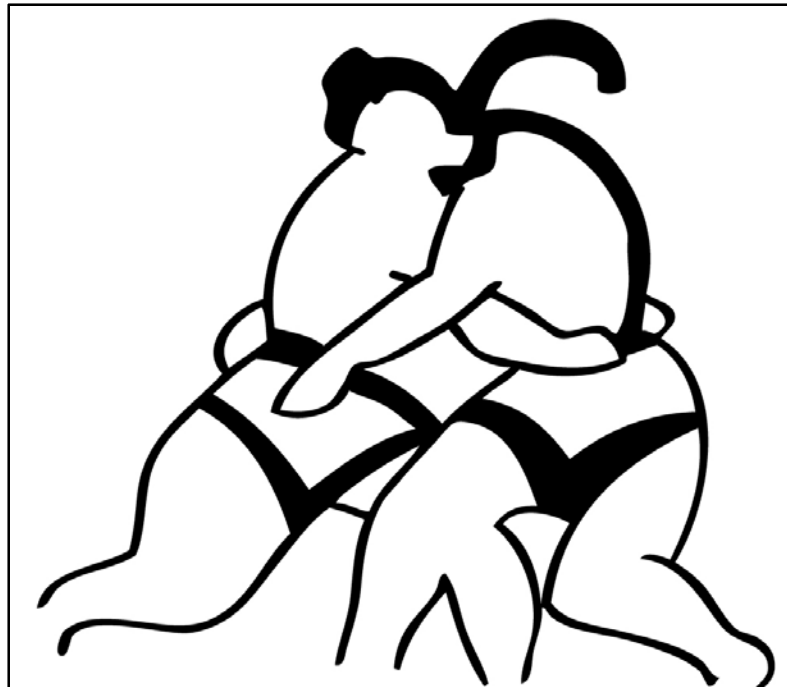


Figure 2 - Smaller Ssireum Detail in Goguryeo Royal Tombs

A smaller image among a collection of other motifs is found within the Royal Tombs and appears to be an abstract image of wrestlers grappling (see Figure 2). It is less detailed than the previous figure though no less suggestive of almost modern ssireum. But all of this begs a specific question - which came first, these images or ssireum?

Interpretations of the paintings generally suggest elite and religious status. The mural is a depiction of a high status practice because it is featured in a royal burial. It may be depicting a (shamanistic/animistic) religious ritual because of the various nature elements surrounding the wrestlers. Other paintings in the tomb feature religious

symbolic content. Conventional knowledge of Korean history links the shamanistic or animistic traditions of Gojoseon people to this notion as well. The trouble is that contemporary ssireum has been made, by design, to look like this image over time (as in Figure 2). It is possible that any similarity to ssireum is simply projected onto the image by the viewer. The costuming and positioning of the three figures may arbitrarily appear to be ssireum when, in fact, they were composed with a completely different intention.

These images place ssireum within an ancient history and authenticate motifs in contemporary ssireum such as shorts and belts. They comment directly on ssireum by virtue of their contents and inferentially by virtue of their placement. Ssireum was important enough to be recorded in the Royal Tombs of an ancient Korean civilization. In addition to being militaristic, popular accounts suggest Goguryeo as the source of several cultural legacies in Korea such as traditional dances, clothing, and technology. The word “Korea” is another legacy as it was derived from the name Goguryeo. The consensus is that Goguryeo was a major political player in East Asia until it was defeated by an alliance of Chinese and Korean rivals. Its downfall also marked the unification of the peninsula from three kingdoms into one. That wrestling was considered important enough to be represented in a royal tomb combined with the historical contextualization of the mural adds to the semiotics of ssireum the legacy of an ancient, powerful period in Korean history that was derived from the military strength of its people. Accordingly, ssireum is associated with the military though not necessarily as combat training. Wrestling may have been military leisure or ritual.

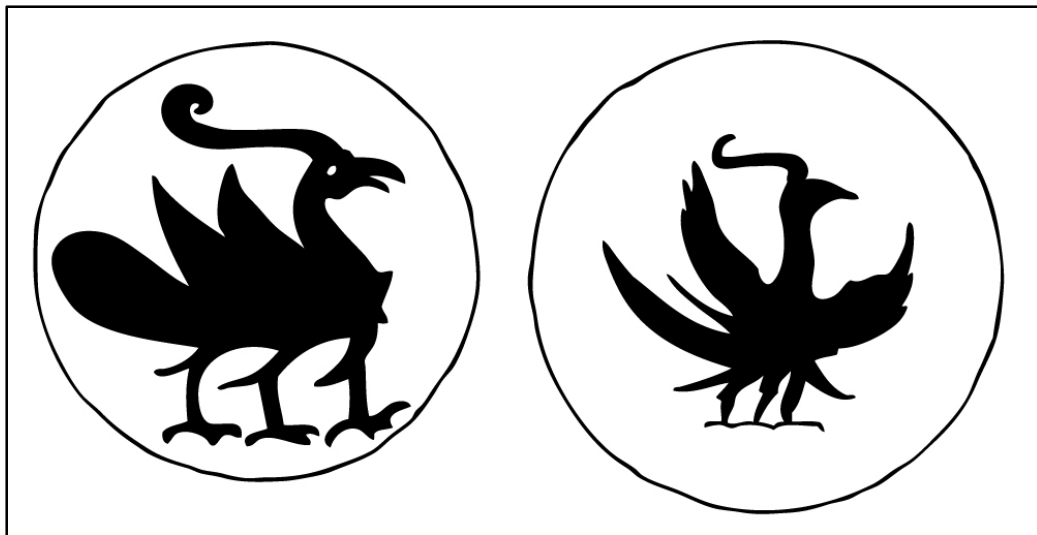


Figure 3 - Samjogo Paintings from Goguryeo Royal Tombs

What was *not* included in the legacy of ssireum that one might expect considering the history of Goguryeo is likewise important. While the belts, shorts, posture, and audience in the tomb paintings are compelling motifs they are only part of the larger history of the sport. There are no written accounts from this period that suggest ssireum. And the history of ssireum did not seize upon other popular cultural motifs of the time. Strikingly missing in later ssireum is the Samjogo⁷¹, the three legged crow of heaven that was used as the royal symbol of Goguryeo (see Figure 3). Also present in the Goguryeo tomb murals the Samjogo would have made for an easily assimilated symbol of divine power, yet it was not appropriated in ssireum and the sport

⁷¹ 삼족오:三足鳥: *Samjogo*: Three legged crow; motif common across many cultures in East Asia. In the case of Korea, the crow was the emblem of the Goguryeo kingdom and thought to be superior in power to either the dragon or phoenix.

made other, later associations with animal symbols. The missing crow suggests several possibilities. First, while ssireum may have rated high enough to be painted in a royal tomb it may not have been specifically associated with royalty or state regalia. Second, ssireum may have been widely enough practiced that associating it with a specific state was counterintuitive or undesirable. Third, there may not have been any interest in commodifying ssireum at the time. In all cases it suggests that there was little effort spent affiliating ssireum with a specific role, history, or aesthetic in contrast to how it is treated contemporarily.

Another sub-set of primary sources is historical documents and paintings. It is in these works that the first language for ssireum appears. The origins of the word ssireum are not clear and non-Korean sources do not contribute any meaningful information to its origin. Because ssireum is written exclusively in the Korean phonetic system of *Hangeul*⁷² and not the Sino-Korean system of *Hanja*⁷³ which predates it, scholars assume ssireum is based on an indigenous word.⁷⁴ Or perhaps a Mongolian loan word.⁷⁵ While the only scholarly agreement is that the word ssireum is *not* Chinese in origin these historical texts mark the first literary references to ssireum, or something ssireum-

⁷² 한글: 漢字없슴: *Hangeul*: The Korean phonemic alphabet commissioned by Sejong the Great in the middle of the 15th Century to replace Hanja.

⁷³ 한자: 漢字: *Hanja*: The Sino-Korean logographic writing system based on Chinese characters used in nearly all historical Korean texts prior to the advent of Hangul.

⁷⁴ The verb *ssireumhada* (씨름하다: 漢字없슴) means “to wrestle [with something]”, but it is derived from ssireum as opposed to the other way around. Alternate possible origins for ssireum include the indigenous verb *ssauda* (싸우다: 漢字없슴), which means “to fight”, and *saruda* (사루다: 漢字없슴), a archaic verb which is used to describe repetitive motions such as struggling to lift something, turning a crank, or even coitus. None of these theories are unanimously accepted.

⁷⁵ One suggestion is that ssireum comes from *sselnem*, a Mongolian word for wrestling. No sources actually confirm this etymology.

like, and they use various Chinese characters to do so. These words include *chiuhui*, *gakhui*, *gakjeo*, *gakji*, *gakryeok*, *jaenggyo*, and *sangbak*.⁷⁶ None of these words directly indicate ssireum though contemporary dictionary definitions often list “ssireum” as a second or third entry. Rather, these words all evoke a sense of the physical competition or kinetic struggle one might expect to experience in wrestling (see Figure 4). Within these terms the phoneme *gak* means “horn” when used alone and may serve to connect ssireum with an agricultural basis, perhaps heralding the later association of cattle with ssireum. This is purely speculative as Sino-Korean words usually cannot be reduced past a compound level.

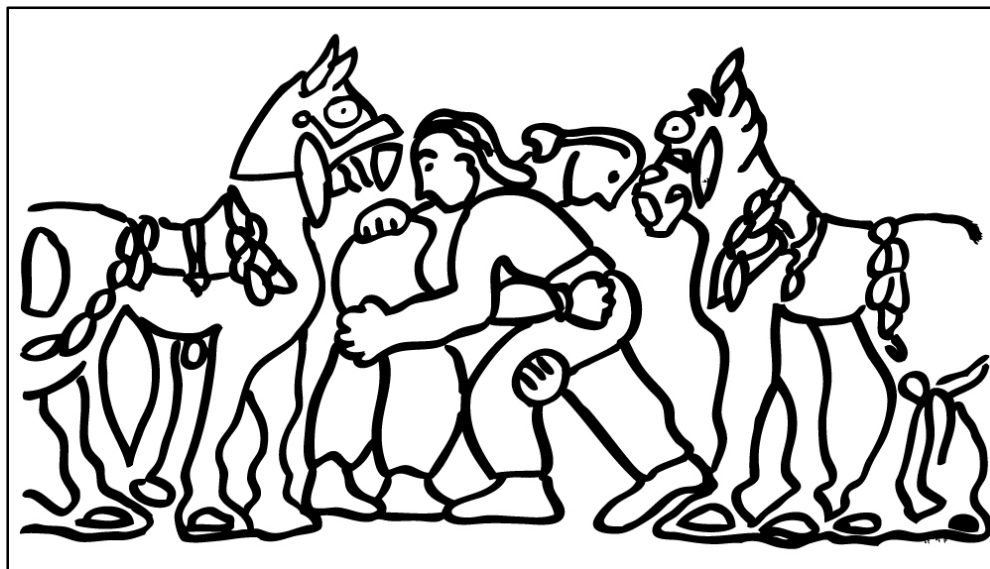


Figure 4 - Ssireum Scene from *History of the Later Han*

⁷⁶ (치우희:蚩尤戲: *Chiuhui*), (각휘:角戲: *Gakhui*), (각저:角抵: *Gakjeo*), (각지:角支: *Gakji*), (각력:角力: *Gakryeok*), (쟁교:爭交: *Jaenggyo*), (상박:相撲: *Sangbak*): Ancient Sino-Korean terms for ssireum.

These historical texts are widely authenticated and provide an interesting level of detail into the civilizations that wrote them. Unfortunately, that level of detail is disproportionately focused as these sources are all royal court documents. At a time when literacy was prized and correlated with social status, it happened that the aspects of daily life amongst the illiterate were not considered worthy of preservation. Almost everything that can be derived from these sources represents a very bureaucratic and narrow reflection of history.

One of the oldest historical texts to depict wrestling comes from China. The *History of the Later Han*⁷⁷ contains a passage describing a reception held for a visiting Buyeo⁷⁸ king in which flutes and drums were played while men wrestled for the royalty's amusement. An image of two Han men wrestling in front of horses and trees is included in the reference (again, see Figure 4). The conventional interpretation of this image is that it proves ssireum existed as far back as the 5th century. In contrast to the way the Royal Tomb murals are interpreted there is little speculation on the importance of this passage and image. It may have been that wrestling was used as a ritual event because it was part of a mutual cultural repertoire between the Han and Buyeo people.

GORYEO

While organized military action was an arm of state authority in the Goguryeo

⁷⁷ 후한서:後漢書: *Huhan Seo: History of the Later Han*, one volume in the *Twenty-Four Histories* (二十四史), compiled by Fan Ye (范曄:范曄:蔚宗) in the 5th century covering the history of the eastern Han from 25-220 CE.

⁷⁸ 부여:夫餘: Buyeo Kingdom, presumed to have originated sometime in the 2nd century BCE and lasted until 494 CE; it existed in an area covering Manchuria and parts of North Korea.

civilization, the later Korean civilizations that were Chinese protectorates maintained their authority through aristocratic traditions entrenched in ritual. Changing military tactics and intra-state politics contributed to the growth of Confucian ideals in Korea that emphasized education and refinement over crude physical prowess. After the defeat of Goguryeo, Silla assumed control over the peninsula; however, it quickly tottered and the Goryeo Dynasty⁷⁹ took its place. Lasting from 918-1392 CE, Goryeo is a turning point in ssireum. Pre-Goryeo, interpretations of ssireum assume it was a high status activity and place it in the mythic context of ethnic origins. But under Goryeo ssireum was supposedly a form of military training. This establishes a “martial” context from which wrestling can take some legitimacy, but also lowers the social status of persons who engage in ssireum. Soldiers are not royalty. This view is backed up by what is known of class stratification at the time as well as the 14th century court record reprimanding a king for wrestling with an errand boy. *The History of the Goryeo Dynasty*⁸⁰ has a March 1330 CE entry reprimanding a young King Chunghye⁸¹ for irresponsibly delegating his official duties in order to spend time practicing ssireum with an errand boy inside the palace grounds; despite the criticism, the king’s participation supposedly continued.

Another factor contributing to the drop in status of ssireum was the transition of the state religion from Buddhism to Confucianism. In the context of a Confucian state

⁷⁹ 고려왕조:高麗王朝: Goryeo Dynasty (918 to 1392CE), the first unified state to exist in what is now the Korean peninsula.

⁸⁰ 고려사:高麗史: *Goryeo So: The History of the Goryeo Dynasty*, commissioned by King Sejong nearly a century after the fall of Goryeo it is based upon primary and secondary sources that are now extinct. The work is written in Hanja and consists of over 139 volumes.

⁸¹ 충혜왕:忠惠王: *Chunghyeo Wang*: King Chungye (1315-1344 CE), the 28th king of Goryeo.

system social and economic status are determined in part through the study of classic texts and concepts which generally did not cover military topics.⁸² Elites, the people with access to education, were ritualized academics. While these people may have appreciated athletic skills, physical competition was counterintuitive to their notion of civility. Studying, not soldiering, was the key to a good future. Ironically, the low status of athletics and high value placed on formal education suggested at this time persist in contemporary Korean society and might have a longer or deeper connection to ssireum than anything else conventionally assumed about the sport.

JOSEON DYNASTY

When the Joseon Dynasty⁸³ ascended to power little seems to have changed for wrestling. In that era Neo-Confucian reforms assured the negative linear relationship between physical labor and social status. Social hierarchies became matters of state designation and the only advancement was academic; i.e. passing the complex national civil service examinations⁸⁴. These exams included literary, military, and miscellaneous categories (sciences) that would test candidates against Confucian standards. While the

⁸² The concept of civil examination started with Silla and became more complex under the Goryeo who used it as a means to limit the hereditary power of aristocracy. Civil exams covered composition and classical knowledge. Military exams existed only briefly under two different kings and aside from that there was no educational path to military advancement. One interpretation suggests this reflected the unstated strength of the military in society; i.e. they were too powerful to need certification. An alternate view suggests military certification was not a priority because there was no competition for it; i.e. it was undesirable or low status to be military. Internal instability, harassment along its borders, and periodic Mongol invasions, and a strong civil advancement system in Goryeo suggest a weak or low military class.

⁸³ 조선왕조:朝鮮王朝: *Joseon Wangjo*: Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897CE), the last royal dynasty in what is now Korea.

⁸⁴ 과거:科擧: *Gwangeo*: Civil exams, started in the 8th century under Silla, revised in the 14th century under Goryeo, and broadly expanded under Joseon rule until they were officially abolished under the Gabo Reforms.

existence of military certification may make it appear as if the low status of physical activity was abating it would not have been possible to advance on skills alone. The test had three sections, two of which were academic - literature, strategy, and combat arts. The civility of ranked military officials was assured by their formal education, not their fighting ability.

*The Chronicles of the Yi Dynasty*⁸⁵ records King Sejong⁸⁶ holding a ssireum competition amongst his soldiers while on a pleasure cruise. A December 1430 CE entry in the same work documents a man losing his life in a ssireum match; his opponent was held liable for funeral costs but was not otherwise prosecuted. A 1560 CE proclamation in *King Myeongjong's Chronicles*⁸⁷ prohibits servants from playing ssireum inside palace grounds, but permits the practice among children. A 1664 CE entry in *King Hyeonjong's Chronicles*⁸⁸ reports that a servant stabbed his opponent after losing a ssireum competition. Royal court records typically made no effort to document the daily life of persons occupying the lower rungs of their hierarchically stratified society. The implications in the court documents reflect the prevailing *Yangban*⁸⁹ caste views of physical activity and martial pursuits as undesirable. Possibly contributing to this was

⁸⁵ 조선왕조:朝鮮王朝: *The Chronicles of the Yi Dynasty*, records of the Yi Dynasty.

⁸⁶ 세종대왕:世宗大王: *Sejeong Daewang*: Sejong the Great (1397-1450 CE), the fourth king of the Joseon Dynasty.

⁸⁷ 명종시대:明宗時代: *Myeongjong Sidae: King Myeongjong's Chronicles*, records of the 13th king of the Joseon Dynasty.

⁸⁸ 현종시대:顯宗時代: *Hyeonjong Sidae: King Hyeonjong's Chronicles*, records of the 18th king of the Joseon Dynasty.

⁸⁹ 양반:兩班: *Yangban*: The traditional ruling class of nobles in dynastic Korea.

the historical competition between the Yangban's scholarly *Munban*⁹⁰ and militaristic *Muban*⁹¹ sub-classes for political supremacy; a competition which eventually ended with the dissolution of the latter. Once Confucianism was adopted as the official state religion the negative views of sport and physical leisure became even more cemented. The path to social ascension lay only in literacy and the completion of bureaucratically elaborate civil service exams which tested familiarity with Chinese characters and Confucian texts. While Yangban were not lineages, it was only the children of elites who had the capital and free-time needed to train for civil exams. Pursuits which occupied time otherwise needed for these studies were frowned upon. In general, at the time these documents were recorded the cultivation of gentlemanly spirit was far more prized than physical prowess. As clearer descriptions of ssireum are absent from these works it can be inferred that wrestling was a low status activity, perhaps affiliated with the indentured agricultural laborer class.

The most enduring accounts of ssireum from this era, those still frequently used contemporarily to demonstrate it as a folk art, are paintings. They affiliate wrestling with commoners, markets, and agrarian undertones - all of which were at the low end of Joseon social status. An unnamed 18th century painting (sometimes called *Sangbak*⁹²) by Hong-Do Kim⁹³ from a series depicting daily-life settings shows an outdoor ssireum

⁹⁰ 문반:文班: *Munban*: The scholars within the Yangban class.

⁹¹ 무반:武班: *Muban*: The warriors within the Yangban class.

⁹² 상박:相撲: *Sangbak*: *Wrestling*, an actually unnamed painting from the 18th Century by Kim Hong-Do in his "Folk Life" series (풍속도:風俗圖) which depicts a scene strongly evocative of ssireum.

⁹³ 김홍도:金弘道: Kim Hong-Do (1745-1806 CE), a painter from the late Joseon period famous for his depictions of daily life.

competition with a pair of wrestlers surrounded by a ring of spectators and a taffy vendor
(see Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Untitled Ssireum Painting by Hong-Do Kim

The painting of the wrestlers by Kim Hong-Do reinforces the view that ssireum was a low-standing pastime. Despite being a court commissioned artist, Kim Hong-Do is perhaps best remembered for producing works which depict the everyday life of commoners. This choice in subject matter stands in stark contrast to the narrow focus of court reports. It is because of the painter's famous preference in subject matter that his depiction of wrestling so strongly infers that it was a low-status sport. The motifs in the painting also contribute to the popular understanding of ssireum.⁹⁴ In particular, the circular arrangement of spectators and market setting (inferable through the presence of the taffy vendor) have become inseparable parts of ssireum. *Sangbak* is the first record to establish the now venerated circle of competition. It also connected ssireum to the rowdy market environment, the communal space of the day where news, goods, and entertainment were chiefly consumed among the masses.

A few other historical images depict ssireum. An 1846 painting called *Fête*⁹⁵ by Yu-Suk⁹⁶ shows a large crowd gathered around a ssireum competition in the upper portion and a *taekkyeon*⁹⁷ competition in the lower portion (see Figure 6). The setting strongly conveys martial athletic entertainment. Interestingly, ssireum and taekkyeon are both portrayed as traditional martial arts with similarly lengthy histories. Images of

⁹⁴ *Sangbak* is such an enduring image that it can be found appropriated in many unlikely contemporary settings beyond the ssireum competitions where one might expect to see it. I found the image being used in drink coasters, handkerchiefs, and puffed barely snacks among other places. One of the easiest and fastest ways to impart a “traditional” feeling to a product or setting was by employing Kim Hong-Do’s images, particularly those of the series which includes the wrestlers.

⁹⁵ 대쾌도: 大快圖: *Daekwaedo: Fête*, an 1846 painting by Yu-Seok.

⁹⁶ 유숙/혜산: 劉淑/惠山: Yu-Seok, pen name Hye-San, (1827-1873) a late Joseon painter.

⁹⁷ 택견: 漢字 없슴: *Taekkyeon*: A traditional dance-like martial art from Korea oriented around kicking; supposedly dating as far back as ssireum it is practiced as type of modern competition.

taekkyeon are also found within the Royal Tombs previously discussed.



Figure 6 - Detail from Yu-Suk's *Fête*

Lastly, there are two images of ssireum by Jun-Geun Kim⁹⁸ from a “Folk Life”⁹⁹ series (see Figures 7 and 8). These images continue the trend of showing ssireum played within a circle of spectators and without any specialized uniforms. As with all images of

⁹⁸ 김준근/기산:金俊根/箕山: Mr. Jun-Geun Kim, pen name Gi-San, a late Joseon painter active at the turn of the 20th century.

⁹⁹ 풍속도:風俗圖: *Pungseokdo*: Folk life drawings.

ssireum the wrestlers are shown in the midst of play - never before, never after. Without depictions of how the competitions began nor how they ended there are limits to what can be inferred. For example, how were competitions structured? Did they bow to each other before play? What spoils awaited the victor? All those questions remain unanswered. But in all cases the point is clear that ssireum is best recognized through play.



Figure 7 - First Untitled Ssireum Scene from Gi-San's "Folk Life" Series

As with the royal tomb painting, what is missing between these late Joseon images and today's ssireum is telling. The figures in the paintings are not wearing belts

and shorts specific to competition. Nor are they adorned as soldiers. Instead, they are dressed in what is assumed to be the typical daily wear of the period (again, see Figures 7 and 8). As far as can be seen in the paintings, they appear to be playing on ordinary flat ground. There is nothing to distinguish their competition space as distinct from the area around it. Nothing in the paintings suggests sand. Nor do the paintings contain any of the blue-and-red motifs that predominate in contemporary ssireum competitions. This leads to the assumption that the wrestlers in the paintings and the space in which they played were not specialized for full-time wrestling. This coincides with the thematic naming of these pictures as “folk life” settings. It also demonstrates that the red-and-blue motifs of ssireum, and their corresponding philosophical and aesthetic implications, are later additions to the sport.

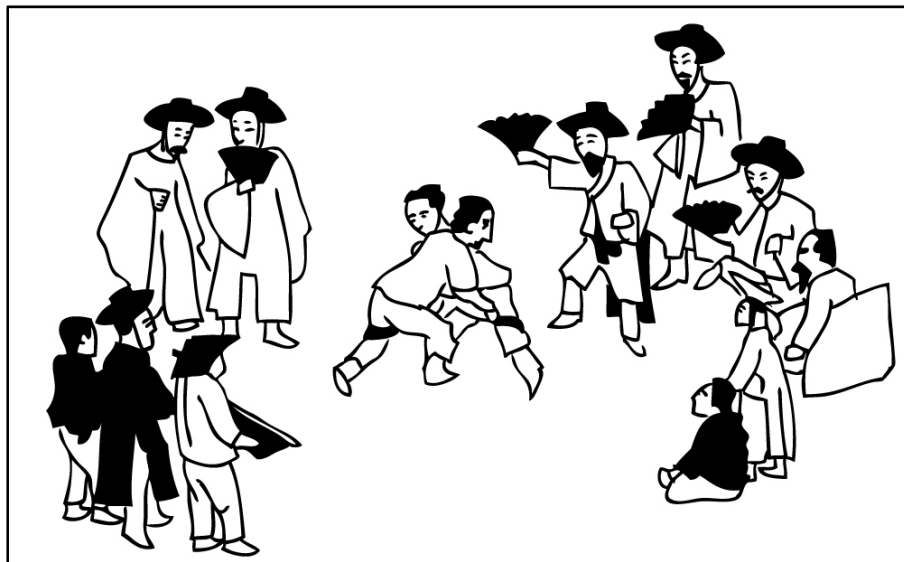


Figure 8 - Second Untitled Ssireum Scene from Gi-San's "Folk Life" Series

CHAPTER III

SOURCES OF INVENTION

This chapter continues the review of historical knowledge about ssireum, focusing on its modern development. This includes the formalization and commodification of ssireum from a game into a sport, a processes indicative of the emergent market ideologies of Korean society being incorporated into ssireum's traditional understanding of competition. The concluding sections explain its structural organization at the time of fieldwork.

MODERNIZATION OR NOT?

There exists popular dispute over whether Japan modernized Korea or not. The issue in this case is whether Korea's modernization was historical (i.e. because of Japan) or proximate (i.e. independent of Japan). Japan forcibly introduced political, technological, and economic reforms in Korea that ended its existence as an isolationist, agrarian dynasty. Yet the net effect was deleterious and evidence shows Japanese rule actually retarded development in Korea (Haggard, et al. 1997). By those accounts, Korea had been measurably better off before Japan's modernization. If we consider modernization an ideology of improvement in the vein of Bauman's (2001) "call to fulfillment", Japan's modernization of Korea was an utter failure; it would be more appropriate to say that the modernization of Japan included the colonization of Korea.

If we consider modernization a series of revolutions akin to Inkeles (2001), then Japan's role in modernizing Korea was imperceptibly modest since all of the

transformations it initiated had to be reintroduced following liberation. Korea's autonomous involvement in the global market and subsequent remarkable ascent did not occur until after its civil war had come to a ceasefire. By that time Korea had experienced invasive levels of American, Chinese, and Russian involvement within its borders that had produced far more lasting effects than Japan.

If we look at ssireum's history of development it seems to split the difference in the debate. Western sports, first introduced by missionaries, benefited considerably under colonization. Ssireum also entered a process of formalization under colonial rule. This suggests that the organization of national sports in Korea under Japan influenced ssireum's development in some capacity. Certainly the anti-colonial sentiment of the time must have benefited ssireum. However, ssireum did not evolve as a market commodity until Korea entered its economic boom, long after colonization had ended. In turn this suggests that the contributions of Western sports under Japanese rule were about formalization, and perhaps not very enduring since ssireum continued to be reorganized over time. Or if they made any ideological contributions they were not realized until after generations of additional involvement in Western sports had normalized them in Korean society.

Indeed, much of ssireum's diversification over time within the frame of competition has been built around the traditional values of *communitas* and harmonization - seeking ways to keep players safe, the game balance and fair, and maintaining audience pleasure. Within the frame of industry the story is different.

During Korea's global market integration political authority within ssireum had become hotly contested because of its monetizing potential.

JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The end of the Joseon Dynasty was marked by internal instability and growing foreign involvement in the state. Korea became a Chinese tributary in 1637 after the Second Manchu Invasion¹⁰⁰ and this lasted until Japan used their own gunboat diplomacy to force Korea into the Treaty of Ganghwa¹⁰¹ in 1876. Under duress from the Japanese military as well as the Donghak Rebellion¹⁰², the Gabo Reforms¹⁰³ were passed from 1894 to 1896 and declared Korea a sovereign nation, abolished the class system, reformed the government as a meritocracy, established compulsory military service, and discontinued Sino-Korean writing in favor of Hangeul. At the time of the Gabo Reforms China was fighting Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895 CE) for control of Korea. A decade later Japan and Russia would come to blows over Korea in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905 CE). In the wake of Japan's victory over Russia the Eulsa Treaty¹⁰⁴ was signed and Korea became a Japanese protectorate. Two years later Korea was forced into the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty¹⁰⁵ and three years after that it was

¹⁰⁰ 병자호란: 丙子胡亂: *Byongjahoran*: Second Manchu Invasion of Korea, 1636-1637 CE.

¹⁰¹ 강화도 조약: 江華島條約: *Ganghwado Joyak*: Treaty of Ganghwa, 1876.

¹⁰² 동학농민운동: 東學農民運動: *Donghak Nongmin Undong*: Eastern Learning Peasant Movement, an anti-government/elite/foreign peasant rebellion that precipitated the First Sino-Japanese War when Korea could not suppress the revolt and China moved to intervene, thereby prompting Japan to counter China's military presence in the peninsula.

¹⁰³ 갑오 개혁: 甲午改革: *Gabo Gaehyeok*: Gabo Reforms, a series of sweeping national reforms undertaken in Korea from 1894 to 1896.

¹⁰⁴ 을사조약: 乙巳條約: *Eulsa Joyak*: Eulsa Treaty, 1905.

¹⁰⁵ 정미칠 조약: 丁未七條約: *Jeongmichil Joyak*: Treaty of 1907.

formally colonized. With the military conflicts between China, Japan, and Russia it can easily be said that the fall of Korea's dynastic tradition and the ensuing Japanese colonial occupation were arguably the first dominos to fall in Korean globalization. The origins of Western sports in Korea date to this time as well.¹⁰⁶

At a time when Korean culture was being actively suppressed the earliest regular accounts of ssireum paradoxically appear under Japanese rule (1910-1945 CE). Newspaper reports, association records, and conventional knowledge about ssireum begin to converge in this period and ssireum clearly transforms from a game into a sport. Ssireum becomes one of the first non-Western athletic traditions sponsored in national competitions (well ahead of the Japanese imports of judo and kendo), tournament and competition rules move towards increasing standardization (belts, uniforms, rules, etc.), and prominent relationships are formed with mass media and compulsory education. Interestingly, the conventional histories of most Korean martial arts report being banned during this period while public ssireum events were permitted.¹⁰⁷ Ssireum takes on stronger, more positive tones as it reportedly became a cover for anti-colonial activity. The rise of the numerous associations that have appeared in the history of ssireum began at the beginning of the early 20th century. This marks the first period of effort in codifying ssireum. The aim was to define ssireum and competition within a framework of fixed rules, to make ssireum a sport as opposed to a game. This era marks the foothold

¹⁰⁶ As mentioned in Chapter I the introduction of soccer by Protestant missions and boxing by Japanese occupation dates to the turn of the 20th Century in Korea and were early means of participation in "global" athletic competitions (Ha and Mangan 1994, 2002; Im 1963; Mangan and Ha 2001; Svinth 1999, 2001).

¹⁰⁷ One explanation for ssireum's preferential treatment was that it was similar to Japanese sumo.

of ssireum as an emergent national sport.

Views on sports shifted dramatically around that time and formal, organized competition with specialized athletes became more common. It has been suggested that this was the result of the introduction of Western notions of sport, but that is a disingenuous oversimplification. The ostensibly Western sports that arrived in Korea at the turn of the 20th century brought with them a history of formally organized competition; soccer and boxing in Korea were never folk pastimes in the way that ssireum was. The advent of formal organizations aimed at physical competition in indigenous pastimes was previously unprecedented as those activities were geographically or socially limited and lacked an infrastructure that could support them. But because this period marked a spike in the amount of sustained contact Koreans had with outsiders it forced the renegotiation of the boundaries of Koreanness. With a disrupted life-in-common the formalization of indigenous physical competitions such as ssireum became a means of asserting an adapted ethnic identity. In this case the sporting associations were appropriating a familiar past within an introduced framework of formal competition. The emergence of ssireum as a sport is inextricably linked to the competition for control over it. Once ssireum was recognized for the value it represented to society an ongoing struggle emerged to define that role and, consequently, the Koreanness of ssireum.

In October, 1912 the first sponsored ssireum competition was held in

Danseongsa Theater¹⁰⁸ in Seoul by the Yugakkwon Club¹⁰⁹. The name of the club was drawn from the first syllables of three different martial arts - *yudo*¹¹⁰, *gakgi*, and *kwontu*¹¹¹ - and suggests some kind of relationship between them or their practitioners. In 1915 the Kwangmudae Theater¹¹² in Seoul sponsored a ssireum competition which lasted four weeks and awarded an ox, a traditional agricultural symbol, as the grand prize.¹¹³ Recording keeping begins around this time, including the start of the exceptional *70 Years of the Korean Sports Council* (1990). Published through *The Korea Herald*¹¹⁴, this two volume work covers the longest continuously running sports competition in Korea, the National Sports Festival¹¹⁵. The Festival has been held annually aside from a few years towards the end of Japanese occupation. It is perhaps the most important high school and university competition in the country. *70 Years of the Korean Sports Council* is essentially a history of the National Sports Festival.

The Festival started a decade after Japanese colonization in 1920 with baseball¹¹⁶. The next year it expanded to include soccer¹¹⁷ and lawn tennis¹¹⁸. In 1924 it added track

¹⁰⁸ 단성사극장:團成社劇場: *Danseongsa Geukjang*: Danseongsa Theater.

¹⁰⁹ 유각권구락부:柔角拳俱樂部: *Yugakkwon Gurakbu*: Yugakkwon Club.

¹¹⁰ 유도:柔道: *Yudo*: Korean term for Japanese *judo*.

¹¹¹ 권투:拳鬪: *Kwontu*: Korean term for boxing.

¹¹² 광무대극장:光武臺劇場: *Kwangmydae Geukjang*: Kwangmudae Theater.

¹¹³ The awarding of the ox is significant because it represents an enduring symbol of success in ssireum that is still occasionally awarded. One such instance will be discussed in Chapter IV.

¹¹⁴ 내외경제신문:內外經濟新聞: *Naewei Gyeongje Sinmun*: The Korea Herald, a major Korean newspaper.

¹¹⁵ 전국체육대회:全國體育大會: *Jeonguk Cheuk Daehwei*: The National Sports Festival, the oldest and longest running sports competition in Korea; running annually with few exceptions since July 13, 1920.

¹¹⁶ 야구:野球: *Yagu*: Baseball (sport).

¹¹⁷ 축구:蹴毬: *Chukgu*: Soccer (sport).

¹¹⁸ 정구:庭球: *Jeonggu*: Lawn tennis (sport).

and field¹¹⁹. Nine festivals after its inception ssireum would appear within the ranks of this national sporting competition. *70 Years* alludes to the early use of the national red-and-blue motifs that have come to typify the aesthetics of “traditional” pastimes in the nation.¹²⁰ The almanac also provides insight into the early years of organized sport in Korea though references to subjects as important as women’s competitions¹²¹ (first seen in 1933) and sponsored teams¹²² (first seen in 1934). Earlier references to organized sport in Korea may exist, but they are nowhere near as comprehensive as *70 Years*.

Aside from a missing 1923 newspaper reference, *70 Years of the Korean Sports Council* contains the oldest record of ssireum match results available. Ssireum is first seen in the tenth entry for the National Sports Festival in 1929. Despite Korea being under Japanese occupation at the time ssireum was the first non-Western sport to be included in the Festival, predating the Japanese sports of kendo¹²³ and judo by six years and taekwondo by more than 30 years.¹²⁴ Ssireum had an early and singularly unique presence in a national competition venue that had been dominated by foreign sports for nearly a decade. Ssireum was not simply an adaptation of foreign wrestling either.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ 육상:陸上: *Yuksang*: Track and field (sport).

¹²⁰ Specifically, a 1936 judo semi-pro team entry mentions a “red versus blue” (청홍전:靑紅戰) competition category.

¹²¹ 여자:女子: *Yeoja*: Women.

¹²² 실업부:實業部: *Sileobbu*: Sponsored team.

¹²³ 검도:劍道: *Geomdo*: Kendo (sport).

¹²⁴ Ssireum first appears at the Festival in 1929, kendo and judo in 1935, and taekwondo in 1963.

¹²⁵ 레슬링:漢字없슴: *Resellling*: (Western) wrestling as etymologically distinguished from ethnic Korean wrestling.

A subheading on the 1929 entry states that the ssireum competition was held through the Joseon Ssireum Association and took place on September 28th at Hwimun High's gymnasium. The fall timing of the competition would go on to be consistent for nearly all subsequent Festivals. The results for the competition are broken down into two categories, team¹²⁶ and individual¹²⁷. The teams were all at the high school level.¹²⁸ This establishes a historical link between compulsory education and ssireum that is at least 75 years old.

The results include a final match summary of seven to six, and a subheading of semi-finals¹²⁹ with two matches, won at three-to-two and eight-to-two. The individual play category does not mention team affiliations or age/education levels. It only includes both final and semi-final results. The number of rounds is not indicated as only “O” and “X” are used. Taken alone, these results do not present many inferences about the organization of the 1929 competition aside from the link to public education, and the inconsistency of both one point and six point winning leads. It is not possible to determine if the competition was a round-robin or a double-elimination tournament,

¹²⁶ 단체:團體: *Danche*: Group (play).

¹²⁷ 개인:個人: *Gaein*: Individual (play).

¹²⁸ During Japanese occupation of Korea the education system terminology was reformed and the nomenclature changed to reflect this. The terms used in the almanac are accordingly archaic for occupation years and sometimes include categories in which middle and high school students would be combined; that is, these terms do not reflect the current 6-3-3 (elementary, middle, high) division used in Korea. The translation of “high school” team used herein thus encompasses several different terms.

¹²⁹ 준결:準決: *Jungyeol*: Semi-finals.

though it appears it was not a single-elimination.¹³⁰ Conventional knowledge suggests it was a round robin only because transportation and communication infrastructure prevented more than a handful of teams in the capital from participating. While the scoring mechanism between individual and team play was different it is likely they followed the same competition structure.

The first ssireum association in Korea, the Joseon Ssireum Association¹³¹, was formed in 1927 and held its first competition at Hwimun High School¹³² in Seoul. According to *70 Years* the Joseon Ssireum Association sponsored the next four years of ssireum competitions at the National Sports Festival. The 1930 entry shows different scoring systems than the previous tournament for both team and individual play. It appears that all competitions were played as the best two out of three. The number of

¹³⁰ Elimination and round-robin tournaments have different scheduling algorithms. In a basic single-elimination (also called “knockout” or “sudden death”) tournament with two competitors per match, if there are n competitors there will be $r = \lceil \log_2 n \rceil$ rounds required; alternately, if there are r rounds there will be $n = 2^r$ competitors. If there are an odd number of competitors then some will be allowed to bye, or advance, a round without competition. Double-elimination tournaments operate two simultaneous sets of brackets, the first for advancing competitors and the second for competitors with one loss (i.e. a winner’s bracket and a loser’s bracket); thus there are between $2n - 2$ and $2n - 1$ rounds depending on if the winner was undefeated or not. Elimination tournaments often employ sorting criteria (i.e. randomization vs. seeding) when setting the initial round of brackets to avoid mismatching competitors or placing too many high-rated competitors against each other early on. In a round-robin tournament if n is the number of competitors there will be $\frac{n}{2}(n - 1)$ matches. If n is even then in $(n - 1)$ rounds $\frac{n}{2}$ matches can be run simultaneously; if n is odd there will be n rounds with $\frac{n-1}{2}$ matches leaving one competitor matchless in that round. Initial sorting criteria are less important in round-robins as all competitors are eventually matched to one other, though the order of matching may involve criteria (e.g. home versus away). Round-robins may occasionally use byes. In a formalized sport the logistical decision about what type of tournament to use can easily indicate values. Round-robins are often seen as the most fair, though resource expensive, while single-eliminations are the cheapest, most expeditious, and most potentially biased; double-eliminations are a compromise between the two. In the case of the 1929 ssireum match mentioned above the semi-finals for both team and individual play include three competitors - an unlikely scenario for a single-elimination tournament, but typical for double-elimination or round-robin tournaments.

¹³¹ (전)조선씨름협회:(前)朝鮮씨름協會:(*Jeon*) *Joseon ssireum Hyeobhei*: Joseon Ssireum Association.

¹³² 휘문고등학교:徽文高等學校:*Hwimun Godeung Hakkyo*: Hwimun High School.

entries in the semi-finals are all even, and this points to a change in tournament structure as well - possibly single-elimination. Based on the contents of the text alone it is impossible to know how many competitors participated, but the change in presentation of semi-final data infers a shift towards more expeditious competition. The 1931 entry does not follow any precedent. No individual play is mentioned, there is only an entry for high school teams¹³³. The semi-finals are marked only with “O” and “X” while the finals are shown they were won at four-to-one. Only four teams total are shown, again alluding to a single-elimination structure. The 1932 entry is almost identical to the 1931 entry except that the scores indicate that seven rounds were played in each competition. The 1933 entry states that a ssireum competition was again held in conjunction with the Joseon Ssireum Association except the results are “lost to time”¹³⁴. That is also the last time the Joseon Ssireum Association is mentioned. There was no ssireum in the 15th National Sports Festival. By the 16th festival in 1935 ssireum was no longer co-hosted, though this is not unusual because from 1920 to 1934 *all* sports competitions at the festival were co-branded under some sort of Joseon heading. The dissolution of Joseon branding did not affect the continuity of ssireum as it continued to be played every year the festival was held without interruption. There is no record of ssireum in the 17th Festival in 1936, perhaps because the Joseon Ssireum Championship¹³⁵ was held the

¹³³ 중등부:中等部: *Jungdeungbu*: High school sports team, archaic usage.

¹³⁴ 기록미상:記錄未詳: *Girok Misang*: History unknown.

¹³⁵ (전)조선씨름대회:(前)朝鮮씨름大會: (*Jeon*) *Joseon Ssireum Daehwei*: Joseon Ssireum Championship Contest.

same year at the Chosun Daily News Auditorium¹³⁶. This event was the predecessor for the current National Ssireum Champion Contest¹³⁷ and, with a few interruptions, it has run continuously since then. The 18th National Sports Festival saw the return of ssireum, though this time it was held in a different area from other sports at the Chosun Daily News Auditorium, the same location where the 1936 Joseon Ssireum Championship was held. The competition results in *70 Years* are fairly consistent over the next five decades. 1937 saw the inclusion of semi-pro teams¹³⁸ in five point competitions. Shortly after the “official” end of Japanese colonial rule, the 1947 NSF redundantly revised the category heading of “ssireum” to “men’s ssireum”¹³⁹ (no women’s ssireum results are ever mentioned) as well as the school team heading¹⁴⁰. The individual competition results include city affiliations. The semi-pro results differentiate between right-ssireum¹⁴¹ and left-ssireum¹⁴². Only first or second place participants are listed; no points or semi-finals are mentioned. The 1948 entry is similar, but adds college teams¹⁴³. The 1949 entry includes waist-ssireum¹⁴⁴ and reorders the division and subdivision headings to reflect competition level first and then team or individual competition second.

¹³⁶ 조선일보사강당:朝鮮日報社講堂: *Joseon Ilbo Sagangdang*: Chosun Daily News Auditorium.

¹³⁷ 전국씨름선수권대회:全國씨름選手權大會: *Jeonguk Ssireum Seonsugwan Daehwei*: National Ssireum Championship Contest.

¹³⁸ 일반부:一般部: *Ilbanbu*: Semi-professional sports team.

¹³⁹ 남:男: *Nam*: Men.

¹⁴⁰ 중학부:中學部: *Jung Hakbu*: Middle school team.

¹⁴¹ 바른씨름:漢字없슴: *Bareun Ssireum*: Right-side, or “proper,” ssireum with the belt around the waist and right thigh.

¹⁴² 왼씨름:漢字없슴: *Wein Ssireum*: Left-side ssireum, with the belt worn around the waist and left thigh.

¹⁴³ 대학부:大學部: *Dae Hakbu*: College team.

¹⁴⁴ 통씨름:漢字없슴: *Tong Ssireum*: Waist-ssireum, meaning that the belt is worn around the waist only; sometimes known as *heori ssireum* (허리씨름) or *ddi ssireum* (띠씨름).

The timing of ssireum's adoption into the National Sports Festival was extraordinary because it was the first non-Western sport to be included and it preceded other non-Western sports by many years. It also occurred during Japanese colonial occupation, a time when Korea culture was being vigorously extirpated. This timing alludes to a line of thought which is rarely discussed. It seems unlikely that the colonial regime would permit a potentially dangerous sport to become entrenched in the public education system. Since ssireum was allowed to do so it must have been because it was non-threatening; that is, not dangerous or perhaps even familiar to the Japanese because of superficial similarities to sumo. It may also have been allowed because of local collusion with amenable officials, something not unprecedented at the time. Whatever the reason, something differentiated ssireum from the other Korean martial arts and sports which were banned outright in those years.¹⁴⁵ This lends weight to some of the rhetoric about ssireum. It authenticates the capacity of ssireum to act as a cover for anti-colonial exchanges, a history frequently attached to the sport. It also validates ssireum's inherently peaceful traditional aesthetics, a point almost guaranteed to arise when discussing how and why the sport is enjoyed. In contrast, ssireum's unabated practice during occupation undermines the martial thread of its traditional history. Either ssireum was never a serious martial art or form of self-defense, or those elements had waned to

¹⁴⁵ I am of the opinion that ssireum is *not* dangerous as a matter of routine play, though in training I recognized a latent vocabulary of skills commonly shared by most "serious" martial arts. Balance, leverage, and core strength are all key to playing ssireum well, but the method of playing with belts limits their practical capacity to injure. Perhaps this is how ssireum was unique. Then again, in a time and place where the conflict was decided with guns and mechanized infantry *none* of the historically banned traditional martial arts in Korea should have been particularly threatening to the established order either.

undetectable levels by the 20th century.

CIVIL WAR

The Japanese occupation that began in 1910 formally ended in 1945. After national liberation the Joseon Ssireum Association changed its name to the Korean Ssireum Association¹⁴⁶ in 1946. The aim of the KSA was the restoration of traditional Korean sports and the promotion of physical activity through higher quality competition made possible by consolidating the various sporting clubs and players of the time. Immediately on the heels of their previously unknown international exposure people in Korean society were adapting and formalizing a means of engaging that exposure with a codified ethnic sport. The KSA would eventually capitalize on the globalization of Korea by going on to promote ssireum outside of Korea in hopes of internationalizing it. They also went on to engage Korean populations living abroad in order to encourage their participation. The KSA struggle to manage ssireum eventually produced a lasting impact by fixing the form of ssireum sports competition.

The political ideological conflict that consumed millions of Korean lives lasted from 1950 to 1953.¹⁴⁷ During the Korean Civil War major ssireum competition supposedly ceased. Again, *70 Years* provides a few interesting notes on this period. In 1951 the school team heading was again revised.¹⁴⁸ And 1953 saw the unusual addition

¹⁴⁶ 대한씨름협회:大韓씨름協會: *Daehan Ssireum Hyeobhei*: Korean Ssireum Association.

¹⁴⁷ The Korean War never officially ended. Rather, a cease-fire armistice was established that led to the creation of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the end of open military conflict between the DPRK and ROK.

¹⁴⁸ 고교부:高校部: *Gogyo Bu*: High school team.

of provincial competition¹⁴⁹ and rankings¹⁵⁰; it is the only time this type of competition is included - a single record of province-based national playoffs at the end of a national conflict. It was not until its end that any formal competitions began again. Starting in 1954 entries follow a simplified reporting format of high school, college, and semi-pro levels in which the latter two became competition staples; the high school category is not always included and a middle school category appears infrequently. Few changes occur over the next several decades. 1955 includes team affiliations for individual competition and lists player names for teams (five each), but this is the only instance. Some years report only team competitions. Points are occasionally reported (with fluctuating values) instead of just listing first and second place. Semi-final results are inconsistently included.

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

The creation of the ROK happened under military dictatorship and the country began to quickly rebuild. It is reported that around this time North and South Korean ssireum began to diverge, most notably in terminology and philosophy.¹⁵¹ The period of military rule in Korea was an unprecedented era of economic growth and many cultural pastimes flourished because of nationalist appropriation and improved funding. Coinciding with the economic boom of the following decades ssireum began to expand

¹⁴⁹도대항:道對抗: *Dodaehang*: Provincial competition.

¹⁵⁰순위:順位: *Sunwi*: Ranking.

¹⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, it is claimed that ROK ssireum strives for the harmonious development of mind and body while DPRK ssireum strives for a unified worker's spirit.

again. Within the first two decades after the war ssireum was officially classified as an ethnic sport and designated an intangible cultural asset under military dictatorship. Semantically, this was a reclamation of the traditional culture which had been nearly destroyed under the early, foreign directed globalization of Korea. Practically, this gave ssireum access to state level incentives and support (e.g. legal, monetary, etc.) useful for preservation and promotion that would not have been available to other sports (e.g. baseball, soccer, etc.).¹⁵²

After the war Korea's dictatorships focused heavily on foreign investment led development of the export industry; as exports grew so did GDP. The country entered an unprecedented economic upturn the likes of which have scarcely been seen since.¹⁵³ Ssireum rode this success and developed into a professional sports league in a Golden Era that lasted from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. Its relationship with mass media deepened with regular television broadcasting and the public careers of prominent retired players. Ssireum was a full-fledged industry with an academic drive for increased performance that picked apart the minutia of the sport looking for ways to maximize it. This was the height of ssireum's national status and it mirrored the optimistic feelings of Korea successfully undertaking globalization on its own terms.

In 1958 the first National Folk Arts Festival¹⁵⁴ was held and it included ssireum

¹⁵² This type of support for ssireum as a unique ethnic pastime still continues.

¹⁵³ This is not hyperbole. Korea literally went from being the poorest country in the world to one whose economy outperforms most northern European nations.

¹⁵⁴ 전국민속예술경연대회:全國民俗藝術競演大會: *Jeonguk Minsok Yesul Gyeongyeonn Daehei*: National Folk Arts Festival.

in the category of ethnic sports¹⁵⁵; in 1962 the Cultural Properties Protection Law¹⁵⁶ was enacted and designated ethnic sports like ssireum as cultural heritage (Lee 2006b). On January 16, 1967 the Gangneung Dano Festival¹⁵⁷, a regional observance of *Dano*¹⁵⁸, was designated an important intangible cultural property and included ssireum in its subset of associated activities. One of the oldest journal articles about ssireum is actually in English and includes it in a discussion of traditional sports alongside swinging, kite flying, and archery. Written by Professor Dong-Kwan Im¹⁵⁹, then Dean of Surabul College of Arts¹⁶⁰, “Traditional Sports of Korea” (1963) is characteristic of most later academic works that involve the history of ssireum. This work describes the seasonal preference for major ssireum competitions as Lunar New Year, Fall Harvest, Dano, and *Hansik*¹⁶¹. It suggests that any sandy or grassy area would have been suitable for playing.¹⁶² The article reviews a variety of Chinese terms for ssireum (without orthography), proposes the Mongolian word *sselnem* as the origin for ssireum, and discusses historical data from ancient documents. Inevitably, the connection between

¹⁵⁵ 민속놀이:民俗놀이: *Minsok Noli*: Ethnic games.

¹⁵⁶ 문화재보호법:文化財保護法: *Munhwa Jaebo Hobeob*: Cultural Properties Protection Law.

¹⁵⁷ 강릉단오제:江陵端午祭:*Gangneung Dano Je*: Gangneung Dano Festival, recognized by UNSECO in 2005.

¹⁵⁸ 단오:端午: *Dano*: Double Fifth, a holiday occurring on the fifth day of the fifth month in the traditional Korean lunisolar calendar in which shamanistic and ancestral spiritual rites were observed alongside auspicious celebratory activities.

¹⁵⁹ 임동권:漢字未詳: Dong-Kwon Im.

¹⁶⁰ 서라벌예술초급대학:徐羅伐藝術初級大學: *Seorabeol Yesul Chogeub Daehak*: Surabul College of Arts which apparently merged with Chung-Ang University (중앙대학교:中央大學校) in 1977.

¹⁶¹ 한식:寒食: *Hansik*: Spring sowing and ancestral veneration day occurring on the 105th day after the winter solstice in the Korean lunisolar calendar.

¹⁶² This is one of the few references to actually propose an alternative to sand as the traditional playing medium.

wrestling and military training appears and in this case it is quite clear that wrestling was about inculcating physical aptitude as opposed to the more commonly inferred fighting prowess.¹⁶³ The article also discusses the traditional prizes won in ssireum as usually being oxen, bags of rice, or bolts of cotton cloth.¹⁶⁴ It mentions that ssireum was a means of maintaining Korean consciousness during colonial occupation. Ssireum is also briefly compared to Japanese sumo and it is noted that sumo is conducted in a fixed radius competition area and played nearly nude whereas ssireum had neither of those limitations. Curiously, competition is described as left-hand-to-right-thigh and involving mostly arm and leg skills.¹⁶⁵ Lastly, the propriety of ssireum is emphasized by pointing out the salutation that precedes competition and the lack of bloodshed characteristic of Western sports like boxing.¹⁶⁶

Im's 1963 piece treads familiar territory for the first time. The points mentioned above are practically a staple of non-physiological research in ssireum. Unfortunately, Im was not particularly detailed in discussing the sources of his information and the article is a snapshot of ssireum at best. It is unlikely that his work was the origin of many currently commonly held ideas about ssireum for two reasons. First, Im does not appear

¹⁶³ This is actually an important point as the popular folk idea is that wrestling was a warrior's art and not simply a means of physical conditioning. I will return to this point in more detail in Chapter III, but suffice to say ssireum is hopelessly ill-suited for combat.

¹⁶⁴ While not stated in the article, the tone implies those winnings would be redistributed as is often still the case.

¹⁶⁵ Failing to describe the use of core (hip and trunk) skills in ssireum strikes me as a gross oversight, perhaps made by someone who was not familiar with playing the sport. My experience in training was that arm and leg skills were useless without proper attention to the body core. The balance and power characteristic of ssireum play extend out from the center of the body's mass.

¹⁶⁶ The "propriety through etiquette" line of reasoning is actually folk knowledge, discussed later.

to have made significant contributions to later research on ssireum in Korea; and second, Korean scholars at that time were not likely to be parsing English language journals when more readily available sources of knowledge surrounded them. The best guess about Im's work was that it was simply summarizing what was already conventional knowledge at the time. The article was published after the reformation of the Joseon Ssireum Association into the Korean Ssireum Association, the first National Folk Arts Festival, and the passage of the Cultural Properties Protection Law. None of the information he presented aside from the etymology of ssireum has come to be seen as contentious, and even that bit is not hotly debated. Instead, Im's work in the context of the scholarship which has occurred afterwards indicates that the basic party line of ssireum seems to have been in place over fifty years ago, though the best ways to perform that line were not settled. Much of the activity in the industry starting at this time would focus on the best ways to represent ssireum's essential values while commodifying it for popular consumption. The invention of ssireum was intensifying.

Looking again at *70 Years*, there was still negotiation in how to play or represent national ssireum. From 1965 to 1985 team names and class divisions flip-flop between Sino-Korean characters and the Korean alphabet. In 1983 the 64th festival marks the introduction of three staggered weight classes based on 10kg increments.¹⁶⁷ In 1984 the weight class names remain the same but the kilogram increments are dropped. Weight

¹⁶⁷ These are light weight (경량급:輕量級: *gyeonglyanggeub*) at less than 70kg, middle weight (중량급:重量級: *jungryanggeub*) between 70-80kg, and free-weight (무제한급:無制限級: *mujehangeub*) meaning over 80kg.

classes were consistent until 1987 when they were expanded from three to five at the high school level.¹⁶⁸ In 1988 all levels of play used the five new weight classes. But in the final entry, the 70th festival in 1989, there was only high school, college, and semi-pro team play with no weight classes mentioned. All were decided by the best four out of six rounds.

The spread of ssireum throughout Korea as a national sport was a clearly a collaborative event between civic officials, athletic sponsors, and public education. It is perhaps because of this collaborative nature that ssireum was open to so much revision. Over time ssireum was pared down and eventually coalesced into a relatively stable pattern of performance, but everything from tournament organization style, competition levels, weight classes, rules, and naming conventions was subject to renegotiation at some point. Ssireum is malleable and may have persisted because of this, though ironically commodification seems to have been (and is) the overarching goal. It is likely that much of the revision going on in this period was connected to association activity as well as the “informed” debate appearing in the decade or so after Im’s article. Academic leadership approaches to ssireum diverged into two general lines of inquiry - historiographic and kinesiology. Some straddled the line between the two trends (Lee 1970), but most were either squarely focused on history (In 1977; Lee 1974; Na 1972) or kinesiology (Kang 1976; Lee 1975; Park 1977). As the ssireum industry boomed during

¹⁶⁸ These are featherweight (소장급:少壯級: *sojanggeub*) at 65kg and under, lightweight (청장급:靑壯級: *cheongjanggeub*) at 70kg, welterweight (용사급:勇士級: *yongsageub*) at 75kg, middleweight (역사급:力士級: *yeokskgeup*) at 80kg, and heavyweight (장사급:壯士級: *jangsageub*) at 80.1kg and over.

the 1980s only a few works continued to look at history (No 1984; Song 1982; Yu 1984) while the majority treated ssireum as a full-fledged sports topic.¹⁶⁹ The 1990s maintained this trend between history¹⁷⁰ and sport¹⁷¹.

In 1972 the first televised ssireum competition, the KBS-Cup National Grand Championship¹⁷², was held by Korean Broadcasting System¹⁷³ and the KSA over the course of three days at the Jangchung Gymnasium¹⁷⁴. Because the event attracted more than 10,000 spectators the MC at the time, Gyu-Hang Lee¹⁷⁵, was convinced that ssireum would be successful with Korean audiences. Lee joined with ssireum expert Tae-Seong Kim¹⁷⁶ to convince KBS producer Jae-Gil Kim¹⁷⁷ to include ssireum in the station's broadcast schedule.

An agreement was reached and ssireum would be irregularly broadcast on KBS

¹⁶⁹ For examples of the latter, see: Chang (1985); Choi (1987); Hong (1988); Jang (1984); Kim (1986a); Kim (1988); Kim and Han (1988); Kim (1986b); Lee, Lim, and Kim (1985); Lee and Kim (1988); Lee (1982, 1988); Park (1985); and Park (1984).

¹⁷⁰ See: Gu (1996); Han (1999); Hong (1997a); Hong and Jeong (1993); Hong, Jeong, and Lim (1992); Jeong (1999); Jeong (1996); Kim (1990); Kim (1993b); and Lee (1993).

¹⁷¹ See: Go (1997); Ha and Choi (1996); Ha and Kim (1995); Hong, Lee, and Park (1999); Hong (1997a); Hong and Chang (1995); Hong and Jeong (1991, 1996); Hong, Lee, and Lee (1998); Hong, Shin, and Jeong (1997); Jo (1999); Kim (1997); Kim, Yu, and Kim (1997); Kim, Han, and No (1999); Kwak et al. (1994); Kwan and Park (1998); Lee, Park, and Park (1999); Lee and Lee (1999); Park (1993, 1998); Park, Jeong, and Park (1993); Seong, Lee, and Lee (1998); and Yang, Hwang, and Yu (1999).

¹⁷² KBS 배쟁탈전국경사씨름대회:KBS 培爭奪全國壯士씨름大會: KBS-Cup National Grand Championship.

¹⁷³ 한국방송:韓國放送: *Hanguk Bangsong*: KBS, Korean Broadcasting System.

¹⁷⁴ 장충체육관:獎忠體育館: *Jangchung Cheyukkwan*: Jangchung Gymnasium.

¹⁷⁵ 이규항:漢字未詳: Mr. Gyu-Hang Lee, the MC for the first televised ssireum competition in Korea who was instrumental in getting KBS to sponsor ssireum; Lee would go on to MC ssireum for over 30 years.

¹⁷⁶ 김태성:漢字未詳: Mr. Tae-Seong Kim, a ssireum expert and FSC founder who worked with Gyu-Hang Lee to keep ssireum televised on KBS.

¹⁷⁷ 김재길:漢字未詳: Mr. Jae-Gil Kim, a producer at KBS who worked with Gyu-Hang Lee and Tae-Seong Kim to establish ssireum in the network's lineup.

for the next nine years as there was no regular competition season or schedule at the time. The incipient desire to promote and manage competitions for this purpose gave birth to the first professional ssireum association in Korea, the Folk Ssireum Committee¹⁷⁸, headed by Jae-Gil Kim, Tae-Seong Kim, Hae-Su Kim¹⁷⁹, and Dong-Su Kim¹⁸⁰ with the backing of KBS. The birth of the FSC came at a time when student and amateur sport participation in general were on the rise and essentially divided sport ssireum into professional and amateur levels. In April, 1982 they formally organized and in March, 1983 held their first organized event. One month after that in April 13, 1983 they held the Ssireum Grandmaster Competition¹⁸¹ also in Jangchung Gymnasium. The event drew an enormous crowd of spectators and was reported to be the most widely viewed sporting event ever in Korea though the television ratings data have been lost to time.

The advent of the FSC and its actions by and large set the tone for ssireum competition as sport through cumulative changes. Ssireum was once played primarily in sand and while the tradition at one point gave way to playing upon gym mats, sand eventually returned as the preferred medium of play. The ring size for play expanded from 7m to 9m and the rules changed to prevent winning by shoving or pushing a player out of bounds; toppling, making an opponent's body above the knee touch the ground, became the only way to win. The previously league-based method of competition was

¹⁷⁸ 민속씨름위원회:民俗씨름委員會: *Minsok Ssireum Wiwonhei*: Folk Ssireum Committee, FSC.

¹⁷⁹ 김해수:漢字未詳: Mr. Hae-Su Kim, one of the founders of the FSC.

¹⁸⁰ 김동수:漢字未詳: Mr. Dong-Su Kim, one of the founders of the FSC.

¹⁸¹ 통일천하장사씨름대회:統一天下壯士씨름大會: *Tongil Cheonha Jangsa Ssireum Daehei*: Unified Ssireum Grandmaster Competition.

replaced with tournament play in which the best two out of three rounds determined a match winner. The major and minor divisions in professional play were named Blue Dragon¹⁸² and White Tiger¹⁸³, respectively. These divisions were subdivided to include four weight classes named after various Korean mountains considered to be sacred; from lightest to heaviest they were *Taebaek*¹⁸⁴, *Geumgang*¹⁸⁵, *Hanla*¹⁸⁶, and *Baekdu*¹⁸⁷ (see Table 11). Thus between the two divisions and four weight classes there were eight positions open for annual championships. Early in professional competition player size skewed towards the low end; in the first Grandmaster Championship mentioned above there were 312 total participants: 180 Taebaek, 73 Geumgang, 35 Hanla, and 24 Baekdu.

Table 11 - Weight Divisions in the Folk Ssireum Committee

Division Name	Weight Range in Kilograms	Weight Range in Pounds
Taebaek	75.9kg or less	<i>165lbs or less</i>
Geumgang	76kg to 85.9kg	<i>166lbs to 187lbs</i>
Hanla	86kg to 95.9kg	<i>188lbs to 209lbs</i>
Baekdu	96kg or more	<i>210lbs or more</i>
Note: The original units were in kilograms; <i>pounds are approximate.</i>		

¹⁸² 청룡:靑龍: *Cheong Lyong*: Blue Dragon, the major division in professional ssireum.

¹⁸³ 백호:白虎: *Baek Ho*: White Tiger, the minor division in professional ssireum.

¹⁸⁴ 태백 from 태백산:太白山: *Taebaek*: FSC weight division 75.9kg or less, named after the Taebaek Mountain Range which are the main ridge of Korea, extending along the east coast from North to South Korea.

¹⁸⁵ 금강 from 금강산:錦江山: *Geumgang*: FSC weight division 75-85.9kg, named after Mount Geumgang (part of the Taebaek Mountain Range) in North Korea.

¹⁸⁶ 한라 from 한라산:漢拏山: *Hanla*: FSC weight division 86-95.9kg, named after Mount Hanla, a shield volcano on Jeju Island.

¹⁸⁷ 백두 from 백두산:白頭山: *Baedu*: FSC weight division 96kg or more, named after Mount Baekdu along the border between North Korea and China, considered the sacred birthplace of the Goguryeo civilization.

Table 12 - Weight Classes in the Korean Ssireum Association

Division Name	Elementary School	Middle School	High School	University, Semi-Pro
Gyeongjang	40kg or less <i>88lbs or less</i>	60kg or less <i>132lbs or less</i>	70kg or less <i>154lbs or less</i>	75kg or less <i>165lbs or less</i>
Sojang	45kg or less <i>99lbs or less</i>	65kg or less <i>143lbs or less</i>	75kg or less <i>165lbs or less</i>	80kg or less <i>176lbs or less</i>
Cheonjang	50kg or less <i>110lbs or less</i>	70kg or less <i>154lbs or less</i>	80kg or less <i>176lbs or less</i>	85kg or less <i>187lbs or less</i>
Yongjang	55kg or less <i>121lbs or less</i>	75kg or less <i>165lbs or less</i>	85kg or less <i>187lbs or less</i>	90kg or less <i>198lbs or less</i>
Yongsa	60kg or less <i>132lbs or less</i>	80kg or less <i>176lbs or less</i>	90kg or less <i>198lbs or less</i>	95kg or less <i>209lbs or less</i>
Yeoksa	70kg or less <i>154lbs or less</i>	90kg or less <i>198lbs or less</i>	100kg or less <i>220lbs or less</i>	105kg or less <i>231lbs or less</i>
Jangsa	70.1kg or more <i>155lbs or more</i>	90.1kg or more <i>199lbs or more</i>	100.1kg or more <i>221lbs or more</i>	105.1kg or more <i>232lbs or more</i>
Note: Players could compete in their own weight division or higher, but not in divisions lower than their weight; teams were limited to one player and one substitute for each division, but were not required to fill all divisions. The original units were in kilograms; <i>pounds are approximate</i> .				

The Korean Ssireum Association rules were largely in-line with those of the FSC, but their amateur competition and weight divisions were more nuanced. The KSA separated competition into four levels: elementary school, middle school, high school, and university/semi-pro.

They also sorted weight classes into seven graduated levels based on either 5 or 10kg increments. From lightest to heaviest, the division names were *gyeongjang*¹⁸⁸,

¹⁸⁸ 경장:輕壯: *Gyeongjang*: First of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

*sojang*¹⁸⁹, *cheonjang*¹⁹⁰, *yongjang*¹⁹¹, *yongsa*¹⁹², *yeoksa*¹⁹³, and *jangsa*¹⁹⁴ (see Table 12).

Players were able to compete in their own weight division or higher, but not in weight divisions lower than their own weight. Teams were limited to one player and one substitute for each weight division, but were not required to fill all divisions. The KSA also sponsored their own annual championships at numerous levels of play.

Less than a year after its formation the Folk Ssireum Committee combined with the KSA in September, 1983 for the purpose of promoting professional ssireum. A few years later in December, 1985 the KSA decided to make the FSC independent and in 1986 the latter essentially resumed its activities without the KSA. Then in December, 1990 the KSA split into two organizations - one of which retained the original Korean Ssireum Association moniker and the latter assuming the almost identical title of Korea Ssireum Association¹⁹⁵.¹⁹⁶ In January, 1991 the Korea Ssireum Association took control of and replaced the Folk Ssireum Committee.

¹⁸⁹ 소장:少壯: *Sojang*: Second of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹⁰ 천장:靑壯: *Cheonjang*: Third of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹¹ 용장:勇壯: *Yongjang*: Fourth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹² 용사:勇士: *Yongsa*: Fifth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹³ 역사:力士: *Yeoksa*: Sixth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹⁴ 장사:壯士: *Jangsa*: Seventh of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.

¹⁹⁵ 한국씨름협회:韓國씨름協會: *Hanguk Ssireum Hyeobhei*: Korea Ssireum Association.

¹⁹⁶ The similarities between the Korean Ssireum Association and Korea Ssireum Association titles stems from their original usage in Korean. The two uses different pairs of Chinese characters which both commonly refer to their nation's proper name. This is roughly analogous to finding two wrestling associations in the United States of America named United States Wrestling Association and American Wrestling Association. These naming conventions were verified as confusing (and slightly unoriginal) by my colleagues who were not intimately familiar with the histories of the various ssireum associations in Korea.

One month later in February, 1991 the Korea Folk Ssireum Association¹⁹⁷ was formed and essentially emulated activities that would have been previously run by the subsumed FSC. After its formation the KFSA was almost immediately renamed the Korea Ssireum Federation¹⁹⁸ and was dedicated to using ssireum for the preservation of ethnic Korean heritage, enhancement of national unity, promotion of physical activity, and international elevation of Korean sports. The KSF opened an annual series of competitions including Lunar New Year Champion¹⁹⁹, Fall Harvest Champion²⁰⁰, Grandmaster Champion, regular competitions, and the occasional special expo or international event. With the exception of the Grandmaster Champion every weight division would award an annual champion a cash purse of around \$10,000. The Grandmaster Championship combined the Geumgang and Hanla weight divisions to determine a single champion who would receive around \$30,000. At the end of a season at the Grandmaster Championship the 16 top ranked players for the season along with an additional 16 coach-nominated players (two from each team) would compete for the title of grandmaster²⁰¹ and an award of around \$100,000.

The majority of the Korea Ssireum Federation's efforts were in reality attempts to seize control of amateur ssireum events from the KSA. Despite a boom in the industry, the KSF would eventually prove unable to wrest power away from the KSA. In general,

¹⁹⁷ 한국민속씨름협회:韓國民俗씨름協會: *Hanguk Minsok Ssireum Hyeobhei*: Korea Folk Ssireum Association.

¹⁹⁸ 한국씨름연맹:韓國씨름聯盟: *Hanguk Ssireum Yeonmaeng*: Korea Ssireum Federation.

¹⁹⁹ 설날장사:설날壯士: *Seollal Jangsa*: Lunar New Year Champion.

²⁰⁰ 추석장사:秋夕壯士: *Chuseok Jangsa*: Fall Harvest Champion.

²⁰¹ 천하장사:天下壯士: *Cheonha Jangsa*: Grandmaster.

ssireum management changed structure frequently because of ideological divides over how the sport should be enacted, personality conflicts and divergent social networks among leadership, and competition over the lucrative aspects (both legitimate and illicit) inherent to any sport league. Regardless of the shifting landscape of ssireum management the number of professional teams in the nation grew as they were vanity projects sponsored by the highly solvent *jaebeol*²⁰² business giants such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK. As the nation rapidly modernized and grew in GDP ssireum teams prospered; it was a status symbol to maintain one and growing profits opened up the number of corporations that could afford to do so. The late 80s and early 90s were the golden era of professional ssireum and are fondly recalled by people who were alive at the time to see it. No doubt this owes much to ssireum's presence in popular media being cemented at that time.

There are two basic ways ssireum moves about through popular media. First, there is the “hard” publication or broadcast of material focusing on ssireum. This includes the aforementioned televising of ssireum competitions, reporting of competition results in the newspaper, and the occasional commentary on the sport. The second type of circulation is the “soft” inclusion of ssireum as a backdrop in preexisting genres. This

²⁰² 재벌:財閥: *Jaebeol*: A type of Korean “business family” conglomerate. The jaebeol originated in post-war ROK when some businessmen and their families took control of former Japanese assets in the country and then worked in collusion with the early military dictatorships to rapidly modernize Korean industries. Jaebeol made extensive use of foreign technology and aid in their growth. The “Big Four” contemporary jaebeol of Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK are essentially family-owned multinational corporate associations that monopolize lucrative industries in Korea and abroad.

covers works like *Grandmaster Madonna*²⁰³, *Bucolic Magpie*²⁰⁴, various children's books²⁰⁵, and celebrity personalities. While seeing ethnically identifiable material in fictional narratives is hardly unusual, the inclusion of ssireum as a key component in entertainment profiles is interesting.

Starting in the 1980s ssireum champions became national celebrities, some with enduring effect. For example, the face of former grandmaster champion Man-Gi Lee²⁰⁶ is still instantly recognizable to most Koreans. Starting with the first Grandmaster Championship in 1983, Lee went on the claim the title an additional nine times before being famously defeated in 1989 by Ho-Dong Kang²⁰⁷. Lee's famously powerful physique and media saturation gave birth to the often repeated claim that he could be identified by merely a glimpse of his legendary calf muscles. Lee won numerous national competitions and was the face of ssireum during its golden era. After retirement he completed a graduate degree and was appointed to the faculty at Inje University²⁰⁸ as

²⁰³ 천하장사마돈나:天下壯士마돈나: *Cheonha Jangsa Madonna: Grandmaster Madonna* (official English title is *Like a Virgin*), a 2006 film about a fictional transgendered young man who enters a ssireum competition to win money for a sex reassignment surgery.

²⁰⁴ 뿌사리 까치:漢字없슴: *Bbusari Ggachi: Bucolic Magpie*, a comic book centered around a young ssireum player which started in 1994 and ran for at least nine issues; the title comes from a regional expression used to describe the tranquil power of cattle as well as the good fortune that magpie's represent.

²⁰⁵ For example, *The Mice That Played Ssireum* (Lee 1992), *Ssireum* (Kim and Lee 2007), and *How About a Round of Ssireum?* (Jeong and Yun 2007). All are children's picture books which use ssireum as an ethnic, traditionalized setting for otherwise unrelated moral education. There is nothing particularly ethnic about the message, "Be kind," but placing it within the context of traditional wrestling gives it a tangible, cultural gravitas.

²⁰⁶ 이만기:李萬基: Mr. Man-Gi Lee, one of the most famous wrestlers from the golden era of modern ssireum he won the Grandmaster Championship a total of ten times.

²⁰⁷ 강호동:姜鎬童: Mr. Ho-Dong Gang, a former ssireum player and Grandmaster, now one of the most popular (and prolific) MC personalities in Korean television.

²⁰⁸ 인제대학교:麟蹄大學校: *Inje Dae Hakkyo*: Inje University.

a professor. Even after becoming a professor Lee maintained a high public profile and continued to appear on television.

The most famous former wrestler in Korea was no doubt Kang, Lee's usurper. Kang did not have a particularly successful early career in pro-ssireum. But in 1989 Kang entered the Grandmaster Championship unseeded and defeated Lee in a monumental upset.²⁰⁹ Kang went on to take the title another four times before retiring from wrestling to pursue a media career as an MC and comedian. To date Kang has appeared in over twenty television shows, typically either talk show or variety show formats. At the time of this writing he was hosting four separate primetime programs split between three television networks.²¹⁰ Kang also engaged in numerous product endorsements as well. Including syndicated or rebroadcast material, Kang's media presence is inestimable.²¹¹ An essential part of his persona is his former career as a pro-ssireum wrestler. Kang's broad physical presence and personal history contributed substantially to the national (sub)consciousness of ssireum in Korea.

Kang was not ssireum, yet he *was*. This is the best way to explain how hard and soft popular media contribute to knowledge about ssireum. The numbers, dates, and

²⁰⁹ As mentioned earlier in the chapter, elimination tournaments will seed favored players across starting brackets in order to prevent them from knocking each other out too early in a competition and setting up lopsided semi-finals. The idea is to extend the excitement of a competition by keeping the most favored players (or teams) apart for as long as possible while still maintaining the thrilling prospect of a wildcard or underdog upending everyone's expectations. Part of seeding involves the preliminary ranking of players. Being unseeded means having a low chance to win. It is not a compliment.

²¹⁰ For the curious, these shows are Happy Sunday, 1 Night 2 Days (해피 선데이: 1 박 2 일) on KBS, Golden Fishery (황금어장) on MBC, and Star King (스타킹) and Strong Heart (강심장) on SBS.

²¹¹ Actually, during fieldwork it felt omnipresent. Television, print media, billboards, and assorted products were perpetually emblazoned with Kang's unmistakable, effervescent grin. It felt impossible to consume popular media without being exposed to him.

commentary of hard media were interwoven with the public faces of ssireum that constituted soft media. The two cross-referenced and reinforced one another within the broadest and most consumable of public domains. Not all Koreans were versed in ssireum history or performance, but almost all of them had enough exposure to it that it still came across as familiar and belonging to the people.

IMF CRISIS AND THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Association documents and sources such as *70 Years* show unequivocally that ssireum was in a unique place for appropriation as an invented tradition at the end of Korea's pre-modern history. The Festival was an effort rooted in both novel political nationalism and nascent athletic fervor. It was also created in a time of unprecedented contact with the outside world and renegotiation of the boundaries of Koreanness. Ssireum was first among its peers to appear in the venue and history left it well suited for the role of maintaining the continuity of an ethnic identity. As discussed above, an increasing amount of attention after liberation was given to the presentation and consumption of ssireum. The transition to televised national sport was rapid and ssireum became an important enough commodity that associations began battling for control over it. Ssireum had become an identity suggesting indomitable resistance, peacefulness, *communitas*, and economic strength. This was not to last.

In 1992 Korea democratically elected its first non-military president. The effervescence of newfound political freedoms was not to last long. The Asian financial crisis that started in Thailand in 1997 quickly spread to Korea and collapsed the nation's

banking system.²¹² The ensuing International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis eliminated the financial tidal wave of corporate affluence that enabled ssireum to expand. Korean Broadcasting System withdrew all of its financial support for ssireum. In the wake of the IMF crisis all professional ssireum teams eventually disbanded. National and regional events were also scaled back. A rhetoric of pessimism has taken hold. Ssireum, like Korea, was in decline and serious efforts were required to reverse those fortunes.

Studies focused on critiquing why the sport failed and how it could be restored, though by and large most work still focused on either history²¹³ or sport²¹⁴. Interestingly, one work published at the time of the 1997 IMF crisis questioned the philosophical distinction between ssireum as martial art versus sport and concluded that a sense of martial purposefulness would better serve the future of ssireum sporting events (Hong 1997b). One of the rare works about ssireum in English comes from 1998 (Yu and Burton) and suggests the use of ssireum as a form of exercise among handicapped persons because the sport is simple and pleasurable.²¹⁵ At least one work looked at the history of ssireum in terms of economic development (Choi, et al. 2001) while another suggested a means for revitalizing ssireum based on the success of sumo in Japan (Lee 2004).

²¹² In Korea this is commonly called the IMF Crisis.

²¹³ See: Chang (2000); Chung and Ji (2000); Hong, Kim, and Yu (2000); Hong, Lee, and Lee (2001); Jeong (2003); Kim (2009); and Kim (2003).

²¹⁴ See: Choi (2004); Hong, Jang, and Kim (2004); Huh (2004, 2008); Hwang (2002); Kim, Park, and Kim (2000); Kim (2002); Kim (2003); Kim and Kim (2001); Kim and Woo (2001); Kim et al. (2000); Lee and Choi (2003); Park and Lee (2002); Ryu (2004); Shin et al. (2003); Song (2003); and Yu et al. (2002).

²¹⁵ Indeed, this concise article makes a persuasive, and by my counts accurate, case for the strongest advantages ssireum possesses as a sport. It is simple and fun. Nearly *anyone* can play ssireum - even blind persons - and it may be one of the most accessible types of physical competition in existence.

Several high profile ssireum players abandoned the sport for different careers outside of wrestling. Former grandmaster champions Hong-Man Choi²¹⁶ and Tae-Hyun Lee²¹⁷ infamously made headlines when they retired from ssireum and entered international mixed martial arts careers. Choi was memorable because of his unique stature as he stood over seven feet tall and weighed well over 300lbs. Lee was famous because he won close to 500 ssireum matches, the best overall professional record in the nation, and also because he earned a PhD in between athletic careers. The controversial career paths of both athletes helped sound the death knell of ssireum for the public. It was widely seen as an unpatriotic, if not depressing, state of affairs when some of the most important players in the sport were abandoning it in favor of modern international pursuits. Neither player did particularly well in MMA competitions, though Lee made headlines a second time when he returned to ssireum.

Conventional knowledge suggested the decline was because ssireum was out of touch and no longer reflecting the needs of a modernized Korean populace, that players had become too large and competition too boring, and that the nation's desire for Western sports was outcompeting it. It was difficult to attract players because they couldn't earn a living without professional league wages and many abandoned the sport for other athletic careers. No one wanted their children to become players, not even people involved with the sport, because advanced education was again the only way to

²¹⁶ 최홍만:崔洪萬: Mr. Hong-Man Choi, an enormous ssireum wrestler who retired to enter MMA competitions.

²¹⁷ 이태현:漢字未詳: Mr. Tae-Hyun Lee, an outstanding ssireum player who retired, earned a PhD, dabbled in MMAs, and later returned to ssireum.

get ahead in life. Yet semi-pro and collegiate leagues grew in prominence and long term goals were set on exporting ssireum to countries outside of Korea with an Olympic future in mind. Ssireum was again low status.

The change in status affected associations as well and essentially restructured ssireum politics by proxy. The activities of the Korea Ssireum Federation were severely weakened by the IMF crisis and the ensuing team losses. By 2005 the KSF had been forced to open up their competitions to semi-pro teams in order to maintain enough participation to stay active. Involving semi-pro teams created a conflict with the Korean Ssireum Association as the KSA oversaw all semi-pro activity. In October, 2006 the Korean Ssireum Association created a new Folk Ssireum Committee²¹⁸ for the purpose of overseeing the semi-pro²¹⁹ teams participating in the KSF. The new FSC was headed by Chang-Sik Choi²²⁰, who was also then president of the KSA. The FSC was up and running by 2007 and quickly wrested control of nearly all of the Federation's resources. The FSC took over the Lunar New Year Championship, the Fall Harvest Championship, and the Dangjin Championship²²¹. In retaliation the KSF sought to legally bar the new FSC from using their existing weight division format (see Table 13). No decision was

²¹⁸ 민속씨름위원회:民俗씨름委員會: *Minsok Ssireum Euiwonhei*: Folk Ssireum Committee. Unrelated to the former organization with the same name, this incarnation was formed as subsection of the Korean Ssireum Association (대한씨름협회) and was active from late 2007 to early 2009.

²¹⁹ In semi-pro teams players are paid reduced salaries, akin to minor league sports in the United States. In light of the collapse of the professional league the designation semi-pro did not appear appropriate since they had become the only paid ssireum teams. Still, the usage persisted, perhaps testifying to the hopes that the professional league would one day be rebuilt.

²²⁰ 최창식:漢字未詳: Mr. Chan-Sik Choi, the 38th president of the KSA.

²²¹ 당진장사:唐津壯士: *Dangjin Jangsa*: Dangjin (city) Champion.

ever reached as Choi opted to change the names of the weight divisions. Taebaek became White Horse²²², Geumgang became Colossus (Elephant)²²³, Hanla became White Tiger²²⁴, and Baekdu became Blue Dragon²²⁵. In 2008 the Hyeondae Heavy Industries Championship seeded from the KSF to the FSC and there was simply no work left the Federation could perform. The KSF basically ceased to exist.

Table 13 - Weight Division Changes (During the KSA/FSC Takeover of the KSF Activities between 2007 and 2009)

Weight (Kg)	Weight (Lbs)	Old KSF	FSC Revision	Current KSF
80kg or less	<i>176lbs or less</i>	Taebaek	White Horse	Taebaek
80.1-90kg	<i>177-198lbs</i>	Geumgang	Elephant	Geumgang
90.1-105kg	<i>199-231lbs</i>	Hanla	White Tiger	Hanla
105.1kg or more	<i>232lbs or more</i>	Baekdu	Blue Dragon	Baekdu
Note: Original units are in kilograms; <i>pounds are approximate</i> . Divisions are under discussion for possible revision again as recently as February, 2010.				

After the KSA completely subsumed the Federation through the FSC it voted to dissolved the Committee in April, 2009. Weight division names also reverted back to their former Federation designations though this time under the control of the Association. Also in 2009 the KSA elected its 39th president, Tae-Jeong Choi²²⁶, after a long and acrimonious contestation of the election results. The KSA then established a

²²² 백마:白馬: *Baek Ma*: White Horse, first of four FSC weight classes.

²²³ 거상:巨象: *Geosang*: Elephant, second of four FSC weight classes.

²²⁴ 백호:白虎: *Baek Ho*: White Tiger, third of four FSC weight classes; previously minor division pro-ssireum.

²²⁵ 청룡:靑龍: *Cheon Lyong*: Blue Dragon, fourth of four FSC weight classes; previously major division pro-ssireum.

²²⁶ 최태정:漢字未詳: Mr. Tae-Jeong Choi, the 39th president of the KSA.

committee for addressing the crisis of decline ssireum faced. The committee was divided into six parts according to task: 1) competition skills research; 2) educational training; 3) rank licensing; 4) cooperative exchanges; 5) policy administration; and 6) promotion and scholarship. A quarterly newsletter, *Ssireum Foundation*²²⁷, was also created. The objective of these efforts was to adapt and develop ssireum in order to re-popularize the sport in Korea and abroad. Presently KSA enterprises are divided into several categories: 1) establishing basic rules and guidelines for ssireum (through collaboration with the Korean Amateur Sports Association²²⁸); 2) hosting and participating in international tournaments; 3) creating branch offices; 4) administering other ssireum associations; 5) organizing and supervising ssireum competitions; 6) researching and developing ssireum playing skills; 7) recruiting and training ssireum players; 8) studying competition equipment and administration; 9) correcting premature competition statistics; and 10) creating propaganda for the benefit of ssireum (i.e. advertising). As of 2010 all ssireum competitions were controlled directly by the KSA.

In early 2009 the World Ssireum Federation²²⁹ was formed with the goal of

²²⁷ 씨름터: 씨름憵: *Ssireum Teo*: Ssireum Foundation, a quarterly newsletter about ssireum published by the KSA starting in 2009.

²²⁸ 대한체육회: 大韓體育會: *Daehan Cheyukhei*: Korean Amateur Sports Association.

²²⁹ 세계씨름연맹: 世界씨름聯盟: *Segye Ssireum Yeonmaeng*: World Ssireum Federation, WSF, started in 2009 with the goal of internationalizing ssireum.

globalizing ssireum.²³⁰ It is a very focused mission; the first two characters in the title of the WSF can alternately be read as “global”. Their articles of incorporation stated, “The purpose of this federation is to contribute to human beings’ mutual prosperity by living in and dispersing the spirit of ssireum which embodies the ideals of a gentleman and a respect for logic.” The activities of the WSF are divided into nine types of projects: 1) world cup championships; 2) student and youth championships; 3) regional championships; 4) international exhibition games; 5) international referee seminars and examinations; 6) international coach training seminars; 7) studies for the global dispersal and technical development of ssireum; 8) publishing ssireum related periodicals; and 9) other projects needed to accomplish the globalization of ssireum. Their most discrete goal is the establishment of ssireum as an Olympic sport.

The aim of the WSF’s dispersal of ssireum is literally the largest unit possible and their description of “regional” championships could be understood to mean “continental”. They have proposed the establishment of affiliated ssireum associations such as the Asian Ssireum Federation (ASF), Pan American Ssireum Federation (PASF), European Ssireum Federation (ESF), and the African Ssireum Federation (ASF). It is too

²³⁰ During fieldwork I was serendipitously consulted by the WSF in the creation of their articles of incorporation and directly advised them on the translation of those articles into English. While I was not responsible for the formation of the WSF the similarity of our thoughts regarding ssireum and their timing were oddly synchronous. I revised their competition rules as well. Between this experience and the other association articles I am confident in asserting that the rhetoric of cultural nationalism and sport in ssireum are now inextricable. There is an inescapable sense that ssireum is a fully matured industry in Korea. While the assumption seems to have always been that ssireum *is* Korean culture the assumption now, from the vantage point of global leadership, is that the rest of the world is ready to adopt it. It may be a presumptuous view, but they might be right in the long run. Ssireum has quite a few things going for it. Above all, it is cheap fun anyone can enjoy.

early to know how well and for how long they can sustain their operations, but as of 2010 they had a fully built ssireum training facilities and teams in Ghana, Togo, and Benin.²³¹ With several hundred people on those rosters they had the two day long African Ssireum Championship planned for December 18, 2010 in Cotonou. Pan American, Asian, and World Championships were also on their roster. These competitions were set on either annual or two year cycles.

The most important point about the WSF in the scope of this dissertation is that it was the only organization with an aim of developing ssireum from the outside in, a further indication of how the maintenance of Koreanness has adapted to the ways in which Koreans are engaging outsiders. Specifically, this shows the appropriation of Neoliberal market thinking in ssireum's value system - that the sport can be commodified, exported, and established abroad as ethnic heritage because its values are universally appreciable. The attitude may be presumptuous and somewhat contradictory (can something be ethnic and universal at the same time?), but it underscores a belief in the equalizing power of sports to communicate between cultures. Anyone can learn to play ssireum. Can anyone appreciate the quintessential Korean aesthetics of such a performance? The WSF seems to think so.²³²

²³¹ I never received a detailed explanation of why the WSF started operations in Africa, but people outside the organization floated a few guesses: they wanted to start small (conservative); lower capital risk (economic); Korean missionaries were already located there (social network); or the WSF was eyeing a takeover of amateur associations with other regional contacts (strategic hostility).

²³² Taekwondo's proliferation sets a precedent, but there are key differences between it and ssireum. Taekwondo received dictatorial military endorsements and support, was intrinsically commodified at birth, and represents different values. Ssireum has experienced a more grassroots growth and has commodified slowly and with a fundamentally different perspective on sport. Taekwondo is about individual self-defense and martial spirit; ssireum is about play and communitas.

Another point that will be touched on later is the judicious inclusion of secondary school students within the scope of WSF operations.

COLLEGIATE LEAGUE

The last primary source covered here are the association documents of the Korean University Ssireum Federation²³³. Founded in 2003 in the wake of professional ssireum's collapse, the KUSF's mission is threefold: 1) preserving Korea's traditional mentality; 2) developing Korean people's health; and 3) developing ssireum. The first two objectives are more easily discussed later as they involve in no small part a serious enactment of ideals. The third objective is important here because it contributes strongly to knowledge of ssireum.

Specifically, the third objective is, in practice, synonymous with popularizing ssireum. Most of the deliberate adjustments to university regulations tend to focus on that aim. The design of competition motifs and spatial arrangements were heavily deliberated in order to appeal at the broadest level possible - one which evoked both traditional and contemporary aesthetics. Weight classes, team composition, and competition order were designed to emphasize player's skills in attempts to improve the

²³³ 대한씨름연맹: 大韓씨름聯盟: *Daehan Ssireum Yeonmaeng*: Korean University Ssireum Federation, founded in 2003 to oversee all university ssireum events; currently part of the Korean Ssireum Association. The first president was Mr. Seong-Ryul Kim (김성률) of Gyeongnam University (경남대학교) who governed until his death in 2004. The second president was Mr. Byeong-Ju Nam (남병주) of Boguk Construction who governed from April, 2004 to January, 2009. The third president was Mr. Ki-Yeong Eum (엄기영) who began governing in July, 2009. The universities and teams represented in the KUSF are discussed in Chapter III.

visual-kinetic quality of the game and audience excitement.²³⁴ Penalties were added to reduce the amount of time players spend jockeying for advantageous handgrips when setting up a round. The configuration of the competition space and use of an inflatable buffer zone are also the product of these regulations. Accessory events, which were intercut with actual competition, were relatively adaptable because they were the product of committee decisions as opposed to formalized regulation. Thus the sing-alongs, cheerleading dances, guest artist performances, and prize raffles that were interspersed in university ssireum events had a larger range of variation than the competitions themselves.

The KUSF partnered with the cable television channel MBC-ESPN to televise university competitions. The winter KUSF season which runs from November to February is shown on MBC-ESPN and includes six competitions along with a grand finale of individual and team championship competition. In addition to the competitions themselves, MBC-ESPN also broadcasts interviews with coaches and players during an event in order to further connect with the audience. Star players are frequently highlighted and this is part of the KUSF's attempt to engage audiences with them in a kind of fan-club context. Much like any other televised sport, ssireum has its own set of MCs and commentators, most of whom were previously involved in the sport when the professional league was extant. The timing and execution of events in a televised

²³⁴ A persistent criticism which has grown over time is that the sport favors larger players and those players rely more on mass than skill for their victories. I once heard it plainly stated, "Watching fat players go at it is boring". The sentiment is easy to appreciate after one has watched a pair of men with a combined weight of more than 600lbs attempt to out-leverage one another a few times. It is laborious.

university ssireum competition are set according to the broadcast agreement with MBC-ESPN, though not all university events during the winter season are televised. For example, one competition period may last four days and only the final two days are actually broadcast. While specific demographic data was not available, production team members indicated that viewership for university ssireum was comparable to other sports. This was widely assumed to mean that efforts to connect with audiences were successful.

While not exactly codified, university ssireum events necessitated municipal and corporate support. Often this involvement came at the local level, but this was not exclusively the case as some national entities would extend contributions. These connections could involve the use of sports facilities, room and board arrangements, product donations, or other services. Again, the connections with local government and business occurred through informal networking and decision making activities that were conducted through formally designated individuals or budget committees. It was often the case in doing business in Korea that important arrangements were settled by social networks first, though the success of those arrangements was still rooted in terms of practical outcomes. The KUSF was not unusual in this capacity. In fact, it could be argued that the success of the KUSF's mission was contingent upon its ability to work well with those entities whose resources sustained it. Much of the effort spent in the development of the KUSF involved establishing a balanced operational budget. The commoditization of ssireum through governing associations entailed the creation of a commodity infrastructure, though the means of the latter were circumscribed by Korean

society. Associations like the KUSF, and the individuals within them, were embedded in a larger social context.

All of the numerous rules, regulations, and partnerships within the KUSF have approached the success of ssireum as an issue of popularity that can be positively influenced through the formalization of competition. It is a goal of development which entails commodification. This is very much in the typical spirit of preceding ssireum associations and the modernization of sports at large. Moving the rather intimate person-to-person physical competition of belt wrestling from the sphere of game to sport requires a complex revision and codification which inevitably rewrites the nature of the competition. Who can play, how they can play, when and where play occurs, and what's at stake are transformed. However, the new product of ssireum still rests upon a current of existing social values which sustain it. In the process of reinventing ssireum the KUSF is distinct from previous associations because it had a uniquely localized focus on development that involved the transition of the sport from the private, corporate sector to the public, educational sector. In this sense the KUSF has reversed the privatization of previous decades as a means of asserting the value of ssireum in Korean society while simultaneously aligning the sport with the long venerated ideal of higher education.

SUMMARY OF EVOLUTION

Because the specific origins of contemporary ssireum are sometimes unclear, developed rapidly in a short period of time, and utilize a dramatized view of the past it is best understood as an invented tradition. This is especially true because of the timing of those origins, a period when Korea was involuntarily dragged into global affairs.

However, none of this discussion is meant to involve authenticity. It is clear from a historical perspective that some kind of wrestling has been present in the Korean peninsula for millennia. The purpose of employing the notion of invented traditions is to highlight the variability in ssireum over time and how that has been ignored in favor of leveraging it for homogenizing purposes. Ssireum was a primordial means of defense among the earliest Korean people; then a high status, religiously significant ritual; then a low status military activity; then a folk pastime under the corruption of a waning state. Then a form of resistance to outsiders; and then an emergent ethnic identity.

The late 20th and early 21st century period for ssireum was generally seen as one of doom and gloom, though this view was possibly induced by the sport's unsustainable high status that started in the post-war decades. However, the Golden Era of ssireum was not widely accepted as a bubble phenomenon. It was still seen as the logical outcome of ethnic success, one in need of recapturing. Restorative attempts have injected "modern" motifs into competition in order to popularize it within the country in addition to focusing on globalizing ssireum abroad. These efforts may be misguided as they look at the sport from the top down with a corporatized mentality of solving "problems" through increased consolidation.²³⁵ The views of what constitutes the success of the ethnic sport, in this case its ability to compete with ostensibly global alternatives in a kind of zero-

²³⁵ A strengthened relationship between ssireum and public education helped facilitate its early 20th century rise in prominence. Over the last decade that relationship has been increasingly neglected and even if pro-ssireum returned it would not replace public education as a primary exposure and recruitment tool. The dwindling of elementary and middle school teams is a greater threat to ssireum's future than the loss of the pro-league, but conventional knowledge about what defines ssireum's success makes that point counterintuitive to most.

sum scenario, are endangering its future.

When the Joseon Dynasty collapsed under the weight of the external globally driven forces of modernization the feudal structures and relative isolationism that made ssireum part of a daily life-in-common were lost. Stripped of that context under sustained, disadvantaged contact with outsiders Koreans reinvented ssireum as an organized sport which came to represent an ethnic identity useful in an arena where nations compete with one another. Knowing and playing ssireum is a way of making Koreanness and interpretations of its history from the present have been shuffled to produce a progressively overarching identity. At present the designs of that identity are set on bringing ssireum to the rest of the world.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEMBERSHIP (BOUNDARIES)

This chapter discusses the symbolic and ritual content of ssireum, how sacred space is established during play, and what distinguishes ssireum from ordinary activities.

SYMBOLS THAT CONNECT

Familiarity with certain aspects of ssireum and the depth of ability exercised in reading them are what constitute membership. There exist different degrees of “insiderness” as a result. For example, basic knowledge of ssireum or the awareness of its existence is a precursor for Koreanness. From there the level of one’s insiderness is a matter of how much knowledge, experience, and memory accrete within an individual and the means with which they convey it to other insiders. This involves knowing which features of ssireum are considered important - the symbols - and how those features are enacted - the rituals - among insiders. The following guide focuses less on the ideological justifications for these symbols and rituals because, as previously noted, they are arbitrary. What matters most is that they have been appropriated and developed as vehicles for conveying identity. The structural or practical reasons for how or why they work are given the most attention here.

The various primary sources on ssireum extend from the prehistoric to modern eras and contain both the most ambiguous and codified sources of knowledge about ssireum. In the context of an invented tradition the sources discussed in the previous chapter have important attributes. First, their existences are nearly incontestable and

establish the authoritative foundation for the knowledge and discussions that appear in secondary and folk sources; they are “real” symbols of a collective past. Second, their veracity and continuity are the basis for the interpretation of their role as signifiers of an ethnic identity. Third, they comment independently and directly on ssireum without the need of additional sources. Their historical veracity and lack of reflexivity allow them to be appropriated easily while still retaining a strong sense of authority. Hence there has been the tendency to emphasize the belt and color-coding of ssireum as emblematic of its uniqueness. However those elements, as well as the circular playing space, sand as preferred playing medium, and language of performance appear to be mostly recent additions to the game.

For example, the folk knowledge employed in the creation of the modern ssireum tradition took a vague conventional concept, the *taegeuk*²³⁶, and appropriated it within a short period of time in the commodification of the sport. The role of the symbol and its colors with the modern nation’s regalia helps associate ssireum with national unity and an emergent collective identity. The absence of historical details to support that role and the clear history of contemporary, corporatized decision making which led to it do not devalue it. The fact that not everything about ssireum follows that standard, that variation exists, does not dilute the homogenizing power of the motif. The red and blue in ssireum intuitively reinforces the message that ssireum is Koreanness because it is

²³⁶ 태극:太極: *Taegeuk*: The Korean red and blue cognate of the black and white symbol commonly known in the US as the “yin-and-yang symbol”.

based upon the conventional sense that red and blue represent Koreanness as well. The taegeuk in ssireum is quite modern. It is not a tradition in a chronological sense, but it communicates a clear message of traditionality in the identity it represents.

THE BELT

In the historical research on ssireum a disproportionate amount of attention has been paid to its uniqueness without unpacking that notion. There seems to have been little reflexive evaluation given to this assumption.²³⁷ The tendency has been to start with that position and work backwards from there when looking at the available data. While most works since the 1970s connect wrestling traditions around the world with ssireum in some capacity, the tendency has largely been to then distance ssireum from that common human history. Belt-wrestling extends as far back as iconography found in Mesopotamia and all the cultures surrounding Korea have some indigenous tradition of grappling. The uniqueness of ssireum is usually assumed to reside in: the vague or broadly defined collective cultural history of Korea; the specific permutations on the game such as technique or rules; or the philosophical aesthetics and *communitas* experienced through play.

²³⁷ As the saying goes, when holding a hammer everything looks like a nail.

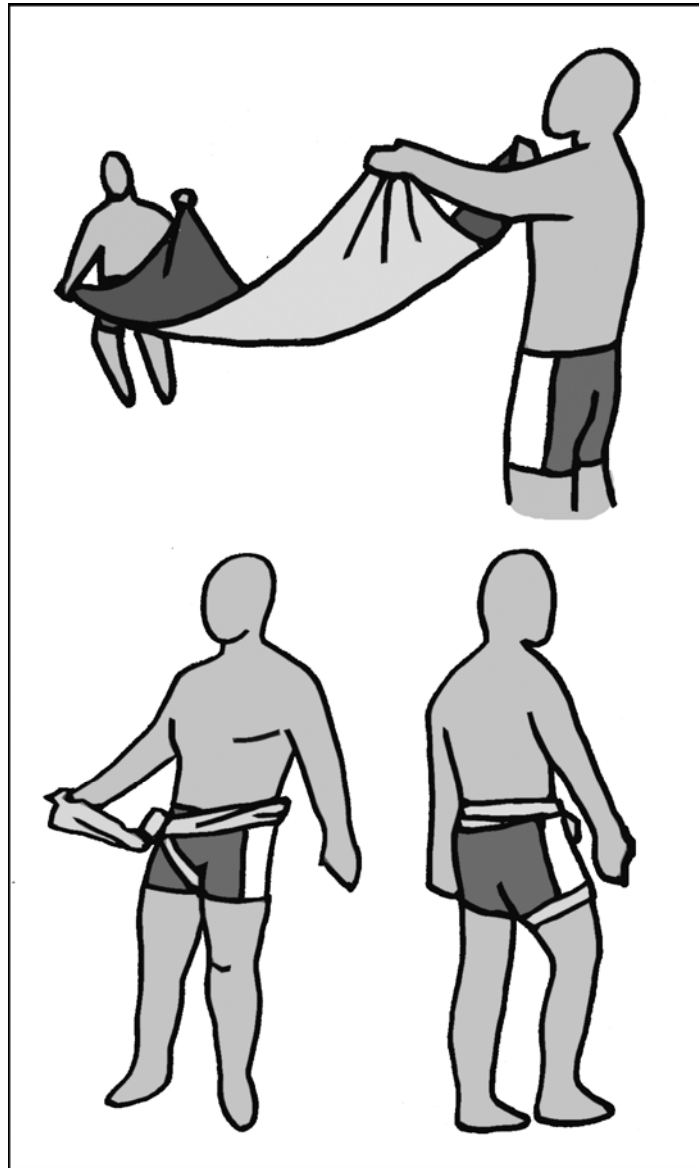


Figure 9 - The Satba (Sash) and Shorts

While these are legitimate points the assumptions of continuity or homogeneity on which they rest are rarely seriously addressed from a socio-cultural perspective. It *is* intuitive to say that ssireum is Korean culture, but relying too much on content or form obscures the processes which have enabled the continuity of ssireum and appropriated it

as a source of emergent ethnic identity. (See Figure 9 for an example of contemporary belt style in Korean wrestling.)

As shown in the previous chapter, the earliest images of ssireum suggest the use of belts. The problem is that nothing was written about ssireum at the time and everything drawn from those images is inferential. As previously pointed out, considering the history of the game, ssireum has become *more* like the Goguryeo tomb paintings over time. Not surprisingly, the tendency has been to assume what looks like belts in those images functions the same as the satbas in use at present. Were the belts considered a defining feature of ssireum then as they are now? What if they were just ordinary belts? Later images sometimes omit the belts. When they are shown, they are depicted as black - not red or blue. Folklore indicates that belts were not always used; instead, players often rolled down the top of their trousers to provide handholds. Several non-athletes in their 30s recalled playing ssireum in elementary school, though none used satbas; apparently specialized equipment like belts are not employed unless playing as part of a team. Does this make the satba a discontinuous tradition? At what point did it become essential to the sport? The answers are not clear.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the 1947 National Sports Festival ssireum results refer to different styles of belt positioning. This is a rare record of what folklore posited as regional variation, that some provinces were known for either left, right, or center belt play. Over time the right-sided belt positioning prevailed, supposedly because this was the dominant method in Gyeonggi Province; since the earliest tournaments took place in Seoul apparently their local preference settled the issue. When talking to one of

the architects behind the collegiate league, Administrator Kim, he explained that their rules formalized what in many cases were already conventional aspects of play. Belt positioning was one of them. Another was the use of red and blue color motifs.

The belts currently used are not ordinary items. They are specially produced by one company and made to fit certain dimensions and material standards, “Strong, with medium friction.”²³⁸ The belts are actually more like sashes - wide, folded pieces of dyed cotton fabric with a standardized weave. The width of the base piece of cloth is regulated by league, usually over 100cm. The length of a bolt for an individual player is not regulated, though the remainder of loose cloth (hanging belt length after knotting) is usually limited. The method of knotting is itself regulated. Put another way, these are not ordinary belts. They cannot be used for anything except ssireum. All of this is important because, as discussed previously, hand-placement on the satba is a critical strategic element in play.²³⁹ Leaving these elements unregulated would be akin to leaving the weight of boxing gloves open to interpretation, or even the size and composition of baseball bats unrestricted. Once a game like ssireum becomes a sport it undergoes intense scrutinization and standardization essential to formal play, the spirit of

²³⁸ In this case, the standardization of belts as ssireum formalized lead to their commodification. A company now produces and sell them as extension of the industry. This affords status to the company in their support of tradition. And it also characterizes how traditional can be monetized. The historical effect of the IMF crisis and ongoing revitalization strategies for ssireum typify this position - the sport must make money to survive. There is a tinge of irony to this view since historically ssireum was played amongst the poorest segments of society and in ordinary attire.

²³⁹ For example, the WSF specifies that bolts, “...for student class players 15 years of older, as well as adult class players, must have a total width of 114cm of blue or red 16 mesh cotton cloth. The remainder of satba length after fastening must be less than 30sm. All satbas must be certified by the WSF”.

“sameness in all things” which ensures fairness. One can assess elements of a sport deemed essential to its dynamic by considering what has been standardized and how.²⁴⁰ Sports develop their own internal logics about what needs to be set, to what standards, and why. This is akin to Weber’s (1962) concept of “rationalization”, the ordering and unifying of ideas in any cultural system; Bourdieu (1978) expanded on this as the need for predictability in any philosophy of sport for constituting what is “right”. For ssireum, the satba is one of those items. The fact that it inherits a mantle of traditionality cements it as such.

Iron Kim taught me how to fold and tie a satba. The folding is a partner driven exercise which starts almost as if folding sheets (see Figure 9). Holding the width of the satba bolt in both hands, leaving the length of it between them, players alternate folding the corners from one hand to the other in successive turns until the >100cm bolt has shrunk in width to around 5cm and immeasurably multiplied in thickness. The end result is a long, snaky piece of cotton which looks like a belt but functions more like a length of medium gauge rope. After the satba has been folded it is ready for tying. This step may be accomplished individually, though having a partner present to hold the loose length of belt helps. One end of the satba is passed between the legs from back to front where it is then looped and tied around the right thigh. The looped end of the satba is then slid off the leg, turned inside out, tightened as needed, and slid back on to the leg so that the triangle shaped knot is placed on the outside of the loop. The remaining length

²⁴⁰ For example, hairstyles could be regulated. But for most sports they are not.

of satba is passed around the back of the waist from right to left, brought around the front of the waist to form a loop, passed through the smaller thigh loop and tied, and the remaining length of satba is draped around to reduce it to the required maximum hanging length. If this sounds confusing, it is. Tying the satba takes a certain amount of training and is a kinetic, spatial exercise which requires a degree of proprioception that words and images cannot convey. One learns to tie a satba by tying it.

Once tied, the satba is ready for play and if done properly will rarely come undone. It was not uncommon to see baskets of pre-tied satbas awaiting use in training facilities. Sometimes unfolded satbas would be laundered and hung to dry in the sun outside of the *ssireum-jang*²⁴¹. Persons familiar with the folklore surrounding the use of belts in various martial arts will find similar themes echoed with the satba. Traditionally the satba was an ordinary white belt common among laborers in the Joseon Dynasty; satbas were dirtied over time from playing ssireum and more successful players could be identified by the darkness of their belt (presumably having won more matches). Satbas should be laundered as infrequently as permissible. Many wrestlers explained that it was taboo to clean it while training and would result in bad luck. Like the calluses on their hands, a sweat-permeated belt can be interpreted as a sign of hard work and achievement. Washing it would eliminate their record of training. Iron Kim gave an alternate

²⁴¹ 씨름장: 씨름場: *Ssireum Jang*: Ssireum-hall; a dedicated, enclosed ssireum training facility usually featuring a small staging area for dressing and a large sand floor for instruction and practice. The “jang” phoneme is also used in a word familiar to student of Korean (*dojang* :도장:道場) or Japanese (*dojo*) martial arts where it means “[martial arts] training hall”.

explanation, “When I was in middle school satbas could be made from many different materials. Some of them would get scratchy and rough when you washed them. We tried to avoid that as much as possible.”²⁴² Supposedly the standard use of cotton has made that a moot point, but the popular negative disposition persisted. A retired player in his late 30s said that his mother would wash his satba religiously on a daily basis during his decades long career despite his pleas to the contrary. The picture of his mother’s obsessive dedication to hygiene would be comical if it were not for the meter long stretch of permanently rug-burned flesh around his lower body.

In contrast to training satbas, competition satbas should be always be fresh. This is to provide a “blank slate” of luck before a competition. Competition satbas or training shorts were also supposedly imbued with power through victory, especially in the case of the Grandmaster Championships. There were several tales of former grandmasters, such as Man-Gi Lee, whose winning garments were touched by women hoping to give birth to male children. One wrestler said he heard of a former grandmaster’s belt being stitched into a baby blanket in order to increase the vitality of a male child.

The satba becomes a handy metaphor for the uniqueness of ssireum. While belt wrestling traditions exist in other cultures, the right-thigh looping of the satba appears to be unique to Korea. The circular shape of the satba can also be used to infer concepts such as unity, continuity, etc. And the red and blue colors are frequently described as

²⁴² Having worn a satba I agree that less abrasive equals more desirable. The loops on the satbas around the thigh and pelvic girdle come precariously close to one’s nether regions - places in which one would probably want to avoid as much unnecessary friction as possible.

essential aesthetic components. This type of use overlaps with other symbols as will be seen with the use of sand circles and color motifs.

THE SAND

Ssireum without sand is not really ssireum. (See Figure 10 for an image of sand inside the ring.) Another purportedly traditional element of the game, there does not appear to be a definitive answer for when it became essential for play. Again, historical depictions and accounts of ssireum do not typically indicate sand. The geography of Korea is not particularly sandy. The east coast is mostly rocky and the tidal flats of the west coast, the product of generations of reclamation efforts, are more muddy than sandy. There is riverine sand, but it is not especially common in large amounts. The sand that is naturally available is not so ubiquitous that it would suggest a peninsula-wide venue for competition. Considering the folkloric and historical memory of ssireum being associated with market culture it seems that any reasonably flat surface would have sufficed for competition. More than sand, dirt might have been the typical medium of play.²⁴³ Retired players who grew up in the early post-war decades confirmed that they would play anywhere they could.

²⁴³ Modern competitions use industrial technology (e.g. tractors, dump trucks, garden hoses, etc.) to set up competitions because it is the only efficient way to transport and arrange that much sand. Likewise, sand was not widely used in traditional construction until modernization and it is possible people began using it around that time. That is, it seems counterintuitive to assume that historical farmers would have had the resources to transport or arrange such a medium; in contrast, packed dirt is cheap and omnipresent.

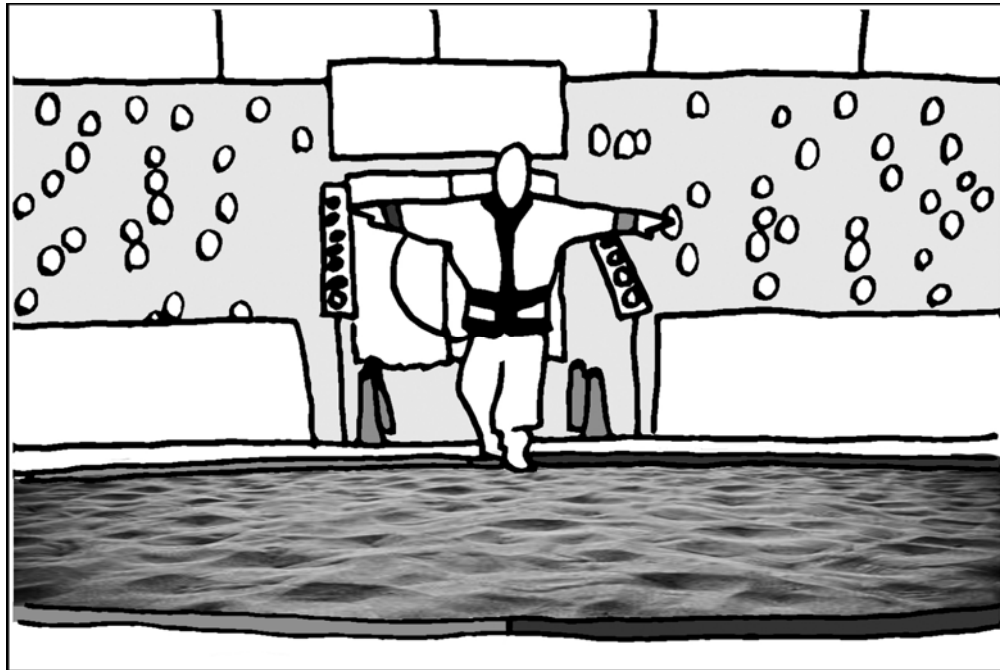


Figure 10 - Inside the Ring

Yet at some point sand became the preferred, and traditional, medium (again, see Figure 10).²⁴⁴ This may owe to its use as an impact buffer or its visual properties during competition.²⁴⁵ The shifting topography of sand also introduces an element of chance as the playing area does not represent level footing and players must constantly adjust. Whatever the reason, it is solidly entrenched. Administrator Kim explained, “When developing the college league we tried to find an easy, safe way to play. Sand is

²⁴⁴ Ancillary details about the staging of ssireum visible in Figure 11 include the lights and fire-pots outside of the player entrance directly behind the referee, the blank white squares which all represent corporate and municipal advertisements; and the color coding of the referee’s wrist bands to the ring surrounding the sand.

²⁴⁵ The sand explodes into the air during competition and literally illustrates the force with which players are battling. It’s breathtaking. With the televising of ssireum in high-definition audiences can see the individual grains of sand as the leap about the ring. No other playing medium can duplicate this effect.

expensive to move around, it gets dirty, and it isn't always safe. So I designed a type of inflatable mat. It uses straw inside a mat along with air to absorb impact. They are cheap, easy to move, and safe. I made some for players to use and no one liked them. They complained. They just wanted sand." Several players confirmed this and one succinctly said, "We feel friendly with the sand. We're not afraid of falling into it." In the end Administrator Kim's efforts were not entirely in vain; the collegiate medium of play is still a sand circle, but it is surrounded by an inflatable safety buffer of his design.

Discussions with Coach Kim expanded on the complexity of sand. "The players always have to rake the sand, clean it, move it around. It's a lot of work. We don't replace it very often because it's expensive. So we add salt to it to reduce the bacteria and smell. When we do replace it, it needs to be the right kind of sand. Too small and it's like dust and you inhale it. Too large and it will cut you. It needs to be just right. All sand is not the same." The inside of a ssireum-jang is usually a musky, dusty stretch of packed sand tens of centimeters deep. Special wide-mouth wooden rakes are a staple inside the training hall and players turn the sand and level it out several times a day. They also spend most of their time being tossed around in it as well. It's unsurprising they develop a familiarity with the substance.²⁴⁶ Wrestlers will rub sand on their hands before a competition, throw it into the air after a win, and dust it off the backs of their

²⁴⁶ My experience with the sand was different. It always choked my lungs inside the ssireum-jang. Several times during play I was abraded by the sand and lost large patches of skin in the process. Once I scraped the skin off the top of my right foot and ankle. It became so badly infected that it swelled up and I couldn't walk on it. I took a trip to the hospital where they debrided the injury and put me on antibiotics for a week. The rest was a series of purplish colored scars.

opponents. The tactile experience of it is part and parcel of what they do.

Because the sand is arranged in a circle, it also represents a defined sacred space. There is a clear delineation between where ssireum is played and where it is not. If ssireum were played entirely on mats it might not impart the same feeling. Some competitions feature a consecration ritual whereby prominent officials (i.e. high status people) will cast salt into the sand while walking about the circle before a competition. Aside from that, the only people to enter the sand are referees and wrestlers. Every time a person enters or leaves the sand they bow - referees to officials or audience, players to each other or audience. Sand is similarly important for training. Physical and endurance training can occur in various settings, but technique and player-to-player training takes place in the sand of the ssireum-jang. The use of sand extends from the professional league (when it was operating) to middle school teams and amateur events.

THE COLORS

Pervading all aspects of the performances in the collegiate league is the color theme of the taegeuk, the visual representation of the theme of *eum-yang*²⁴⁷ or, broadly speaking, “balance”. As with other symbols, the exact details of when this color scheme was adopted are unknown. There is at least one reference to red-and-blue competition styles in judo that dates to the 1930s (mentioned previously) which combined with ssireum’s earlier club association with judo suggests the taegeuk motif could have

²⁴⁷ 음양:陰陽: *Eum Yang*: “Yin-and-Yang”, the Taoist philosophical concept of harmonious opposition, or simply “balance”.

already been in circulation at the time. At present everything in the collegiate league is color coded according to the taegeuk - satbas, uniforms, the playing ring, the mats, and any trim or adorning decorations at competition. This is supposedly to emphasize the traditional philosophical and aesthetic components of ssireum (discussed later). However, the scope of the taegeuk's importance in contemporary Koreanness representation of traditional culture seems to be disproportionate to its historical role. Because the taegeuk is a Korean cognate of a Chinese religiophilosophical concept it is important to discuss how it arrived in Korea.

The Three Kingdoms period in Korea marks an increase in contact and exchange with Chinese culture. Particularly religious transmission from China, including Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism is said to have reached the Goguryeo and Baekje kingdoms by the end of the 4th century and Silla by the 5th century. Taoism arrived much later around the 7th and 8th centuries. Buddhism eventually became the first state religion of unified Korea while Taoism became a romantic theme applied across various contexts. The contemporary use of the taegeuk color motifs of blue and red in ssireum is rooted in this romantic Taoist legacy. Knowledge of Taoism's timing in Korea and the religious context of the Goguryeo tomb murals support this view. Yet at the same time it is known that Taoism is not uniquely Korean, did not leave a formalized philosophical or religious legacy, and is not mentioned in other historical contexts of ssireum.

Taoism was never an enduring major religious or philosophical tradition in Korea. During the Three Kingdoms Era it is reported that Goguryeo civilization had been exposed to Taoism through emissaries sent by Emperor Gaozu, founder of China's Tang

Dynasty. Note that this is the same civilization which produced the royal tumuli and mural which have been mentioned several times now. Of the other two civilizations of the period, Baekje did not strongly adopt Taoism while Silla is reported to have enthusiastically embraced it and given rise to Buddhist-Confucian-Taoist warriors called *hwarang*²⁴⁸. The Three Kingdoms Era ended with the supremacy of Silla, though this was short lived as it was quickly replaced by the Goryeo Dynasty. Goryeo took up Taoism for a short time, but by the middle of the dynasty Buddhism was the state religion. When the Joseon Dynasty came to power Confucianism replaced Buddhism as the state religion and Taoism was marginalized as heretical.

In modern Korean society Taoist legacies such as taegeuk have been absorbed in an amalgamation of animistic, Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, shamanistic, and secular traditions. Despite Taoism never having had a particularly powerful or enduring history as a proper religion in Korea the taegeuk was appropriated for use in the construction of the national flag in 1950.²⁴⁹ But even the history of the national flag indicates its mutability - ordinances as recent as 2007 were used to officially set the arrangement of motifs, dimensions, and colors of the national flag. The state appropriated the taegeuk as a national symbol of homogeneity. This worked because of the communal feelings it inspired.

The use of taegeuk and its red and blue color motifs in ssireum also represents a

²⁴⁸ 화랑:花郎: *Hwarang*: A class of warrior elites in the Silla kingdom.

²⁴⁹ The flag of South Korea has an antecedent in the national flag used by the Joseon Dynasty from at least 1882 until 1910 when Japanese occupation began and the flag was banned.

collective ethnic identity. It coincides with the formalization of the sport over time. Early ssireum was played with a black belt or in ordinary clothes with the top of the pants rolled down to provide something to grip. After the uniform was introduced in the 20th century specialty belts followed suit. The records in *70 Years of the Korean Sports Council* indicate that various styles of belt positioning persisted in ssireum until at least the 1950s. *70 Years* also mentions a “blue versus red” style competition for judo in 1936, but it has no such entries for ssireum. Professional ssireum eventually set standards for uniformed short pants, belts, and playing styles though teams were allowed variation in the color of their uniforms. The practice of using red and blue uniforms in amateur ssireum was in effect before the 21st century, but no one can pinpoint if or when it was made mandatory. It was not until the formation of the Korean Ssireum University Federation in 2003 that the blue and red motif was officially set for competition uniforms. It did not involve too great a break from precedent as it mostly formalized what some competitions were already doing. The taegeuk motif was chosen to help easily differentiate players during competition, represent traditional Korean philosophy, and (though unstated) provide an easy palate for broader color coordination in a variety of settings. That is, the blue and red matches prominent, existing features of competition venues - such as the national flag.²⁵⁰

Not all ssireum competitions rely upon red and blue so heavily. Some amateur events have either looser color guidelines or none at all. Informal, small scale events

²⁵⁰ The implications of “intuitively” color-coordinating with a national flag should be clear anywhere.

such as those held during elementary school physical education classes or at recess do not usually use uniforms. Instead, those players just roll the tops of their pants down. In general, the less organized a setting the less likely it is to feature the taegeuk motif. That may change over time as the KSA and other organizations continue to consolidate ssireum competition.

The real value of this association is how easily it can be transmitted between people and adapted by individuals as nuanced frameworks for understanding. What is generally articulated as the intuitive recognition of Koreanness in ssireum is the folk distillation of normative criteria as they are shared across a population, evaluated and adapted by individuals, and re-circulated.

THE LANGUAGE

Another important symbolic feature of ssireum is its language. As previously mentioned, the word “ssireum” is purportedly Korean in origin. This automatically implies a certain distance from the influence of outside culture. Moreover, the origins of the word are lost and most, though not all, explanations for its etymology correlate to other indigenous words. This is not to say that foreign loan words are low status - quite the opposite as one way to convey a high-status/quality feeling in Korean is to use a Chinese word²⁵¹ or phrase in place of an indigenous alternative. This owes much to the bureaucratic tradition of literary elites that dominated the country until the 20th century.

²⁵¹ 한자어:漢字語: *Hanja Eo*: “Sino-Korean Vocabulary”.

That is, there exists an enduring history of associating Sino-Korean with high status.²⁵²

The historical connotation of ssireum as a peasant game correlates with the use of an indigenous word to name it. This implies an ethnic origin at the cost of a higher status feeling. Considering the abundance of Sino-Korean words assumed to refer to ssireum in historical texts it is not as if Koreans were unfamiliar with alternate modes of reference for the game.²⁵³ It seems plausible to consider the now standard use of ssireum was chosen because it helped claim this style of belt wrestling as unique cultural property. The word ssireum has also been paired with the indigenous verb “do”²⁵⁴ to create an action meaning, “to wrestle/grapple/struggle [with something]”²⁵⁵; this use has a both literal and metaphorical connotations akin to what “wrestle” could convey in English. Taking these points together, saying ssireum is thinking Korean.

It is also worth mentioning the use of indigenous words to describe technical skills in ssireum. While the general category of “skill”²⁵⁶ uses Sino-Korean, the subdivision of skills into three categories of hand, trunk, and leg all use indigenous terms. Likewise, nearly all skills within those three categories use indigenous vocabulary. Skill names typically follow a pattern which starts with a preposition to indicate anatomical

²⁵² By one estimation, the Korean language is 60% Sino-Korean vocabulary, 35% indigenous, and 5% other loan words (of which 90% are from English) (Sohn 1999).

²⁵³ The NSF records in *70 Years* allude to this as well. While ssireum does not appear to be called by any other name, the category headings routinely flip-flop between the indigenous alphabet and Sino-Korean script over the decades. When asked about this point, Director Kim suggested, “[Event officials] were probably trying to appear high class by using Chinese characters. But you can’t write ssireum using those”.

²⁵⁴ 하다: 漢字없슴: *Hada*: To do; often combined with nouns to create compound verbs. For example, *saenggak* (생각: thought) plus *hada* (하다: to do) creates *saenggakhada* (생각하다: to think).

²⁵⁵ 씨름하다: 漢字없슴: *Ssireumhada*: To wrestle/grapple/struggle with something.

²⁵⁶ 기술: 技術: *Gisul*: Skill, a Sino-Korean word difficult to express concisely in indigenous vocabulary.

position or motion, followed by a descriptive action, and conclude with a gerund suffix.²⁵⁷ See Table 14 for examples of this trend.

These terms are especially difficult to translate because accurate descriptions are wordy while concise descriptions have the potential for ambiguity; conversely, they are intuitive to understand from experience because playing familiarizes one with the relative placement of anatomy and force when executing skills typically named from the player's vantage.²⁵⁸ Both research and conventional knowledge explain that there has been regional variation in skill terminology; again, commodification as a sport has increasingly tightened the focus on standardization and terms have been culled accordingly. Considering the association of wrestling with low status it feels intuitive that skills would have non-literary styled names, ones with a visceral clarity immediately intelligible to the people playing.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ In Korean grammar -gi (-기) is a gerundial suffix which is added to (usually transitive) verbs to have them function as nouns. For example, chida (치다: to hit/shove) becomes chigi (치기: hitting/shoving).

²⁵⁸ Consider the first example in table on the following page, apmureup-chigi. A concise translation would be "front knee shove". Without knowing how this skill is categorized one might assuming it means "shoving one's knee forward". But apmureup-chigi is a hand skill. Thus it means "shoving one's palm against the front of an opponent's knee". This is intuitive in parsing the Korean phrase as it equals something akin to "front" (앞), "knee" (무릎), and "hit" (치다), which could also be more laboriously written "hitting the front of the knee" (무릎의 앞쪽을 치는데). Still, writing "hit" is not quite accurate because it is performed with an open hand, not a closed fist. "Slap" fits better than "hit", though the object of the motion is not to deflect the limb or skip the hand across it, but to actually move the opponent's limb through direct pressure. "Push" seems closer to this concept, but it implies a continuous action while this is an single movement performed in an instant. Thus the motion is perhaps best described as a shove. Add to this the complexity of considering ssireum's starting grip (right hand lower back, left hand outer right thigh) and some skills can *only* be executed using one specific hand/leg/direction against one specific body part/limb while others can be performed with either hand/leg/direction against any body part/limbs.

²⁵⁹ These terms typically explain what the player is doing to what part of the opponent's body. It's intuitive if one is, or has been, a player because a skill name usually means "what I am doing to the other guy".

Table 14 - Examples of Ssireum Skills by Category

손기술:손技術: <i>Son Gisul</i> : Hand Skills	
앞무릎치기 <i>Apmureup-chigi</i>	Front knee shove - protraction of the palm against the [opponent's] anterior knee joint
옆무릎치기 <i>Yeopmureup-chigi</i>	Sideways knee shove - medio-lateral extension of the palm against the [opponent's] medial knee joint
다리기술:다리技術: <i>Dari Kisul</i> : Leg Skills	
안다리걸기 <i>Andari-gyeolgi</i>	Inner reap - medio-lateral retrusive flexion of the posterior leg surface against the [opponent's] medial leg surface
박다리걸기 <i>Bakdari-gyeolgi</i>	Outer reap - latero-medial retrusive flexion of the posterior leg surface against the [opponent's] lateral leg surface
허리기술:허리技術: <i>Heori Gisul</i> : Trunk Skills	
왼배지기 <i>Oenbae-jigi</i>	Left-side belly toss - dorsal flexion and sinistro-lateral rotation of the trunk to elevate [opponent] against the abdomen
들배지기 <i>Deulbae-jigi</i>	Lift-n-toss - elevational flexion of the anterior surface of the thigh and dorsal flexion of the trunk to elevate [opponent] against the abdomen

While indigenous vocabulary is preferred in the name of the sport as well as its technical skills, other terms retain Sino-Korean vocabulary. Sometimes this is for convenience, other times it is done for its status elevating effect. Event names and team names often use Sino-Korean. The names of weight classes have referred to Korean mountains or, in some cases, mythical beasts from Taoist philosophy; to appreciate these terms relative meaning to one another someone would need to understand their derivation.²⁶⁰ The color coded terminology of belts derived from taegeuk also uses Sino-

²⁶⁰ Refer to the discussion of contemporary ssireum leagues in the previous chapter for these names. The point is that one would not know how to relatively order the weight classes from lightest to heaviest without knowing the relative order of the objects being referenced. Is Baekdu heavier than Taebaek? Yes, because Baekdu Mountain is higher.

Korean in place of equally fascicle indigenous terms (see Table 15). The inclusion of Sino-Korean outside of skill terminology suggests a contrivance involved with commodification, that certain aspects of the game could be elevated through language.

Table 15 - Available Terms for Satba Identification

Indigenous Korean (Unused)	Sino-Korean (Used)	English Translation
푸른삿마: <i>pureun satba</i>	청삿마:靑삿마: <i>cheong satba</i>	Blue Satba
빨간삿마: <i>bbalgan satba</i>	홍삿마:紅삿마: <i>hong satba</i>	Red Satba

Being able to speak the language of ssireum coherently, to encode and decode it, signals status as an insider. While the terminology is not so esoteric that it is incomprehensible, it is still a nuanced vocabulary. On several occasions I heard event emcees conferring on what term to use to refer to a winning move. The language emcees use is also symbolic of the sport. While interviewing Emcee Kim, he explained, “I do the [televised] emcee work for sports like ssireum, golf, tennis, billiards... I try to pass my feeling on to the audience through how I speak. I try to give it energy and make it more exciting. When I emcee women’s golf it is the same idea, but a different way. Golf requires concentration, stillness. So I talk low and smooth to give that feeling. That’s why women usually do the interviews or emcee sports like skating. Their voices can’t match the energy of something powerful like ssireum.” Yet separate sets of in-house, non-televised announcers are used during competition events - usually women. When asked about them, Emcee Kim said, “Well, they are not describing the action for the audience. They’re giving information, like player names, and who won. Audiences like a

woman's voice better for that. It's smoother, more polite." Televised and in-house emcee language was perpetually at the high-end of Korean linguistic formality. This is a typical mode of formal public speaking, giving the highest level of deference possible to the audience. Narrative mode in Korean is different than in English and the distinction between persons and singular/plural is often blurred for politeness or formality. In-house emceeing favored first and third-person plurals, again adding to the formality of the occasion.

THE CLOTHES

The last major type of symbols used in ssireum is one of the most omnipresent. The garb. It is possible to infer a person's status at an event by observing what they wear. In some cases the choice of clothing seems ridiculously self-evident (e.g. only wrestlers wear satbas), in other cases regulated (e.g. coaches, event staff), or simply cultural logical (e.g. successful older men wear suits). During interviews no one specifically mentioned clothing as a means of identifying status, but in practice they frequently used it as such. Questions about why certain styles of clothing were used often pointed back to tradition. Iron Kim said, "People who work directly with ssireum are supposed to wear old-timey clothes"²⁶¹. It gives the audience a more traditional feeling." Observations about how clothing was used yielded general status categories.

²⁶¹ 옛날옷:漢字없슴: *Yetnal Ot*: Old-timey clothes; this is difficult to translate since the modifier, yetnal, means "old" without specifying a length of time. It could mean anything from, "Old clothes," to, "Period costume." In this case Iron Kim was indicating something akin to pre-modern attire (e.g. from the Joseon Dynasty), but without referencing a concrete time or status. The translation of "old-timey clothes" is an attempt to capture the vagueness of meaning and clarity of aesthetic the term gave in our conversation.

Players wore standardized competition short pants with their names and affiliations emblazoned upon the backs and sides respectively (refer back to Figure 9). These skin-tight shorts are either red or blue in the collegiate league. While still in operation the professional league had a wider palette of team colors for short pants. Amateur wrestlers have no uniforms, though they are still color-coded with the satbas. Teams generally have uniformly styled athletic long-pants, t-shirts, and overcoats (in winter) which may or may not have their affiliation printed across them. While actual competition occurs in bare-feet, athletic shoes or other daily-use footwear was typical for wrestlers when not in the ring. Players are the only individuals at competitions to wear satbas.

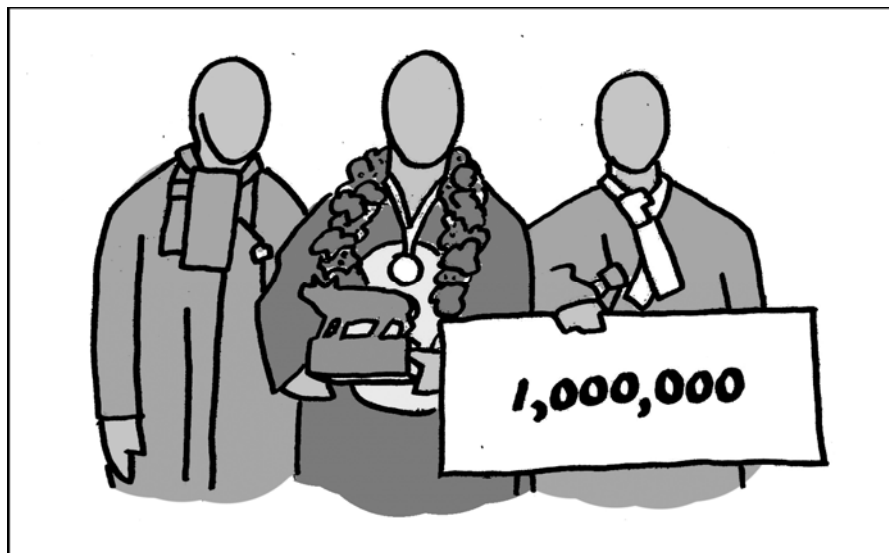


Figure 11 - Winner's Robes and Coaches

Champions, as a subset of players, could be recognized by the ceremonial adornments they received at the end of competition (see Figure 11). These included medals, garlands, and robes. In the case of the latter, official champion robes would be adorned with traditional courtly insignia such as dragons or phoenixes. These robes belonged to the leagues and, unlike medals and garlands, would be returned at the end of a victory ceremony.

Referees wore specific uniforms of white jackets²⁶², long pants²⁶³, and shoes (refer back to Figure 10). The jackets' collar, front seam, waist, and bottom edge were trimmed with black bands with gold decoration. The right cuff of the jacket had a blue band around it while the left had a red band; these allowed the referee to signal winners and fouls by simply raising the hand with the color that corresponded to the status of the player in question. Referees wore their shoes inside the sand.

Coaches wore dark colored traditional robes²⁶⁴, sometimes with white, and matching scarves (refer back to Figure 11). Underneath they wore either traditional *hanbok*²⁶⁵ or western-style business attire (button-front collared shirts, slacks, etc.) and leather shoes. The style of robe appeared to be the *durumagi*²⁶⁶, a garment supposedly from Goguryeo (again, the same civilization that left behind the oldest record of *ssireum*).

²⁶² 저고리: 漢字없슴: *Jeogori*: Traditional Korean jacket.

²⁶³ 바지: 漢字없슴: *Baji*: Traditional baggy long pants.

²⁶⁴ 포: 袍: *Po*: A general term for outer robes or overcoats commonly worn in Korean up to the Joseon Dynasty.

²⁶⁵ 한복: 韓服: *Hanbok*: Traditional Korean clothing.

²⁶⁶ 두루마기: 漢字없슴: *Durumagi*: A flowing overcoat tied across the chest.

Emcees wore formal clothing as well. Television emcees and hosts wore some variation on international business attire - jacket, tie, slacks, etc. In-house event emcees wore hanbok.

Elite persons, such as ssireum officials, could be identified by their business attire or formal hanbok. But because suits were a staple feature of formal attire for men it was not always possible to tell if a person was affiliated with the production of an event or simply wished to appear high status. Persons wearing suits in the high status reserved section near the emcees were nearly always event officials.

Event entertainers wore clothing matched to their role. Hostesses for pre-game singing competitions would wear hanbok. Event cheerleaders wore modern sequin uniforms or similar attire. Invited entertainment, or guest singers, dressed professionally according to their musical genre; men usually in suits, women in modern chic.

Event staff (gaffers, riggers, camera men, sound techs, etc.), or anyone selling their labor specifically for the event, had no uniforms and generally dressed in functional clothing. They were similar to audiences in this respect as the latter rarely wore formal attire to ssireum events. The most certain means of identifying event staff was by observing the space they occupied; audience members generally did not have access an event's operating space.

Despite the emphasis on period clothing as a key component of imparting a traditional aesthetic, no one wore any of the historical varieties of Korean headwear.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ Aside from the occasional stylish elderly gentlemen sporting a fedora or trilby.

The combined effect of clothing allowed for the identification of status, marked segregated spaces, and directed the visual aesthetics of events. These effects would be lost on outsiders since they would lack the frames of reference needed to decode the messages inherent in the clothing. There were also degrees of insiderness. While hanbok are easily grasped as traditional in nature, the folk knowledge about the periods from which those garments come and the connection of ssireum to those periods are not necessarily so obvious.

THE RITUALS THAT BIND

The key feature of rituals is their communicative nature (Rappaport 1992). Repeating an action or sequence builds an index of reference for evaluating subsequent variations (Rappaport 1992). Turner (2008) extensively described rituals' reflexive ability to generate new realities. Kapferer (2008) elaborated that the insistency on repetition in rituals establishes a virtual space in which meanings can be developed. Rituals are not invariant, but an inherently reflexive mode of social interaction - one of the primary modes of organizing and exchanging symbolic content.

The symbolic repertoire appropriated by ssireum is effective only when regularly recirculated. This involves the ritualization of these symbols, often in specific contexts. It is not simply the durumagi itself which construes a sense of Koreanness in ssireum, but the repetitive, familiar comfort of knowing who wears it, when they wear it, and where they wear it.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ In this case, ssireum coaches, at competitions, in competition halls. And so forth.

Some contexts are highly structured for participants. For example, ssireum players lead very regimented lives. Their daily schedules for training are set outside of their own volition. For the most part, they cannot choose not to train. The more profane aspects of their existence are neither casual nor self-directed. Because of the circulation of some symbols within those contexts, particularly sand, satbas, color motifs, language, and formal roles, players are highly sensitized to them. But those symbols permeate the lives of players and coaches alone because training is not a public activity. That is, the non-event time/space of ssireum is distinct from the performance of ssireum events. It is in the latter that the ritual use of symbols adopts more sacred properties in the production of Koreanness. To paraphrase Durkheim (1995), satbas and sand are neither intrinsically sacred or profane; their meanings are produced and reproduced in the collective process of ritualization and symbolization.²⁶⁹ What satbas and sand “mean” at any particular moment is contingent upon their use. Within the frame of ordinary training, they communicate one way - the familiarity and hardship of training for example. Within ssireum competitions they are prepared, ordered, and presented for enlarged circulation, a special time when they take on higher meanings among each group and the roles they fulfill.

²⁶⁹ While Durkheim was discussing religion, and his concept is not without detractors (see Coleman and White 2006 for an extensive discussion). I am loosening their usage by qualifying them to reflect the range between “*more* ordinary” (profane) and “*more* existential” (sacred) associations. Much like the identity ssireum expresses, I do not hold there to be any strict dichotomy nor any supernatural ideologies involved.

THE COMPETITION

Ssireum events, competitions, are the ritual performance of Koreanness. Their technical structure, ordering, arrangement of space, and flows of interaction pull together the library of symbols around which membership is based.

The structure of competitions follows an annual cycle which differentiates between seasonal legs and coincides with preexisting cyclical calendar events. Thus there are winter and summer seasons as well as Lunar New Year and Fall Harvest Championships. Each cycle begins with a season opening, the first competition of the year and first competition with incoming players, and then culminates in an Annual Championship, the last competition of the year and final competition of departing players. Throughout each season there will be special accessory holiday events as well as the occasional municipal or corporate events. The timing between official season events and accessory events may overlap, though this is not always the case. For example, the Lunar New Year Championship may regularly occupy an official seasonal slot while the Masan City Championship only does so occasionally.

The effect of the timing of ssireum events is twofold. First, it establishes ssireum as a special activity, one not performed daily; playing ssireum is not the same as eating lunch. Second, it associates ssireum with a broader spectrum of national and cultural symbols and events; conventional knowledge holds that ssireum has always been a part of seasonal festivals. Together these move ssireum events from the profane to the sacred. This in turn directs the sets of daily activities which constitute non-performance time, such as training. The latter occurs when not performing while the opposite effect does

not apply; players train when not competing though time spent outside of training is not the same as time spent competing.

The sequencing of subordinate activities within a competition is a ritual feature. These subordinate activities further frame the performance of ssireum as sacred. A competition is not an organic activity that develops spontaneously. There are rules which guide it. Looking at Figure 12, there are several levels of timing and sequencing that dictate ssireum performances. Each number represents a frame and includes a sequence within it. The larger the circle in the figure, the more time it takes for the circulation of ssireum within that frame's sequence; the smaller, the more rapid. At any given time ssireum itself provides the same functions (boundaries, authority, socialization), though the attendant ritual and symbolic features vary according to the frame and sequence. Movement along these paths correlates to when, and in what relationship, something in ssireum occurs. In a natural progression, all things will eventually repeat themselves. Moving against the natural progression violates the "natural" order and results in the disjuncture of a performance.

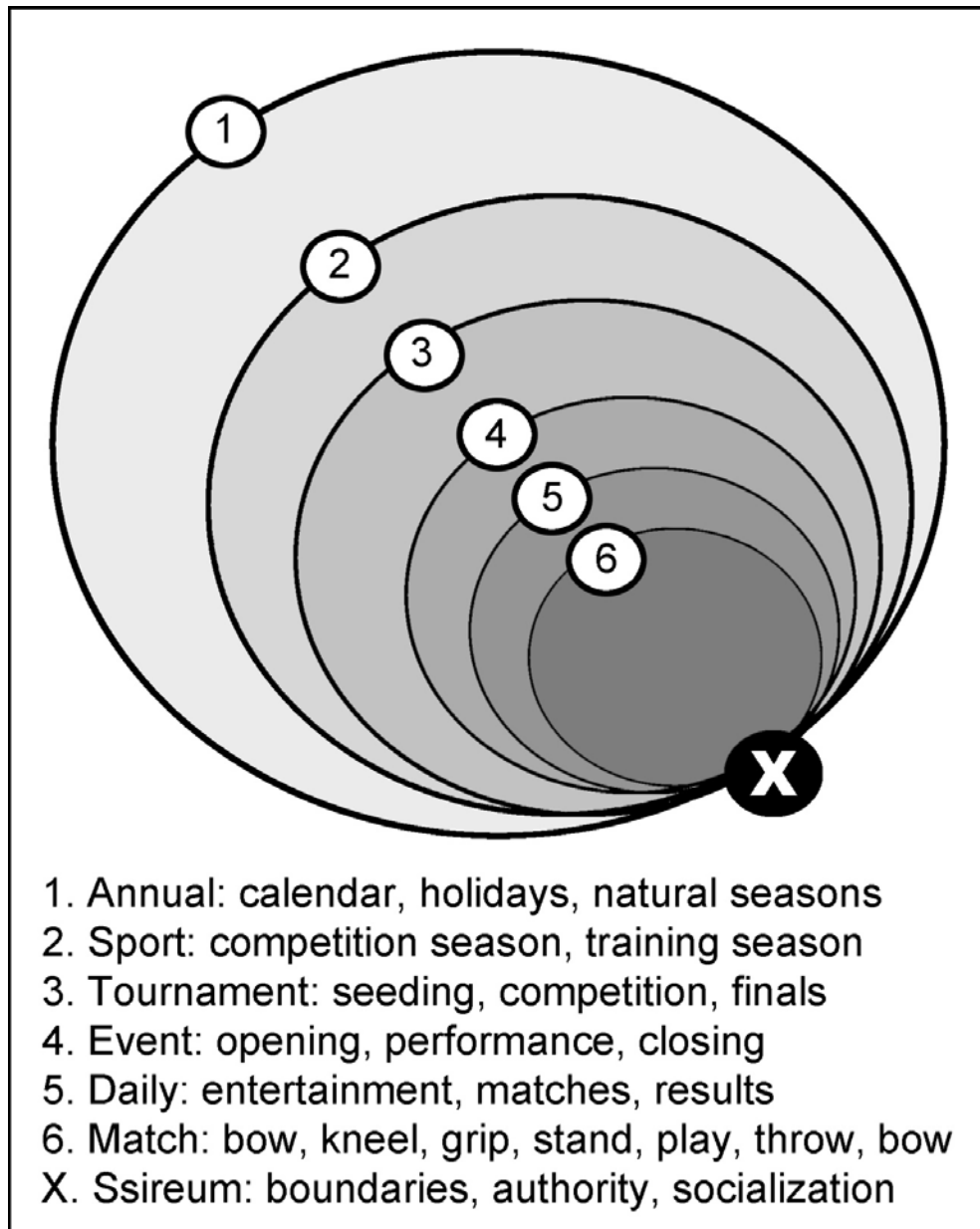


Figure 12 - Cyclical Timing, Ordinal Sequences in Ritual Ssireum

Competitions typically run across several days as set by their calendrical arrangement. At the start of a four day event local and league officials will usually hold a dinner party opening the engagement. While not publicly accessible, these events begin

the ritualization of an event among participants. The message is essentially, “It has begun,” even though some dinners take place after the competition space has been staged (i.e. after people have already begun their work).

On the following day commencement speeches mark the formal beginning of an event for the public; prior to that, audiences will have already been primed for the event through mass-media advertising. Wrestlers and teams may be introduced to the audience depending on the timing of an event, usually coinciding with holiday championships. Actual competition time is preceded by warm-up entertainment such as guided sing-offs among audience members. After the warm-up, production crews begin their action. Pyrotechnics, music, and an opening show using dancing cheerleaders takes place. This is followed by actual competitions between wrestlers which themselves are intercut with additional entertainment such as more cheerleading, invited guest singers, player interviews, and special unofficial competitions. The day’s event officially concludes with the last competition between wrestlers, though it also winds-down with prize raffles for the audience and the restaging or breakdown of the space and equipment by the technical crew. The final day of competition concludes similarly except for championships which end with the declaration of winning players and teams. In those cases winners are garlanded, are given medals and trophies, shake hands with officials, and pose for photographs. During the close of championships individual winners may don ceremonial robes and be paraded about the ring on a wooden litter. The conclusion of a season for performers involves another league organization group dinner and, for teams, a graduation ceremony for departing players at their university.

Some of this order is dictated by the constraints of televising competition. On days with televised matches event workers were given production schedules which listed the order, length, and timing of each sequence. Deviation from these schedules was a source of agitation among production management. Producer Kim, in charge of operations, was usually only present on televised days and appeared accordingly on edge. On non-televised days the order of sequences was generally the same while the length and timing went mostly ignored; invited professional singers never performed on non-televised days.

Matches were subject to their own ordering. This followed the competition principals of individual weight class matches and team matches. There existed one layer of competition among all players within a weight class regardless of team affiliation meaning sometimes players would compete against their own teammates. In some competitions players were free to compete in weight classes higher than their own (presumably, but not always, to their disadvantage). Other competitions were free weight, meaning players from any class could compete though the seeding for those competitions tended to favor the higher performing, and heavier end, of the spectrum. Team competition added another layer by pitting the aggregate scores of teams against one another. Team competition could be through a “best of”²⁷⁰ arrangement of weight classes. For example, if there were five weight classes in a league then Team A and

²⁷⁰ Assuming there are no draws, in a “best of” match there are between $\frac{x+1}{2}$ to x rounds where x equals the maximum number of rounds; or between x to $2x-1$ rounds where x equals the minimum number of rounds.

Team B would match players moving from the lightest to heaviest weight class until one team had accrued three wins. Or team competition could be based on the highest score between all weight classes in a league. For example, in a five weight class league the team scores would end with either five to zero, four to one, or three to two decisions.

Matches themselves also followed their own order as described previously.

Players and coaches are staged on either side of the sand circle, the head referee calls the players into the circle (Figure 13, panels 1, 2), the players bow to one another (Figure 13, panel 3), kneel in front of the referee (Figure 13, panel 4), assume their grips on one another's satbas (Figure 13, panels 5, 6), rise (Figure 13, panel 7), and commence competition at the referee's signal (Figure 13, panels 8-13). If players set foot outside the sand circle competition is stopped and their positions are reset. The competition concludes with the first player to touch the ground with any part of their body at or above the knee (Figure 13, panel 11). If no player touches the ground before the round timer ends the round ends in a draw; some leagues count a draw as one win for each player, other leagues award draws to the lighter of the two players.

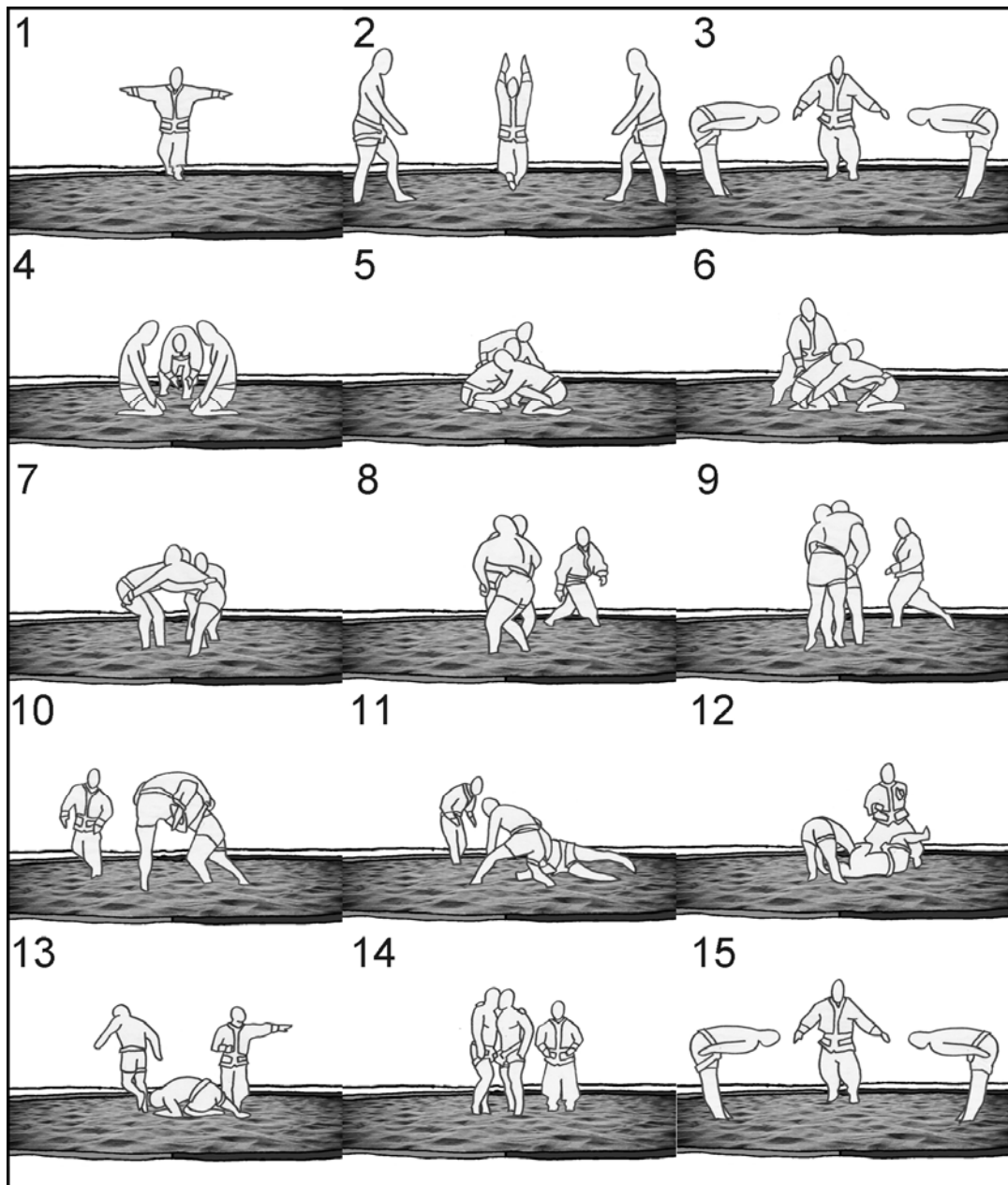


Figure 13 - Typical Ssireum Match

After competition has concluded, the referee declares the winner of the round or match (Figure 13, panel 13). The cycle is repeated until a match has concluded, typically

through the “best of” format. At the conclusion of the match players may embrace or brush sand of one another, then they are dismissed, move to the edges of the sand circle nearest their respective staging areas, bow to one another again, and exit (Figure 13, panels 14, 15). This cycle is repeated for as long as the day’s competition schedule dictates. Schedules are usually arranged so that later brackets, those closer to the completion of a tournament cycle, are closer to the end of a season or event. In other words, higher stakes matches occur later in an event as well as later in a season in order to prolong the audience excitement. As will be discussed later, these rituals are the result of commodifying ssireum as a sport and, to a certain extent, attempt to balance between traditional aesthetics and contemporary needs.

The arrangement of space is an important ritual component. As alluded to previously, it is possible to infer the status of persons based on where they were situated in an event. This did not appear to be an explicit goal of an event as no one every discussed it as such. Rather, it was the logical outcome of how to separate spaces in order to satisfy the performance; i.e. establish a place for the audience to sit and direct their attention to ssireum while accommodating the other people that need to be there. In practice the division of space was ritualistic and invariant. Being out of place was wrong. For anyone other than players and referees to enter the sand during competition would have been unthinkable. (See Figure 14 for an example of spaces.)

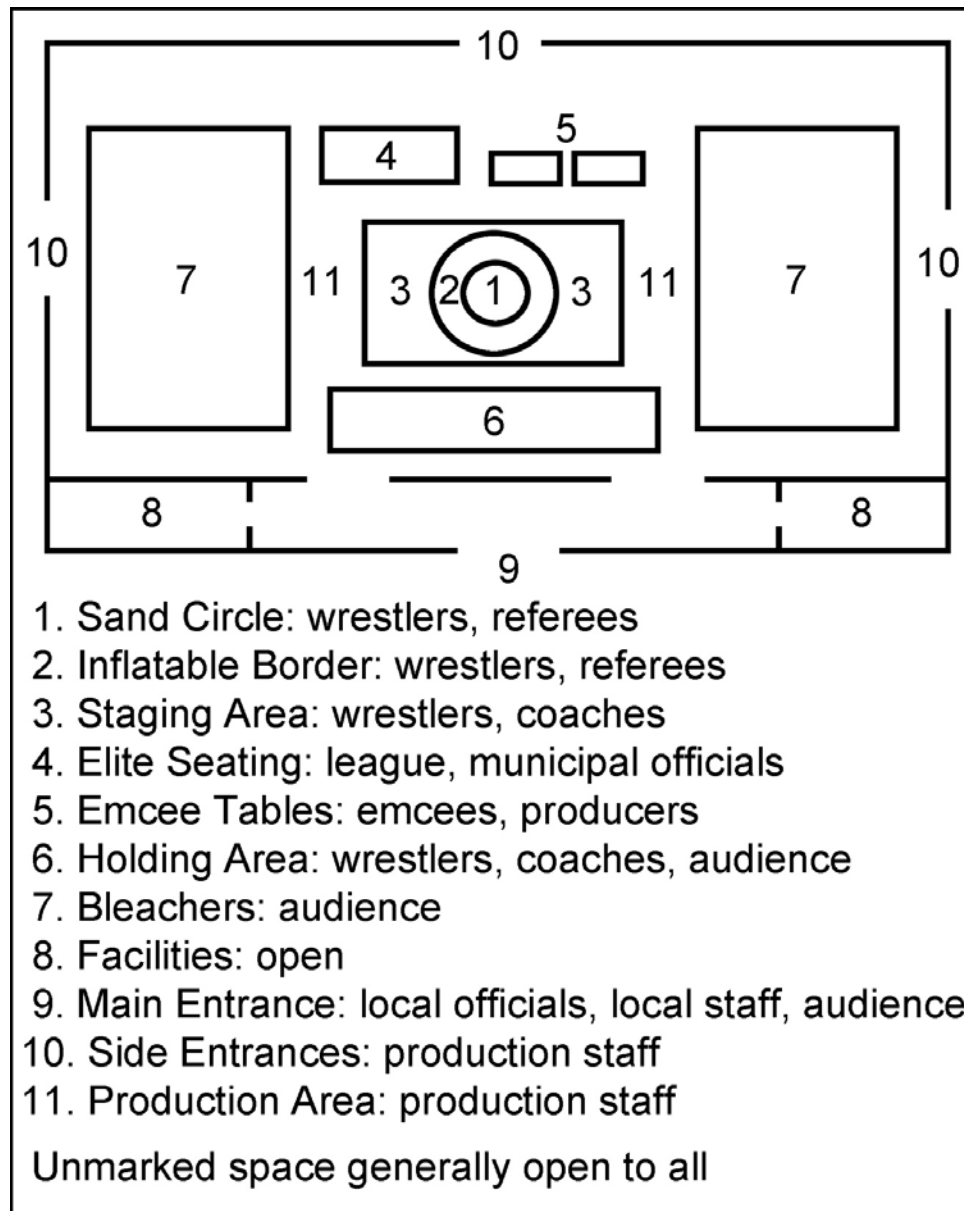


Figure 14 - Ritual Space in Ssireum

Audience space was the most permeable and persons of different status could move through it easily. In contrast, elite space, emcee space, and competition space (sand circle, safety buffer, etc.) were rigidly maintained. Somewhere in the middle was

the staging space for players and coaches as that intersected with footpaths for technical crew as well as the general holding area for players and teams (which also sometimes accommodated audience members). Figure 14 shows one type of arrangement recorded in a small coastal town. The basic positioning of the sand circle, bleachers, elite seating, and emcee tables was constant across nearly all venues.

Timing, sequencing, and space were rituals because they helped bind together the symbols used in ssireum in a nonnegotiable framework. One could not perform ssireum without observing them. In this way they also managed how, when, and where symbols operated. That is, the interactions between symbols at events are ritualized. The way belts, sand circles, colors, uniforms, and language interacted could not be rearranged at will. Audience members could no more wear satbas than wrestlers could play in the bleachers. Any time or space in which an interaction occurred there was an intersection of limited potential; if all unfolded according to the ideals which dictated the event then only certain people would be in certain places and certain times doing certain things. As these peoples, places, and actions were all laden with symbolic content it sends a message. The synergistic effect of Koreanness manifested in the performance of ssireum is, in this sense, the management of appropriated symbolic content through limiting the ways in which it can be read.

Most of those readings are naturally informed by a Korean-centric logic, for that is the primary source of participants and audience. When taken in light of the industry's global aspirations it seems like a point with which they will have to contend. Are these readings uniquely Korean? If so, how will non-Koreans interpret them? If they are

unintelligible, why assume foreign audience will respond favorably? Nested somewhere in ssireum is a universally appreciable mode of play that is contending with what Miracle (1992) summarized as the constraints of a culturally specific text. I offer up the following account of a very enlarged reading as an example of why these questions are relevant.

THE “BULL”

It was spring time and the bitter cold of winter had receded, slowly replaced by cloudy skies full of Yellow Dust²⁷¹. Regional festivals take advantage of the improved temperature and agricultural timing to conduct their business. Small towns in rural areas use these festivals to generate business and cultivate a sense of regional distinctiveness in the process. In this particular case I was attending a festival centered around bull fighting, though not the Hemingway variety. In this festival the bulls literally fight each other in a large stadium with a sand floor.

Bulls from around the country are transported in and seeded for tournament style competition. The pamphlets and signs in English, Japanese, and Chinese guided the large audience through each match.²⁷² Emcees narrate as the bulls are brought two at a time into the ring, pulled by handlers with ropes tied around the bull's horns and heads. The

²⁷¹ 황사: 黄沙: *Hwangsa*: Yellow Dust, a seasonal phenomenon in East Asia in which desert sand from China, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia is picked up by air currents and carried across Korea, Japan, and parts of Russia. The dust clouds accumulate pollen and pollution along the way and deposit sheets of yellow-brown grime across everything exposed to the elements.

²⁷² Again, this overestimation of the audience reflects the pervasiveness of market ideology and globalization. The town where this event occurs is exceptionally rural and the internal coding of the event were very locally specific. The festival management may have global visions, but it seemed unusual.

animals are positioned to face each other and when the signal is given the ropes are released and the animals begin a shoving contest head-to-head. The steady pressure of the giants pressing each other eventually gives way as one tires and breaks from the contact. The triumphant bull may make a short chase after the fleeing loser to emphasize the point. The bulls will then be secured by the handlers and reset for another round. None of the animals seem particularly aggressive and the matches end quickly. While some animals may bleed from abrasions sustained in play none of them were ever gored, bucked, or trampled. A few bulls fled from their challengers before ever making contact. It was a mock combat, as peaceful a struggle between two large animals could be.

The parallels to ssireum were obvious. The sand floor, the red-and-blue color coding, the bull (traditional prize), the rural setting, the seasonal timing, and ritual diffusion of violence made it an easy parallel. As if to emphasize this point the mascots for the event are two cows dressed in satbas and posed as if wrestling.²⁷³ The event also featured two “comedy ssireum” events. The first took place inside the ring and the second outside the stadium in the adjoining vendor space. Both followed the same general pattern and cast. The indoor performance was late in starting, presumably because of the bull fights running over their allotted time. The performance was preceded by a short concert of 1970s style singing. Afterwards the stadium emcee announced that the comic ssireum would begin, though it would only run eight minutes

²⁷³ I noted that, curiously, the cow in the red satba was wearing it backwards.

instead of the originally scheduled time.²⁷⁴ With that announcement, the performance began.

A group of men entered the bull fighting arena dressed in period garments. One was a royal court inspector, one was his assistant, several more were armored guards, and one was a Japanese prisoner. The entire premise of the act hinged upon the racist caricature of the Japanese player. He was dressed in a black *kimono* (robe), wore *geta* (wooden sandals), and sported white *fundoshi* (underwear) beneath his robe. While awaiting his sentencing he trash-talks his captors and challenges them to a test of physical strength. The captors offer to let him compete in *ssireum* for his freedom and he agrees. Naturally, the Japanese prisoner is spectacularly tossed about and loses three times in a row. At that point he claims the *ssireum* contest was unfair and that they let him demonstrate the power of his Japanese style. He gives a brief imitation of some sumo stretching before running off in an act of superb cowardice. The court inspector and his retinue give chase and all exit the arena.

The same routine was repeated outdoors with slight variations. It was preceded by a b-boy (break-dance) routine, the Japanese prisoner assumed the role of an audience heckler instead, and the performance was followed up by an interview with the leader of the comic *ssireum* troop. After the interview concluded the space returned to its previous

²⁷⁴ There was no mention of how long the comic *ssireum* was supposed to run though the pamphlet showed an hour reserved for the performance - a length of time nearly double what the full outdoor performance ran.

function as festival attendees milled about among vendors while a troop of musical cross-dressing taffy hawkers sang dirty and caustic verses about their customers.²⁷⁵

The text of the comedy ssireum was an elaboration on national identities, an inversion of the typical Japanese relations. This plays into national animosities and the historical legacy of Korean oppression at the hands of invading Japanese. Turning the caricature of the Japanese thug into the foil of the performance asserted the virtue and prowess of the Korean wrestlers. A none too subtle message about intergroup relations and clear example of how ssireum can be used to elaborate on a whole host of boundaries through the symbols it ritualizes.

²⁷⁵ 각설이: 却說이: *Gakseoli*: Singing beggars, a staple trope found at festivals and market setting. Cross-dressed in exaggerated and filthy costumes these performers sing rude or lascivious verses (often about the audience) while selling taffy (엿: *yeot*).

CHAPTER V

THE LEADERSHIP (AUTHORITY)

This chapter discusses the political aspects of ssireum, the sources of corporate direction that maintain ssireum as a sport (as opposed to a game), and the style of authority that is central to the values it establishes. In short, this covers the purview of sponsors, coaches, founders, advisors, and their ideas.

SITUATING AUTHORITIES

There are various, overlapping types of authority and leadership in ssireum that all work to inform each other. Coaches obviously have an impact on players and senior players have influence over junior players. But other types of authority are less obvious or more symbolic in their appearance. League founders set agendas and mediate the collective direction of the sport. Sponsors use their wealth to support the leagues and elevate their status. Independent of one another these types of authority would have little impact on the collective direction of ssireum. The real force of their authority comes from working together in the context of the sport. Through their interaction we can see both the emphasis on the traditional aesthetics of *communitas* as well as the market ideology. An account of the season's conclusion should illustrate these points in context more clearly.

The final leg of the season took place during one of the frozen winter months. Iron Kim and I were inside the gymnasium where it would take place. I could feel the bite of the cold through my parka and cap. Looking at the wrestlers standing around in

their shorts waiting for their turn to play I wondered aloud how they did not die from exposure. Iron Kim said, “They probably don’t feel anything right now. That’s how it was when I played. Before you go in, everything is numb. Once you’re in the sand, time slows down. You can’t focus, but you can feel everything all at once. Like you’re watching it from somewhere else. Then suddenly it’s over and you just want to rest.”

Seated in the elite section, Professor Kim motioned for me to join him. He pointed at one of the wrestlers in the competition at hand. “He’s a graduating senior that will be taking a job with a new semi-pro team in this town. The man sitting next to me is a city council member who is on the board of the team. Do you want to meet him?” It was a rhetorical question followed up with the customarily formal introduction and exchange of business cards. Councilman Kim examined my card and said, “So, you’re studying ssireum?” Before I could respond our attention was diverted as the results of the third round in the match were called out. The graduating senior had lost.

I asked Councilman Kim how and why they started the team. “Well, most of us played ssireum when we were young. Now we’re successful business guys. We started the team because we love the sport and want to retain good players from this area. We used to be famous for wrestlers but we had no way to keep them. Now we do.” Through a few more questions Councilman Kim revealed that their board was a civic operation as opposed to a private one, the rationale being that attaching the team to a local government support system was more stable than relying on a private entity. The board had thirty-four members and each one was responsible for sponsoring a wrestler by covering their salary as well as room and board. At present they had secured enough

funding to operate the team for two years and they fully expected to continue indefinitely. The members had also pooled resources to build a dedicated ssireum training facility and dormitory as well. “One of our members is donating an ox to the team at the convocation ceremony tomorrow.” It was an invitation to attend. I closed the interview by asking Councilman Kim if he had any children and if they had played ssireum. “I have two sons. They’re studying to be doctors.”²⁷⁶ Thanking him for his time I left Councilman Kim to continue scrutinizing the competition.

Since he had been present, I asked Professor Kim what he thought about the conversation. He leaned close to me and said quietly, “Not really,” an oblong comment on the reputation of the area for champion wrestlers. “Even though there is a recession these days, it’s easy to raise money for ssireum from old business guys. But this place is a little unusual because even some larger towns haven’t thought to create their own semi-pro teams. I guess they want to build the industry because their team’s players will probably become local coaches or trainers after they retire. Still, you can see he doesn’t want his kids to become wrestlers because he knows their future isn’t guaranteed.” I asked Professor Kim about the ox. “I know the guy donating it. He’s a cattle farmer so it’s not a big deal for him. I guess he will probably sell the ox [back to himself], maybe for less money than it is worth. It’s for show. He’ll probably just give them the money.” I asked if that was typical. “I won an ox once when I played. I had no way to get it home

²⁷⁶ This somewhat evasive answer placed distance between his sons and ssireum. It could be interpreted different ways, but the basic point was that his sons had not played the sport.

so I left it at a police station. The next day I gave it to the mayor. He sold it and divided up the money.”

I went back to sitting near Iron Kim and asked him about the graduating senior. Did he think it looked bad that the guy lost his match in the town where he is going to work? “Maybe, but I think he lost on purpose. He already has a job waiting for him. The other guy was from the same hometown. It’s more important to improve the other guy’s ranking so he can get a better job when it’s his turn to graduate.” I asked if that was common. “It depends on the relationship. You can’t guess unless you know how the players are related to each other. Even coaches don’t always know about that. Sometimes they need to help each other.” I asked if Iron Kim had ever done that. “Some [of my] seniors asked me to do that.” He grinned at the ambiguous answer, indicating he might have subversively disobeyed depending on who had asked him.

We later toured the town’s semi-pro team facility during its official opening. By all accounts it appeared to be well-built with its modest cafeteria, dormitory, training room, and indoor practice mound. I tried to estimate the scope of resources that had gone into the project, but it was difficult to assess. Like the farmer who donated an ox, whenever people participated in the industry they tended to do so in ways that match their ability to contribute. In all likelihood the building contracts had gone to people on the team’s board that were in the construction business. And the same was probably true of everything else needed to run the team - food, toiletries, equipment, and so on. The most tangible costs would come in the form of recruitment incentives and salaries. Distributing as much of the logistical overhead as possible throughout a locally

organized network would indeed disperse the risk of a team shutting down. The professional league of ssireum's heyday had folded during the IMF crisis precisely because their corporate sponsors had become insolvent or were forced by economic reforms to cut non-remunerative activity. Semi-pro teams appeared to be filling the space previously held by the professional league and doing so in a way that emphasized regional, personal ties in the performance of a national sport.

The next couple of days of competition built up to the final event. On the last day I arrived at the gym to see the celebratory bovine stationed outside wearing a blanket advertising the event and a garland of flowers around its neck. It appeared nonplussed by the spectacle surrounding it. Inside the gym Iron Kim was sitting at the event emcee table and assembling the computerized system which would control round timing and scorekeeping. I watched the lights being tested for player introductions and listened as the sound system was checked repeatedly. Gaffers barked orders as electricians clambered about the ceiling space cross checking anything with a wire. Team banners and advertising were hung on the longest walls of the rectangular gymnasium. Iron Kim spent the better part of the day checking the system and isolating player data for the following days of competition. At one point I asked him about longitudinal record keeping. "That's a good idea, but who would do it? No one is interested in that responsibility. It's a job for these guys, not a passion. Until there is money for it, it won't get done."

The final match itself was an open-division format. A tall, lean player was paired against and shorter, broader one. Since I identified more with the body type of the

former I had been watching his performance throughout the season. He went against type, but he did it well and showed that long limbs and height are not always disadvantages in ssireum. He beat the heavier player handily using legs skills and pyrotechnics went off before buckets of confetti rained down from the ceiling. The player was robed, given medals and trophies, and pictures were taken with him and all of the league officials. Similar honors were given to the winning team. Everyone took turns posing outside with the prize cow (see Figure 15).

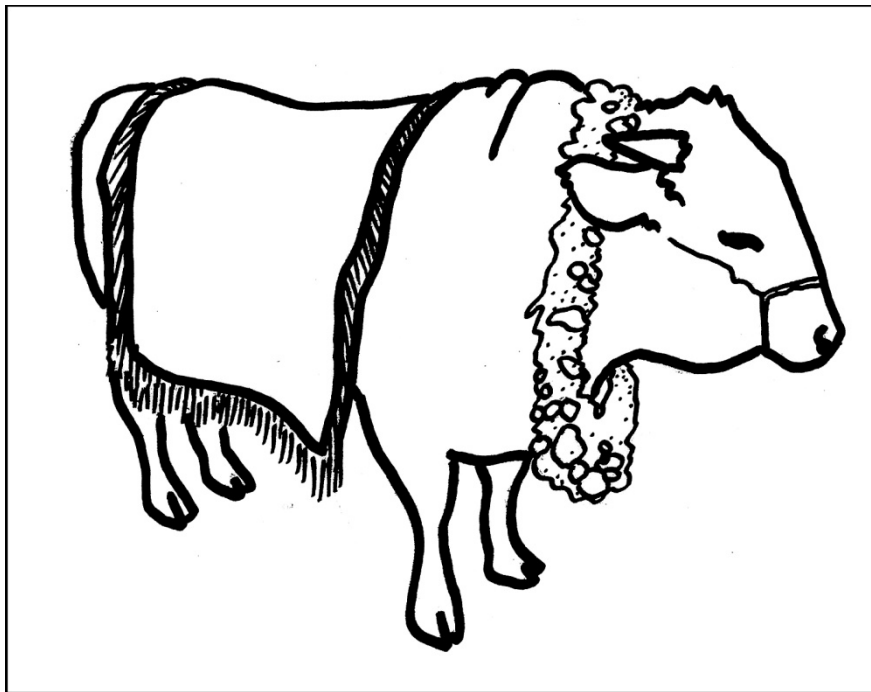


Figure 15 - The Prize Cow

Remembering my conversation with Professor Kim about the cow he won, I asked about for what was going to happen to the cow present that day. No one seemed particularly sure. Coach Kim guessed, “They’ll probably just sell it and take the money. What do they need a cow for?” Iron Kim agreed and added, “They’ll probably use the money from the cow for a party. Or the coach might keep some of it and give some to the players.” Those seemed like reasonable takes on the cow, but a few weeks later I received a clearer answer. Talking to a player who graduated from that team he revealed that their coach had found a way to transport and process the cow. The team had subsequently eaten it.

FROM THE TOP DOWN

The distribution of authority in ssireum sits disproportionately at the top. This is intuitive from a modern managerial perspective. It is what keeps corporate endeavors operating. It is also makes sense from a traditional perspective as well, at least in Korea. In general social settings, status (and authority) properly flow from the oldest to youngest. Ideally one’s superiors will also be one’s elders. Within the ssireum industry, collegiate players were predominantly in their early 20s, primary school coaches in their late 20s to early 30s, university coaches in their late mid 30s to early 50s, with the highest positions of league authority going to those in their mid 50s and beyond. According to both managerial and cultural logic, those older leaders dictated the collective direction of ssireum.

Consequently, lower ages correlated with lower status. Players as a group were forever at the bottom end of status and authority. They rarely had the discretion to

dictate the structure of their daily life - that was the coach's job. They certainly did not have the authority to exert obvious influence over the enactment of ssireum or resist the agendas of league leadership. The expectation was that players were responsible for playing and management was responsible for managing. Coaches could dispense advice and rhetoric to their wards during training. Management would often duplicate this role for the benefit of collective audience at competitions. It was a system of maintaining ideological integrity.

The system also seemed to place distance between players and authority in that the former were rarely concerned with the aims of the latter. After a particularly lengthy speech from a league president about the civic virtues of sportsmanship at a commencement ceremony I asked the heavy set Player Kim, a young man nearing the end of his collegiate career, what he thought of the message. Player Kim looked at me blankly in response. I rephrased the question and asked him if he agreed with the speech. After some hesitation Player Kim replied, "I guess so." My question had caught the ear of one of Player Kim's teammates who leaned in closer and said, "We weren't paying attention." It was a point I personally came to relate to over time. The most pressing concerns for players, as will be discussed later, lean towards the practical and not the poetic. The speeches that the older men delivered bordered on the esoteric, flavored with the nostalgia of their years. The relative security of their years gave them the opportunity to contemplate a meaning for ssireum, one usually tailored to their own experiences. It was not always easy to relate to those topics. I once tried to occupy that role by recycling a ssireum metaphor I had heard during a speech in a conversation with Iron Kim,

something in line with the popular analogy comparing wrestling to life - ssireum teaches us to turn a superior force against itself to succeed. Iron Kim nodded in agreement. I asked if he got the point, to which he replied, “No, Haeng-nim. Sorry.”

Within ssireum, elite status equates to the ability to influence action and values by controlling knowledge. Founders and advisors set agendas and coaches connect those agendas with players. This type of interaction circulates knowledge and is at the aesthetic heart and philosophical mind of the ssireum experience because it informs nearly all aspects of the sport. Considerable knowledge about ssireum is untraceable because it is subjective, responsive to context, and known only through personal interaction. It can be divided into three loose categories. Conventional knowledge is the nebulous sum of untraceable collective expectations which explain how ssireum was, is, and ought to be understood. Interpersonal knowledge is the contextually responsive method ideas use to jump from person-to-person. Personal knowledge is the reflexive negotiation which evaluates experiences and produces the body of variations which feed back into the pool of conventional knowledge.

For example, the “harmonious” philosophy of ssireum is represented by the taegeuk and appropriated red and blue color motifs. The generally Taoist philosophy these colors represent is the harmony of properly aligning mutually opposing forces. In this case, the wrestlers represent the opposing forces and this is signaled by the red and blue in their competition uniforms and the ring in which they compete. The wrestler’s struggle involves the alignment of these forces and their fulfillment (i.e. end of a match) brings harmonious *communitas* to those present. Even when both wrestlers fall the

appropriated aesthetic is still achieved - one wins by being willing to fall.²⁷⁷ Aligning courage and fear yields a harmonious strategy and so forth. These rather blunt aesthetic symbols represent a conventional knowledge that can become infinitely nuanced in the rhetoric individuals use to explain, persuade, and enact their version of Koreanness. However, as discussed previously, the metaphor of taegeuk probably overstates the historical importance of Taoism in Korea. The real value of this association is how easily it can be transmitted between people and adapted by individuals as nuanced frameworks for understanding. What is generally articulated as the intuitive recognition of Koreanness in ssireum is the folk distillation of normative criteria as they are shared across a population, evaluated and adapted by individuals, and re-circulated. Social authority and deference to authority are integral to the process.

PLAYING SSIREUM TEACHES TRADITION

The primary sources of knowledge about ssireum discussed earlier represent firm, historical information. The interpretations of that information, or the projections made from the present upon them, would be considered conventional knowledge. This type of collective knowledge is a set of normative expectations explaining a subject, the “sense of a thing” acquired by being part of the group. This atemporal wellspring of existential

²⁷⁷ The belts and grips used in ssireum create a type of play in which toppling an opponent is more often than not an issue of making him land before you do. Even when you manage to break an opponent’s balance and throw him to the ground he is usually still holding on to *your* belt and bringing you with him. This type of play creates its own strategies and skill sets, but the point remains that an important part of winning is better falling. Resisting or avoiding falling too strongly will actually inhibit your chances of winning. Playing as low and close to the ground as possible is one of the best ways to out leverage your opponent. It may seem counterintuitive, but in a game decided by falling the ground is your friend.

data on ssireum is how individuals think others think of ssireum. The flow of this knowledge moves from the top down. The persons with the resources and drive to organize and frame ssireum events are usually the oldest, highest status individuals.

Rhetoric based on conventional knowledge tends to be vague, light on details and heavy on dogma. This type of knowledge is an excellent tool for influencing actions through social pressure. For example, a small regional event for primary school children opened with the national anthem and then the organizing official delivered a short speech exalting the virtues of good sportsmanship. “It is our responsibility to play well!” The children received his words earnestly and intently by shouting in response, “We must follow the rules!” Most ssireum competitions open similarly with a speech delivered by an organization official that typically invokes a general notion of etiquette²⁷⁸ or courtesy²⁷⁹. Persons receiving the message assimilate and disperse the notion as well. Holding the knowledge that ssireum is about gentlemanly behavior makes it possible to apply social pressure to others when they do not conform to that conventional knowledge. Disrespectful players can be pushed towards an vague ideal of mannerly conduct when, objectively, there is nothing that actually connects ssireum and propriety.²⁸⁰ Likewise, the sport may be amended over time under the auspice of

²⁷⁸ 예절:禮節: *Yejeol*: Etiquette; a term used to describe refined, gentlemanly, traditional good manners.

²⁷⁹ 예의:禮儀: *Yeeui*: Courtesy; similar to etiquette, refers to civility and manners.

²⁸⁰ Keeping in mind the distance historical elite social classes placed between themselves and physical labor, along with wrestling’s association with the bawdy market environment, the association of wrestling and virtue seems relatively modern. This is just speculation, but it is possible that this conflation took root around the time foreign sports and their accompanying notions of sportsmanship became more common in Korea.

maintaining this character. Ssireum must work to maintain good behavior because ssireum is about etiquette.

This tautological reasoning based on collective knowledge is part of the mechanism through which invented traditions solidify themselves. Everyone intuitively knows that ssireum is about etiquette because it just *is*. When the logic operates at that level too much reflection would inhibit its ability to be passed between members of the group. Again, there is nothing which concretely links ssireum to good behavior much less makes a well reasoned case that contemporary concepts of manners can be assumed to have been the same over one thousand years ago. Whether or not Goguryeo civilization thought of civil behavior the same as 20th century Koreans or linked it to ssireum is at best irrelevant to collective knowledge about ssireum. At worst it is antithetical because it could start a cascade of questions which defuses that knowledge. The vagueness of collective knowledge facilitates its ability to help maintain the continuity of an ethnic identity because it is easier to adapt variations in contents over time to weakly articulated ideals.

Some of the most important collective knowledge about ssireum revolves around etiquette, harmony, and development. Broadly applied, etiquette is the means through which the goal of development is harmoniously achieved. The ritual respect demonstrated at all levels of performing ssireum, such as bowing, is etiquette. By observing these protocols for proper conduct players, coaches, judges, and audience members can maintain a smooth social interaction, one unobstructed by disruptive conflicts, and achieve a harmonious *communitas*. The rationale for pursuing that feeling

is the development of the self with the self, with others, and with the world. This is a peaceful mandate which appropriates conflict and ritualizes it in order to control and channel that energy towards noble ends. At least in principle. In practice etiquette, harmony, and development are actually “know them when you see them” issues.

It should be pointed out that these concepts are very much in line with the nationalist rhetoric of Korea as a militarily non-aggressive nation steeped in refined civil traditions. Collective knowledge sets up a cycle where the national character and ethnic character mirror one another in various traditions such as ssireum. Thus manners become a national civic issue, a way in which the peace is maintained not only in sports but across the whole of daily life situations in Korea in such a way that the prosperity of the country ensued. Not surprisingly etiquette in motion entails a good measure of learning how to practically interact in a world of rigidly stratified social hierarchies based on age and gender. Indeed, the ritual observation of these stratifications is key to getting along and being able to more successfully achieve goals over time. Persons higher in the hierarchy are obligated to care for those persons beneath and closest to them while persons lower in the relationship should anticipate and satisfy the needs of those above them. This mutual respect and concern through the hierarchy is a redistributive mechanism that makes the practice of values within ssireum the same as the larger social context in which it operates.

AUTHORITY AS DEVELOPMENT

As best as can be determined, there was no presiding ssireum authority prior to the advent of the first organized leagues. There is the record of the Yugakkwon Club’s

competition right around the start of Japanese occupation, but it was not until the Joseon Ssireum Association's activities in the late 1920s that there was any national structure to ssireum. The rise of the JSA coincides with the inclusion of ssireum in the NSF and eventually the regular telecasting of the sport. The rivalry between the JSA (reborn as the Korean Ssireum Association) and the Korean Ssireum Federation during the golden era of ssireum in the 1980s and 1990s illustrates how important the national structure of the sport was - control over ssireum was a valuable enough commodity that it was contested through intense corporatized conflict. The ability to direct the ideological and structural development of the sport was the pinnacle of elite self-realization.

The century long process of consolidation and control resulted in standardizing most of the features of ssireum. The diversity of ssireum prior to this time is unknown, but the lack of transport and communication infrastructure until Korea's modernization probably kept it mostly localized. Conventional histories of the left/right/center playing styles and divergent terminology for identical techniques support this view. Oral histories suggest that before modernization it was impossible to get enough people from outside the capital together to standardize the sport. Eventually any regional variation became ironed out as the most pronounced trend in ssireum became movement away from being a low status game and towards being a national sport. For example, the connection between ssireum and higher education is a result of this trend. Shortly after the end of Japanese occupation colleges are documented as having ssireum teams; this means that within a couple of decades of the formation of organized ssireum an entirely

new level of play was added to the sport. The social stratification of ssireum became a driving force behind its growth.

This is evidenced by the library of symbols and rituals employed in the sport. Before ssireum was organized, there was greater diversity in the protocols for play. Or, it could be stated, there was no standardization. Consider weight division and tournament play. As explained by Director Kim, someone who grew up in post-war Korea, they are a convention of contemporary sports performance. “In the old days, [ssireum] wasn’t played this way. Just king-of-the-mountain was played.²⁸¹ No weight classes, tournaments, nothing like that. Everyone would get together and play. Bigger guys had some advantage. They would win more easily. But it was more exciting when they were defeated by smaller guys. That was real skill. Watching a smaller wrestler win was the best. Wrestling someone bigger [than you] and winning was even better.” King-of-the-mountain play was not conducive to the development of a national competition format. There are no teams or weight divisions in king-of-the-mountain, it is not conducive to ritualization because there are fewer opportunities to employ symbols. The earliest efforts at developing ssireum apparently knew this since they included teams almost from the very beginning; the development and revision of weight classes quickly followed suit in effort to balance the advantages larger players had. As teams and

²⁸¹ King-of-the-mountain is the most informal tournament style possible. It means only one match occurs at a time with the winning player, or champion, continuing on to compete against others players until they eventually lose. When defeated the former champion leaves and their successful challenger then assumes the role of champion, thus there is only one champion or “king-of-the-mountain” at any given time. In this scenario a player’s ability is usually a matter of how many (consecutive) matches they have stayed champion.

divisions became standard they adopted symbolic functions through the associative nature of their names. And the continual inclusion of “all open” competition at some events reflects the nostalgic beauty of ssireum, the desire to see smaller players prevail.

The expansion and diversification of ssireum in forms of play, along with the standardization of those forms, falls under the rubric of “development”²⁸². This concept was frequently invoked in abstract discussions of ssireum as a sport, particularly in the sense of sports industry. Unique to this usage was that it served to catch rhetoric rather than direct specific actions. For example, when Ssireum President Kim exhorted at a dinner meeting with other officials, “We must continue to be committed to the development of ssireum,” it was a way of characterizing what the organization’s attitude should be. There were no details about how development was conceptualized, should be implemented, or even evaluated. When following up on this point I questioned Ssireum Official Kim about what development meant. “Popularity. Getting more people playing and watching.”

Talking to other officials and industry workers, the consensus was also on popularity. This connected with the undercurrent of gloom in the industry that apparently took hold during the collapse of the professional league. Ssireum insiders were all sure that the sport was less popular than it had previously been and pointed to the loss of corporate financing and disbanding of teams, lower television ratings, and reduced event turnout. Two problems underlie these measurements. First, they’re subjectively based on

²⁸² 개발:開發: *Gaebal*: Development.

familiarity with the golden era of ssireum. The period of popularity enjoyed by ssireum during the 1980s and 90s may have been a bubble and not at all sustainable. No one I talked to in the industry had considered that possibility. Second, no one questioned whether the measurements they offered were appropriate or accurate. Is popularity synonymous with development? Are television ratings data and event turnout the only reasonable measurements? What would be the net effect of popularizing ssireum? How would it be recognized? The questions, to my knowledge, were largely unasked.²⁸³ The popularly suggested measures of development were very market driven ideas emphasizing audiences as consumers. The relationships between audiences, participants, and development were not sufficiently disentangled or understood. This entanglement of measures ignored the fact that while the professional league had died off, collegiate and amateur events had proliferated. It seemed to me that participation rates constituted at least half, perhaps even the greater half, of the measure of popularity. Why then were they subordinate to measure of consumption? Again, this reflected a tendency towards market ideologies - ssireum was more becoming of a product than an activity.

The only front on which development seemed to be clear was the globalization of ssireum. This had two specific components. First, to establish ssireum leagues in foreign

²⁸³ Of course, absence of proof is not proof of absence. I did not have complete access to organization meetings and these points may have been considered therein. It may also be possible that these were considered settled issues that did not merit continuous discussion. When pressed on the matter, most people appeared to be uncomfortable - either because I was not understanding the point of development or because they were unable to articulate it specifically.

countries.²⁸⁴ Second, to eventually have ssireum recognized as an Olympic sport.²⁸⁵ As previously mentioned, the WSF formed explicitly to satisfy that notion of development though they may eventually come to blows with the KSA should the latter attempt to extend their influence in that direction as well. This mission fit with the increasingly popular use of globalization and market ideology in various endeavors across Korea. Interestingly, it marked a desire to shift the direction of influence in global interactions. The Korean economy was already international in its scope, the geopolitical strategic importance of the peninsula had been a global interest for over a century, and the trend of sending students abroad for higher education had been fully realized for quite some time.²⁸⁶ Major corporations and government offices in Korea had adopted English oriented hiring policies ranging from the relatively innocuous proficiency exams all the way up to grueling “English only” business interview and skills assessment. Korea was, by most accounts, a solidly globalized nation. However, that experience had up until that point been an issue of accommodation - Korea adapting to the influence of the outside

²⁸⁴ Based on the state of affairs in organizational leadership and the lead-in time for current efforts in this direction, the idea of globalization could not have been more than a few years old; it is impossible to say with certainty since the idea may have been in place earlier, but without the funding to realize it. The strategies for revitalization that emerged after 1997 occasionally mentioned the usefulness of attracting foreign attention, but I cannot think of one that specifically suggested exporting ssireum.

²⁸⁵ The Olympic recognition of ssireum was a point I brought up with KSA officials when asked for my opinion about how to, “advanced the future of the sport”. This came on the heels of the 2008 Summer Olympics. I had just watched Rajmond Debevec receive a bronze medal and wondered how something like shooting was Olympic level athleticism while belt wrestling was not. Apparently I was not alone in this epiphany as, unbeknownst to me then, the World Ssireum Federation was incorporating around that time. Less than a year later Olympic aspirations had become status quo for ssireum’s development. Perhaps we had all contracted the notion because of the climate - the lay popularity of globalization in Korea at that time felt epic.

²⁸⁶ That is, if families had the resources their preference was to send their children to an English speaking nation for college. While a handful of ssireum officials had been educated in the US, *all* of their children had attended school abroad - either college or English language studies.

world. The (re)emergent desire was to reverse that trend and have Korea influence the outside world.²⁸⁷ Examples include the export of Korean popular culture to other nations (e.g. television dramas, cinema, pop music), the government incentives for recruitment of foreign faculty and students to Korean universities, the spread of Korean-based Christian missions in periphery nations, and the global dispersal of Korean cultural goods (of which taekwondo was the leading example).

When I arrived at Daehak University my regular presence and status as an foreigner was largely novel; a year later, there were banners across the campus touting the “global vision” of the institution and its new “glocal” mantra. It was difficult to tell what, if anything, had changed logistically. I asked Department Head Kim about the subject and he first suggested it was a populist theme before adding, “Our prestige is raised by attracting foreigners.” When asked for more details he said, “There are financial incentives from the government. Beyond that, it’s difficult to say.”

On an unrelated occasion in the United States I met a tenured political science professor from a state university who had just completed a summer lecturing stint at a prestigious private university in Seoul. I was reviewing some Korean research abstracts at a coffee house and he was seated next to me. Looking at the papers he asked, “Is that Korean? It looks Korean...” I indicated it was and a conversation ensued in which he described his recent summer experience. “It was a nice university - gorgeous campus, lots of old growth trees and scenery. The accommodations were excellent, I was well

²⁸⁷ The government espoused globalization-cum-Koreannization of the 1990s had been quashed by the IMF crisis. A decade later and the time seemed right to try again.

paid, taught all my classes in English, and I had a personal assistant who pretty much handled the students for me. I had to adjust to the food a little, but aside from that it was comfortable. They seemed like they were really putting a lot of effort into building an international presence there. They had a good plan. But you know what? It was a real *Field of Dreams* attitude, 'Build it and they will come.' That's the problem. Nobody could say who was coming or why. Why would anyone want to go to Korea?" When I pointed out that *he* went, the professor replied, "I didn't have anything else planned for the summer and it seemed like an interesting opportunity. It was interesting. For the summer. They're not going to produce a lasting effect if they can't attract anyone permanently. What's the incentive to move to Korea, learn the language, and live there the rest of your life? They're putting all this development money into attracting people but they have no plan for keeping them. As far as I could tell nobody seemed to think that was going to be a problem. Maybe they don't really want to keep them." We left the topic at that.

In the collegiate winter season I counted only five foreigners in the audience. Three of them left the competitions before I could catch them for interviews. The remaining two were foreign brides from the Philippines who approached me during the singing competition portion of an event preceding the televised action. It was a rural town in the interior of the country and foreigners were apparently not a common sight. One woman asked me, "Do you speak English?" After indicating that I did, they asked a few more questions. "Where are you from? Why are you here?" I explained and returned the questions to them. "We're here because our husbands wanted to come. We have to

go back and sit with them now.” During the first day of the prominent annual Fall Harvest Championship in Seoul I noticed six blonde women in the audience and I managed to reach them before the competition ended. The women were in their mid-20s and originally hailed from Canada, the US, and New Zealand; the senior of the group, with more than one year experience in Korea, did most of the speaking. They all worked together at the same English academy and had come together with two Korean men, also in their mid-20s. The senior woman had seen a sumo tournament while in Japan on a short vacation and had mentioned it in her class. A student, one of the men present, mentioned ssireum in response. The teacher later saw an advertisement for the Fall Harvest Championship on television and invited her coworkers along with the student, who in turn invited his friend (the other male present). It was the first time *anyone* in the group had attended a ssireum competition. All agreed it was exciting and claimed they would continue to follow the sport. None of them returned over the remaining days of the competition.

CONFLICTS OF AUTHORITY

While greater codification and differentiation of ssireum as a sport helps to create a stronger connection to the past, it also provides additional opportunities for conflict. As mentioned before, the period of greatest standardization in ssireum also coincided with intense association conflict. Authority in ssireum is an asset. Disputes over that asset appeared to follow three general lines: 1) ideological differences; 2) conflicting obligations; and 3) money. In any case, disputes over authority can result in its collapse as coalitions are pulled apart in the wake.

The conflict between the KSA and KSF can be characterized in this way. While the relationships between individuals in those associations are not necessarily a matter of history, the ideological divide between framing ssireum as an amateur sport versus a professional sport played a part in their discord. The framing is important because it presents a means of asserting control over the financial aspects of playing ssireum. Establishing a semi-pro league was a means of sidestepping the regulative authority of the existing professional league and, in the end, defeating them through attrition as the resources of the latter dried up. That is, claiming to play a different game is also a financial strategy; it is a means of avoiding competition for existing resources or surrendering control over newly acquired resources.

Social obligation may also cross purposes with finances as well. While the official business of associations is purportedly above board, their activity still has a monetizing effect and the flow of that effect is frequently settled by social networks. If a facility needs to be built the construction contract will likely go to a business with ties to the association. Likewise, the provisioning of events can follow this pattern - the meals for association staff or accommodations may be decided through social obligations.²⁸⁸ This is not to imply nepotism, but to suggest that all things being equal among competitors for a contract the final decision will be based on the familiarity or good will derived from close relationships in a social network. When these obligations diverge

²⁸⁸ The same businessmen who support local ssireum teams often hosted association dinners at restaurants that they happened to own. Thus they were compensated for having the resources which allowed them to contribute to the industry in the first place.

from advantageous business they will produce negative outcomes. Whether they are denied because they represent a loss or they are realized at a loss the outcome is enmity. Yet ssireum is supposed to be a means of cultivating traditional manners. When asked how conflict could be part of the industry, Iron Kim said, "If martial arts make good manners why are people always fighting over the presidency [of associations]? Well... 70 to 80% of ssireum players are soft spoken, well mannered guys. But every group has bad guys, gangsters in it." He was associating greed with the corruption of authority. When asked if those guys would be worse without ssireum he said, "Maybe. Who knows? Sometimes the situation makes them bad. Coaches don't make a lot of money. Everyone knows this. If they receive money from players' families are they bad? You can't blame a poor man for wanting money."

This also applies to illicit, or under the table, aspects of ssireum as well. Iron Kim explained that the salaries for ssireum coaches are notoriously low and they are often compensated with money or goods by the parents of their players or through individuals who stand to profit from their players. If the outcomes are mutually beneficial then good results have been realized; if the inverse occurs then negative reputations and conflict occur. "My middle school coach was a good man. Kind to his players, he never beat us or yelled at us. Everyone liked him. My parents and the other players' parents would send him food or other gifts. Sometimes money. But he never used the money for himself. Instead, he would save the money and use it for us - to treat us or to persuade good high school coaches to take us after graduation. My coach made some plan for me to join his senior's high school team, but Dirty Coach came and talked

to my parents. Dirty Coach convinced them his team was better for me because he could get me on a pro-team after high school. My coach disagreed, so Dirty Coach paid my coach's senior not to take me. After that Dirty Coach was the only option and then he asked my parents for some money. What could they do? If they didn't pay him I wouldn't have a team. I hated that guy. A little while after I joined Dirty Coach my middle school coach died suddenly in an accident. His family was never rich because he didn't use any money for himself. It still makes me angry.”

Iron Kim's opinion of Dirty Coach's activities raises an interesting point about hierarchical relationships. As mentioned previously, part of the underlying logic of junior-senior interactions is the distribution of labor and resources in a social context and this guides how people should express concern or affection towards one another. Good juniors work hard for their seniors, and good seniors provide for their juniors. Reciprocity and closeness are enmeshed in these exchanges according to traditional values. So when does a relationship become exploitative or corrupt? As Werner (2000) demonstrated, the morality of exchange is a highly subjective area. In *ssireum*, as in general in Korea, there was no clear division between a gift²⁸⁹ and a bribe²⁹⁰. Connotations affecting how much like a gift or a bribe an exchanged appeared to be are summarized in Table 16.²⁹¹ Gifts reflect naturally ordered interactions because, in part, of their readability by third parties; they are the “right” way to express social

²⁸⁹ 선물: 贈物: *seonmul*: Gift.

²⁹⁰ 뇌물 賂物: *noemul*: Bribe.

²⁹¹ The caveat of “more” is extremely important here. This is a range of possible readings of an exchange and depending on the context or informant only one or two questions might decide the issue.

relationships. Conversely, bribes are unnatural because they reflect marginal relationships based upon subservience or exploitation. Dirty Coach, and those like him, operated primarily in a quid-pro-quo mode of coercive profiting.

Table 16 - Factors Influencing Morality in Exchnages

Criteria	More Like a Gift	More Like a Bribe
<i>How open is the exchange?</i>	Public	Private
<i>How large is the exchange?</i>	Nominal	Consequential
<i>What is the intention?</i>	Expressive	Utilitarian
<i>Could anyone participate?</i>	Transparent	Preferential
<i>Is there a history between the parties?</i>	Networked	Unknown
<i>How are the parties related?</i>	Close	Distant
<i>How was the exchange initiated?</i>	Spontaneous	Solicited
<i>How clear is the expected reaction?</i>	Unclear	Explicit
<i>How is the exchange accepted?</i>	Modestly	Greedily
<i>What happens to the exchange?</i>	Shared	Horded

Iron Kim's parents' financial contribution to their son's athletic future floated the bribes Dirty Coach was making to other high school coaches to block their recruitment and funnel higher performing athletes to his team. Consequently, his team did perform well and his wards were sought after by professional and semi-pro teams. That situation was also leveraged as Dirty Coach would take kickbacks from pro and semi-pro coaches while simultaneously pushing his players' parents for money so he could supposedly bribe those same pro and semi-pro coaches and get their sons employed. Dirty Coach was collecting from all ends of the recruitment process and flow of talent he possibly could. He developed a reputation for larceny that was overshadowed by his procurement and production of talent in a high pressure system. Dirty Coach also worked as much

from the system as possible. Iron Kim explained, “[Dirty Coach] told my senior’s parents that the school didn’t have enough money to get good food for players like their son. At first he convinced them to give him money to buy things like chicken. Later he persuaded them to support the cost of feeding the team by running the cafeteria. They quit their jobs and used their savings to buy the food and cook it for the team. The coach paid them a little money to do this, but not enough for their expenses. If it cost \$6 a person to feed the team the coach paid them \$3. My senior’s parents worked for free and still lost money trying to give their son good food. Dirty Coach kept as much money as he could. Then he used that money to start a construction business. Now he owns that, some apartments, and a restaurant. He’s a rich man and his companies did a lot of business with the professional league.” When asked what happened to his senior, Iron Kim said, “Dirty Coach took money [from my seniors’ parents] to get him on a pro-team. But my senior got injured during practice and couldn’t go. He had to quit playing. That coach was always beating us, forcing us to eat, yelling at us. I hated him.”

Iron Kim summarized Dirty Coach’s commitment to players with the following anecdote. “When I was in high school our coach rented a space in the mountains for us to train in winter time. It was some kind of plastic covered green house behind a bed-and-breakfast place. The coach even brought some weights up there. My friend didn’t want to train, so one morning he went into the greenhouse alone and beat himself on the head with a small weight. He tried to knock himself out, but all it did was cut him up. He was bleeding all over the place when he came to breakfast. Dirty Coach just wrapped a bandage around his head and said, ‘Get back to work.’”

IMPARTING A MESSAGE

Coaches are a staple presence in players' lives and represent one of the strongest conduits for imparting values. Among other things, this includes the reinforcement of traditional authority and appropriate submission.

Iron Kim and I attended a middle school training session that was held at a nearby college.²⁹² The players had spent the first thirty minutes of our time there practicing without specific instruction. Everything was quiet aside from the light scraping of sand ground beneath their feet, the groaning of cotton belts as they are stretched, and the labored breathing of two dozen bodies in constant motion. Until that point the eldest coach had been sitting quietly in his chair watching them. Without warning he broke into barking orders, gesticulated with his hands, and rocketed up out of his chair to emphasize his seriousness. Three players arrived late and a junior coach boxed their ears.

The senior coach, having delivered his instructions, walked over to us to converse. His was Iron Kim's peer on the high school ssireum team. We started talking about training. Gesturing to the middle school students in training, the senior coach said, "You have to start training young to develop a ssireum player, to get the sixth sense of a winner. You could start in high school if your body is naturally good, but it's rare to turn that kind of player into a winner." When asked if he ever encountered such a player the

²⁹² It was often the case that colleges would share their ssireum facilities with high and middle schools if the coaches of the respective teams were friendly and networked with one another.

senior coach said, “One time I ordered *jajangmyeon*²⁹³ for my team. When the delivery driver showed up he said, ‘I used to play ssireum. I liked it. I bet I can beat everyone here.’ I thought that was funny so I let him try and he did a good job. I let him join the high school team and he eventually went on to a good semi-pro job. A good sense and good body are important, but lots of training is a more steady way to get good results.”

When asked if training was ever not enough, the senior coach admitted, “There was a little guy that really loved ssireum and I couldn’t keep him away from the team. So I told him, ‘Well, you’re starting late and your natural ability isn’t that good. You can come train if you want, but just play to enjoy.’ This kid came continuously for two years. He even did weight training. But it didn’t matter. His dedication and mind were excellent, but he was always going to be too small. I finally had to tell him directly, ‘You have a good mind and I like that. I understand why you love ssireum, but you should focus on your studies because you’re a good student.’ He stopped coming and went to a pretty good college after graduation.”

At that point a fourth player arrived late. His right foot was in a cast because it was fractured; someone had dropped a weight on it during practice. The coach called him over and introduced us. The senior coach explained, “This guy is nineteen years old already, but he’s not ready for university play. His basic skill and position are too weak to have a good career. I suggested he repeat his senior year on the team so he can train to

²⁹³ 자장면: 炸醬麵: *Jajangmyeon*: A Sino-Korean dish of wheat noodles topped with a salty, oily black sauce.

correct these faults.” Turning to the forlorn looking player he said, “This guy [Iron Kim] was a top university player. You need to listen to what he tells you. He knows very well about ssireum.” It was an awkward position for Iron Kim, but he concurred anyway, “Listen to your coach. You may not like it, but he has more experience than you. He’s right about back position being important. Take the time to fix that and you’ll have a better college career.” Unlikely and unable to argue, the player nodded and hopped off to take a seat and watch his peers train.

DISCONNECT

The legitimacy of authority correlates to how it is practiced within community standards. The willingness of the high school player to listen to Iron Kim as well as Iron Kim’s disapproval of Dirty Coach both stemmed from understandings about authority. In the context of what was “naturally” expected of Dirty Coach, his performance diverged an ethical violations accrued. Yet there are other types of divergence in authority that are not seen as ethically incompatible with the performance of ssireum. These are not issues of violation or counter-performance, but the disconnection that occurs when drawing in alternate sets of values that are assigned no moral weight within ssireum and then giving them selective preference. This is, in essence, what happens when market ideologies and ssireum converge in practice. The result is a scenario in which people are saying, ‘I played. Everyone should play. Except for my children.’ It

seems that the issue of kinship and parental investment plug tap into more mainstream ideologies and supersede generational investments in ssireum as a tradition.²⁹⁴

One late summer evening Iron Kim and I attended a small, informal dinner get-together proposed by Professor Kim. In attendance was a group of men whose social network was threaded together by ssireum. Both Iron Kim and Professor Kim were retired ssireum players, so was Businessman Kim, the owner of a successful pharmaceutical distribution operation, and Amateur Organizer Kim, a full-time promoter and official in a regional amateur ssireum league. Also joining us were Software Engineer Kim and a handful of graduate students from Dae-Hak University, all of whom were athletes in sports other than ssireum. Everyone at this dinner was either a wrestler or a wrestler's junior.

Though I had met everyone before in different contexts, the social setting that evening created a different atmosphere - one more conducive to open conversation and generally preferred for that purpose; the dinner presented the opportunity to drink alcohol as a group. On a separate occasion an inebriated department head from a prestigious Korean university explained to me the purpose of communal drinking, "This is Korean culture. Many problems are solved this way." My take is that whatever effects communal drinking accomplished were the result of alcohol's mood altering nature as well as the relative neutrality of the space in which it occurred. The two in conjunction

²⁹⁴ This type of scenario is very much in line with what Oh (2010) described as the enmity and generational anxiety that propels Korean parents to emphasize education with a notorious "hang-the-expense" fervor.

made it safer to talk and relieve stress as a group, though this could induce stress among individuals in the group when confronted with unpleasant topics or forced to drink against their will by their seniors. Because of my presence the topic of ssireum came up. The novelty of my interest in the sport among Koreans seemed irresistible.

The oldest man at the table, Businessman Kim, called for the restaurant *ajumma*²⁹⁵ to bring a cold bottle of *soju*²⁹⁶. When the bottle arrived he passed me his empty glass. I received it with both hands and he poured me an icy shot of soju. I turned slightly away from the table, downed the alcohol, and returned the glass. He received it with his right hand while this time I poured the shot, which he consumed without turning. When the glass was set on the table one of the students leaned to fill it. This time the business owner placed an index finger on the rim of the glass as the soju was poured. He did not drink it right away, instead leaving it on the table for the time being. He sucked his teeth slightly and rhetorically asked, “So... Why ssireum?”

“When I was a child we would play ssireum. It was what we did. We had time because there were no *hagwons*²⁹⁷ back then. I played well because I was big for my age.

²⁹⁵ 아줌마: 韓子嬸: *Ajumma*: “Biddy”; an abrasive contraction of the proper term for a presumably married woman with children; the meaning ranges all the way from “lady” to “battle-axe” depending on context.

²⁹⁶ 소주: 燒酒: *Soju*: “Hooch”; a distilled alcoholic beverage native to Korea; this ubiquitous, inexpensive, and clear alcohol is comparable in taste to vodka or sake and is typically consumed neat from shot glasses.

²⁹⁷ 학원: 學院: *Hagwon*: Academy; a for-profit type of private academy in Korea which teach a variety of subjects, though most often English, as a means to advance education and “get ahead” in society. Some Koreans view hagwons as providing an important supplement to compulsory education while others see them as profiteering from, and contributing to, social and economic inequality. If a family can afford it their children frequently begin attending hagwons as early as pre-school and continue to do so throughout their public education.

In middle school we had a club. By high school I was on a team. I got a scholarship to college because of ssireum. It was an opportunity at a time when there were not very many. You could make a living at it. But not these days.” The heads of the wrestlers at the table nodded agreement. “These days you can’t make any money at that. You need an education.” I asked if he had any children. “One son.” Did he play ssireum growing up? “No, I never let him play. It was important he study. He went to hagwons. He’s going to be a doctor soon. It’s the only way.” Heads nodded in agreement again.

I asked the other married men if they had children. All but one did. Did any of them play ssireum? No. It was more important to get an education. Businessman Kim spoke again. “You should understand, things were different then. We were lucky. You can’t get a good career with ssireum anymore. Children just need to study.” This echoed the generally negative disposition towards participation in organized sports in Korea with the subtext that playing ssireum was an especially bad choice. So why be concerned about ssireum? “It’s what we did. It’s important. We need to keep that.” The subject did not come up again until we were leaving the restaurant. The Software Engineering Kim pulled me aside and said, “Look, he’s older - he grew up in a different time.” He motioned his hand in an arc in front of us at the mostly deserted downtown street. “None of this was here when he was a kid, when most of them were kids. Wrestling was entertainment, their fun. It gave them something to do. You’ve played, you know [what I mean]. That’s why they want to keep it around. But... Things changed. It’s not that they don’t want their kids to play ssireum. They just want their kids to have good futures. A lot of things in Korea are like that.”

What Businessman and Software Engineer Kim described that night was a nearly unanimous position, one that meant almost no one within the ssireum industry had familial legacies if they could afford not to. No one with children that I interviewed would allow them into the sport as athletes if at all possible. They all agreed that a serious education was far too important, unwittingly playing into the stereotype of ssireum players as poor students.²⁹⁸ No one discussed it directly, but apparently even the promise of full-ride athletic scholarships for collegiate ssireum were unpersuasive. This may have been because ssireum insiders were too familiar with training regimens to believe that there would be enough time for a player to adequately study. Staying within the industry by transitioning to a new role was a frequent move for players approaching the end of their career, but the industry could only support so many people and as a result those opportunities were rare. The general message was that the non-athletic, mainstream path of higher education offered better security for the future.

In espousing this view former players were endorsing an exceptional view of their time in the ring, equating it to a Golden Era while diminishing the state of the current industry. It suggested to me that insiders were all too familiar with the shortcomings of their condition and couched their discontent in more mainstream

²⁹⁸ In an unrelated interview with a elementary school ssireum coach I asked about parents' objections to their kids playing. He suggested that sports were good for students without a lot of academic passion and that parents' objections to participation would generally relent if their children had poor grades. In the same interview he suggested that ssireum could also, in fact, improve those same kids' grades. The details were vague, resting mostly on the premise of mental focus through physical training. The interesting part was the two different views of ssireum delivered in such close proximity - it's not good for good students, and yet it can help poor students. This played into the generally negative Korean stereotypes about ssireum as well as the industry's own brand of, "Familiarity breeds wariness."

condemnations of ssireum. On few occasions I was privileged to direct, specific complaints about the industry that bypassed the reluctant dialog. I never heard former players speak out against specific sports other than ssireum.²⁹⁹

Still, all insiders agreed that ssireum needed to be preserved. Not necessarily for their children, but for all Koreans. And, it occurred to me, for themselves. Most men did not just acknowledge the futility of a career in ssireum, they bemoaned it. The deterioration of ssireum represented a real threat to their livelihood as well as the loss of a value system in which they were emotionally invested. The pain of watching something they loved slip away motivated them to try to restore the glory of ssireum. The evening ultimately ended in what would become a familiar, groping quest for the practical implementation of “development” and “advancement” in ssireum. Issues of financial solvency, consolidated management, marketing, and industry vision were mulled over without definitive action.

²⁹⁹ To be fair, I did hear former baseball players and active coaches lament the conditions of *their* sport.

CHAPTER VI

THE PLAYERS (SOCIALIZATION)

This chapter discusses how wrestlers are made, the day-to-day of their learning, and what goes on outside of the public spectacle of performance.

PLAYERS' LIFE CYCLE

The stages of collegiate player involvement with ssireum followed a general pattern that began with their introduction to the sport early in life and ended with their inevitable retirement from competition. The greatest uniformity in their experience came at the beginning while later in their careers the experience could diversify. Nearly everyone started playing ssireum by being recruited at an early age, usually elementary school and usually by a coach. By the end, some players would retire from the sport completely, others would transition to being coaches, and a few would find semi-pro careers before moving on to different employment. The cycle could be roughly divided into the phases of introduction, recruitment, profession, retirement, and reinvention based on the changes in the individual's relationship to the sport. Each phase marks a major transition.

Of the dozen players interviewed who were then active in the collegiate league, all but one had been introduced to ssireum by the fourth grade with the last one being introduced to the sport in middle school. The players ranged in age from 20 to 23 years

of age³⁰⁰, meaning that all of them had been born after ssireum had become a national sport. The oldest among them had been introduced to ssireum before the collapse of the professional league. All of them were born into a dictatorial political landscape, the country was democratized during their early childhood, and the IMF crisis hit when they were in elementary school. At the time most of them were first encountering ssireum the professional league was already in its death throes. While there is an established history of collegiate ssireum teams in Korea, the league in which these men played was officially formed only shortly before they joined the Daehak University team. The historical context of their collective experience was unique. Their recruitment was not.

One of the players explained, “I started in elementary school, fourth grade. It was my father’s suggestion. Actually, my father’s friend’s friend was a semi-pro coach and he noticed I had a good body for ssireum. He persuaded my father to let me join the team.” The other players had similar experiences, though not through familiar connections. “I was eight years old and my school played in some amateur ssireum competition. I won first place and the coach pushed me to join the team.” Another player explained, “I was the biggest kid in my fourth grade class. The school’s coach grabbed

³⁰⁰ There are two ways of calculating age in Korea - traditional and “Western”. The latter follows the conventions with which most Americans, Europeans, or descended populations would be familiar; at the moment of birth a child’s age is 0 years and one additional year is awarded on each recurrence of that date (using a solar calendar). This method is used for legal purposes in Korea and is noted by using the prefix “full” (만: *man*), as in, “I am fully 22 years old”. The traditional reckoning of age dictates that a child is 1 year old at the moment of birth with one additional year awarded at the start of every lunar year. No special notation is used and this age can differ by as much as two years from the “Western” age is the person is born near the end of a solar year. For example, someone born in December could be 19 full years and 21 traditional years old at the same time. In this dissertation player’s ages are given as they reported them - in traditional years.

me for the team.” And so on. In every case the players were identified at a young age and pulled into the sport, often because of their early maturation or exceptional size relative to their peers. When asked about their initial reaction to ssireum, all the players described it as “fun”³⁰¹. This correlates with what elementary and middle school coaches indicated about the selection process.

I asked seven ssireum coaches who all worked at the middle school level what they looked for in players. Their answers focused primarily on the physical attributes, “A kid’s gotta be taller than the others, bigger, with good back and leg muscles.” Another coach looked specifically for, “Thick wrists and broad shoulders.” One coach replied, “A player’s mindset³⁰² is important. Look at their eyes and you can see it. They must want to play or they can’t learn anything.” When asked why children would want to play, all the coaches agreed on the point that children are attracted to the sport because it is fun above all else. “There’s not a lot of equipment so it’s easy to set up and understand. Kids are curious. When they play, they like it. It’s fun.” Other coaches elaborated, “It’s 50% enjoyment and 50% persuasion. Teachers and parents push them,” and, “Some enjoy it, but some need to be persuaded. Parents, too.”

Among the coaches the issue of parental discretion was agreed to be important - without it there would be no recruitment. “If [parents] don’t want their kids to play, they

³⁰¹ 재미있다:漢字없슴: *Jaemi itda*: Enjoyably interesting; stimulating fun. This phrase hovers between “fun” and “interesting” in English. It is sometimes mistranslated as “funny”, but it does not carry the same feeling as “humorous”.

³⁰² 정신:精神: *Jeongsin*: Mindset.

can't play. We have to respect that." When asked about persuading parents, one coach explained, "You have to talk about ssireum's benefits. Of course it is good for the body. It can be good for school, too." It seemed somewhat disingenuous to extol ssireum's academic benefits considering the increasingly large amounts of time it would demand as children stayed with it. But in some cases that was not a factor as occasionally parents push their kids to play.³⁰³ The frank explanation was that, "[They] think their son isn't a good student, so being an athlete is better. [The son] can at least be good at something." Another coach echoed this with a similar take. "If their kid isn't getting good grades then being an athlete can help with school. It gives [the son] discipline." While not directly stated, their comments left the impression that the parents of good students would not be disposed to their children taking up ssireum. The perception seemed to be that ssireum might drag down good students and elevate poor ones.

In light of the societal push for academic achievement that starts at an early age, it is not surprising that parents would need some coaxing in order to allow their son to become committed to a sport. Generally speaking, athleticism consumes enormous amounts of volitional time which could otherwise be spent studying. Once on such a path parents are equally reluctant to allow their children to stop least their efforts be

³⁰³ Without a wider demographic survey of ssireum players it is difficult to determine if there are any trends to who plays and who does not. The urban-rural and socioeconomic divides are fairly high in Korea and may play a role in the recruitment processes. The coaches and wrestlers themselves never elaborated on these points in conversation.

wasted.³⁰⁴ Players commented on these points as well. “It felt good to play. I liked it and wanted to learn more about it. The coach talked to my parents and they said, ‘You can play if you want to - but you must do well.’ So I did.” Another said, “I wanted to play for fun. My parents didn’t like that at first, but after I won a competition they said, ‘Okay.’”

The players also noted that at a certain point, usually around joining a middle school team, ssireum ceased to be fun and became work. “I didn’t like it, didn’t hate it. I just did it. Training was hard, but it was normal.” When asked what they did not like about ssireum, training was the primary topic. This covered its time consuming nature as well as difficulty with coaches. Half of the players mentioned they hated being beaten by coaches during training.³⁰⁵ One player said there was nothing in particular he did not like about ssireum. When asked if they ever thought about stopping ssireum, many said they had but it was not feasible. “After high school I thought about stopping. But I started

³⁰⁴ While not in ssireum, I encountered a former collegiate judo player with an interesting story about his history with that sport. At the end of middle school this player wanted to quit because of the stress from training. When he told his coach, the coach beat him - dislocating his jaw and knocking out three of his teeth. The player escaped the coach and ran home. When his parents found out what had happened they forced their son to go back to the coach and ask to be let back onto the team. The coach agreed. While the judo industry has a reputation for thugishness among my informants (see the footnote about cauliflower ear in Chapter I) the sentiment of the story rings true. One does not quit lightly or without consequence.

³⁰⁵ The topic of corporal punishment in Korea is complex. Nearly every Korean I know has very matter-of-factly talked about being beaten or tortured by parents, teachers, coaches, seniors, or higher ranking military superiors for various transgressions. Punishments have included strikes to the body as well as being forced to maintain excruciating postures for hours at a time; e.g. “The Bombing of Wonsan” position (원산 폭격) where the head and feet touch the floor while elevating the body in an arch (buttocks pointed up towards the sky) and the hands clasped behind the back. Some of the accounts have included egregious injuries like broken bones, dislocated joints, and scars. Still, I was almost always assured, “Things are changing. They aren’t like that anymore.” This should not be taken out of context - these stories were almost always extraordinary events, not daily occurrences (aside from the military). Corporal punishment existed and seemed accepted as both unavoidable and undesirable.

when I was eight. More than half of my life was ssireum. How could I quit? I decided to go on as long as possible.” One player seemed perplexed by the question. “Stop? What else would I do?” Another had not given the issue any thought. “There was no reason, but I just kept on going.” Others were more enthusiastic. “It’s still interesting,” and, “I did well, so why not?” One senior player was pragmatic and said, “Playing gave me a healthy body and a way to go to college.”

Coaches were keen to note the positive physical effects of playing as well. While visiting one elementary school coach during his teams’ afternoon training he pointed to one child and said, “See that kid? Two years ago he was in a bad car accident. After that he couldn’t eat anything without vomiting and he could barely do anything physical. He just kept getting weaker and thinner. But a teacher pointed him out to me and I thought I could help him. I asked his parents to give me a chance to train him. Now look at him. His weight is better, he eats plenty, runs over a kilometer a day... He’s changed. His parents can’t stop thanking me.” When asked what effected this miraculous transformation the coach said, “My senior owns a convenience store and he gives me lots of bread and milk. I bring that for the kids to eat after practice. It’s good for them. At first the injured kid couldn’t even eat that. I had him just walk up and down the stairs to build his legs muscles. He would see the other kids having fun playing. Eventually his legs got stronger and I let him play against another kid who was not a good player. Well, the sick kid won. After that he got a real taste for ssireum.” This was also the same coach who suggested a player’s mindset was important for recruitment.

Once involved in a team it is likely that players will go on through at least high school and then on to the collegiate league. Voluntary attrition seemed low as no one I interviewed indicated they knew of anyone who stopped playing because they wanted to. An elementary school coach acknowledged it was a possibility when he said, “If a kid doesn’t like it, they just stop playing,” but the comment seemed limited to the introductory phase of the cycle since that was where he stood. Provided they are uninjured, the logical thing for players to do is to go on as long as possible. When asked what they wanted to do after finishing their time in the collegiate league, players usually discussed completing their compulsory military service, playing for a semi-pro team, or going on to coach a ssireum team. One player neatly summed, “Military, semi-pro, and then coaching when I can’t play anymore. [That’s] my plan.” A few others indicated they had explored less dedicated avenues, “I’m going to be a business man. I just want to work in an office,” and, “I want to play semi-pro long enough to earn money to start a business.” When asked what kind of business he replied, “I’m not sure yet.”

While it is possible to move directly from high school to semi-pro play, that is an unusual and discouraged move. Conventional wisdom, as one might find with football in the US, is that players need to be seasoned through college leagues. Collegiate players are not directly compensated while semi-pro players are and the management for the latter is reluctant to risk money on unproven athletes. A side-effect of emphasizing collegiate play is that it merges ssireum with the long-venerated status marker of higher education. Collegiate players earn undergraduate degrees and a modicum of status along with them. Many players expressed the desire to earn graduate degrees as well. While

these men were playing within the auspice of higher education they had peers who were not. Some men bypassed college in favor of semi-pro because they could start earning money more quickly and with salaries not contingent upon educational attainment.³⁰⁶ Iron Kim introduced me to three of his juniors that played at that level and two of them had not completed college.

All three men were single, 25 years old, and worked for semi-pro municipal teams. As with the collegiate team players these men had grown up in a similar time frame. One was recruited directly from high school to semi-pro while another went semi-pro after finishing college. In both cases it was described similarly. “The [semi-pro] coach called me with an offer to join the team. I had a senior already on the team and he suggested me.” The third semi-pro player’s story was slightly different. “I played for a college but had to stop. I failed too many classes my first semester. I didn’t go because I was too tired from training. Well, I wasn’t too interested in class either. Mostly I liked wrestling and motorcycles. Around that time my high school coach had started playing for [my current] team and he suggested me to the [semi-pro] coach. I want to finish school one day so I can get licensed to be a PE teacher.” The player who moved directly from high school to semi-pro had similar designs; the one who had finished college already had a real-estate license ready to be used after retirement from the sport.

Iron Kim also introduced me to a senior of his that had been a professional player.

³⁰⁶ Starting to earn money earlier is not a trivial point. None of the collegiate players I interviewed admitted to having regular girlfriends. One of the reasons was lack of money. In contrast, all of the semi-pro players freely admitted to having steady girlfriends. As is the case in many other settings, romantic opportunities and finances are comingled for ssireum players.

Barely in his thirties, the man was married and something of a venture capitalist. He met us for lunch and we talked leisurely about his experience in ssireum. He had graduated high school in the year of the IMF crisis and joined a college team immediately after. He played at the college level for one year before being recruited to a professional team. “[Our] senior was on that team and when they had an opening he suggested me to the coach. I wasn’t a very good player, but he knew I was a good junior.” The conversation turned towards recruitment and salary. “They gave me a contract for \$20,000 a month along with a \$2,000 a month expense account and \$300,000 signing bonus. It was a three year contract with annual bonuses of \$100,000 for the second and third years. The monthly salary would go up based on performance, too.”³⁰⁷ In essence, this man’s first professional ssireum contract was worth at least \$1.29 million or a little over \$1,100 a day. By his own admission he was not the most skilled player on the team, but at the end of his five year career he was making more money than when he started.³⁰⁸ A back injury derailed him and he made the transition to businessman. When asked if he would let his children play ssireum he said, “No. We were lucky. These days studying is best.”

³⁰⁷ The exact figure in dollars is difficult to represent and these figures are a crude means of reflecting the scale of the salary based on a \$1 = ₩1,000 exchange (the magic number during fieldwork - just chop off three zeroes). Prior to the 1997 IMF crisis the high end of the exchange rate was \$1 = ₩800 while at the peak of the crisis that figure plunged to around \$1 = ₩1,700. According to the Consumer Price Index, the worth of \$1 from 1998 to 2008 is \$1.32. So the original figure of ₩300,000,000 (삼억 원) fluctuated in (CPI adjusted) value from \$233,000 to \$495,000 in the span of one year. While not accounting for inflation in Korea over those two decades the figure of \$300,000 is actually 17% less than the median within the possible range.

³⁰⁸ This helps put some perspective on how damaging the IMF crisis was to the industry; it could easily cost millions of dollars a year just to support a professional team’s salaries (not counting ancillary costs). Having an active pro team could be considered a kind of elite corporate spectacle emblematic of the nation’s economic enlargement. When that abundance came to an end the first things to be cut in cost-savings were vanity projects like professional sports teams.

Iron Kim told me another one of his seniors was offered \$400,000 to go from high school to semi-pro around 1999 but declined the offer and joined the collegiate league instead. He explained that a spirit medium³⁰⁹ had advised his senior in that matter. In the end, the senior suffered a devastating spinal injury but went on to finish a doctorate degree. I asked Iron Kim if his senior ever expressed regret with the decision. He replied, “It doesn’t matter. He can’t play anymore either way. But, I don’t ask him about it.” When looking into the salaries of contemporary semi-pro players, Iron Kim consulted a handful of his juniors. At the low end, freshmen players were earning roughly \$50,000 a year with \$100,000 signing bonuses while top-ranked players were earning \$100,000 annually. Salaries could be significantly higher for veteran players depending on the career and team. A player moving from the college league to the semi-pros could expect to earn at least a couple hundred thousand dollars - a figure on par with well-paid salary-men in the near term. But unlike some types of corporate work, a career playing ssireum cannot be sustained indefinitely.

According to conventional knowledge, the average career after high school would be around eight years - of which only half would be salaried if a player went collegiate first. A ten year career would be considered remarkable. Anything longer than that would be exceptional as only a handful of players in their 30s were still active.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ 무당: 巫堂: *Mudang*: Spirit medium, sometimes translated as “shaman”; generally a woman who channels the supernatural world in order to address clients’ questions or concerns.

³¹⁰ Spending two thirds of your life playing ssireum is guaranteed to take a toll on the body. One semi-pro player just a year older than me looked like a mummy that had been double-wrapped in athletic tape every time he stepped into the sand.

None of the coaches I interviewed that worked in the compulsory education system were even that old. Thus the natural career arc for a player began when they were eight or nine and ran for a couple of decades before transitioning into coaching or a different field.

While the figures for player salaries seemed more than reasonable, the reluctance to allow children to initiate a ssireum career persists. There are several reasons this may be the case. First, as mentioned previously, the popular attitude towards education in Korea is manic (refer to Oh 2010 for a detailed analysis of why). The point of studying is, among other things, the elevation of social (and economic) status. Athletics in general interfere with studying and ssireum in particular is a low status sport. Second, the financial success ssireum represents has limited potential, finite longevity, and high risk. The high end of player salaries has shrunk over the last decade and it will probably continued to do so unless the professional league is rebuilt or the semi-pro league receives major financing. There are fewer opportunities to work at that level as well. Even if players find a job and attain high salaries, their career longevity is decades shorter than mainstream non-athletic jobs. Additionally, players are engaged in a high-risk field where injuries are practically inevitable and the potential for a disabling one is high. Third, there is little public knowledge about player salaries. I was only able to obtain the numbers presented here as an insider. To express the situation a little differently, conventional understandings in Korea correlate educational attainment with

career status and security while at the same time associating ssireum with a volatile, marginal existence.³¹¹

PLAYER EXPERIENCE

It is improbable that children understand the long term implications of being recruited into ssireum; at ten years of age their capacity for projecting into the future is limited. They start playing ssireum because they enjoy it and are then, it seems, pushed onto a career path with little self-determination involved. Once in that career they have even less control over their day to day activities. While this can appear disempowering, they probably have no less personal authority than their peers at most stages; conventional knowledge suggests that students at any age have little control over their schedules if they are doing what they are supposed to be doing (i.e. studying). And the experience of playing ssireum does have its high points as well.

When interviewing the Daehak University team it was clear that there was no one-sided opinion of life as a player - it was neither completely positive nor completely negative. Players were rather matter of fact in discussing their status and tended to focus on immediate and practical concerns as opposed to existential ones. The lofty ideals of “development” or abstract “globalization” common in the speech of ssireum authority were entirely absent among players. Instead, it was common to hear them discuss

³¹¹ For a parallel example, there are many low-status jobs in the United States that provide desirable wages. I worked at a major delivery company in the US where I knew drivers with nothing more than a high school diploma that were earning \$35 an hour with full benefits and a generous pension in the 1990s. Yet I never met anyone who would have actively encouraged their children to become a delivery driver over pursuing a college education.

practice, physical condition, eating, women, winning - all things which were primarily sensorial. Clearly there are strategic elements to winning that require long term planning and awareness, but the culmination is a personal feeling or individual experience. This is the difference between the “thrill of victory” versus “national pride”.

As mentioned previously, when asked if they thought about ever leaving the sport most players indicated they had; when asked why they did not their answers indicated that quitting did not make sense. “I hate training, but why should I quit?” Most of the players wanted to at least attempt to have careers in semi-pro and coaching. None of them framed their continuity with ssireum as anything esoteric, though the “stick-to-itiveness” of players came up in conversation with coaches and directors. Director Kim described his time as a player, “I played well. Everyone thought I would be a champion. Then I got injured when a bigger guy threw me. Pleurisy.³¹² They put me in the hospital to recover, but I left too quickly because I wanted to get back to training. Well, then I got a bad case of pneumonia. I went back to the hospital again, for much longer. In the hospital I thought about my life. I decided that if I couldn’t train my body anymore I would train my mind. I was not going to quit. I said, ‘I’ll fight until I die!’ That’s ssireum. It’s not about winning. It’s about confidence.” Coach Kim expressed a similar

³¹² This translation is a bit tricky. The term Director Kim used was *hyung-makyeom* (흉막염:胸膜炎). This could also be translated as pneumothorax. The blunt trauma cause of the injury (i.e. being thrown) would be consistent with the latter translation, but Director Kim indicated they extracted fluid from his chest, not air, and that is consistent with pleurisy. In either case, the reason he could not keep training was because the doctors advised him the injury would disposed him to relapse; i.e. he could easily flood his thoracic cavity *again* if he was thrown *again*. While not the most common injury it was not unusual. I saw several players with surgical scars across the back of their ribs and was told they’d had pleurisy.

sentiment, “I was visiting a friend at a different high school and he took me to their gym to see some ssireum. I knew martial arts really well, so I wasn’t impressed. I said, ‘That’s not so tough.’ The coach was some bug-eyed, leper-faced guy. He just said, ‘Okay, you can try.’ I jumped in the sand and this one big guy threw me in less than a second so hard I got knocked out. When I got up all I could think about was beating him. I tried and tried and tried. Couldn’t do it. Just kept getting thrown. So I started training in ssireum. By my first competition I could beat anybody except that guy. It would always come down to me and him. And he’d win. Finally I went to this little temple in the mountains to pray. I went there every winter for three years to train outside and pray until I finally beat that sunovabitch. After that I was undefeated until retirement. Buddha made that. Meditation. Mind power. You can’t play ssireum with just your body. It’s about advancement. Win today. If not, tomorrow.” While ssireum players may not feel as if their continuation is anything more than natural, to the authority that attitude symbolizes their virtue.

Players do realize benefits from their status. When asked what they like most about ssireum they all focused on success. “I liked it when I won a national competition in middle school.” “The best part is when you get first place.” One wrestler simply said, “Winning.” Players also discussed the benefits of physical conditioning. “I love exercise,” “Training makes you strong,” and, “Having a good body.” A freshman wrestler who enjoyed singing said, “I like listening to music while we go jogging in the morning.” A handful of wrestlers mentioned the pleasure of innovation. “Learning and trying new skills is good. You can see your effort make results,” and, “I like being creative with

techniques.” Only one wrestler mentioned travel, “You get to go to a lot of places for competition.” And only one player mentioned mental conditioning, “Ssireum teaches tenacity.”

When asked about the disadvantages of ssireum, the focus was generally on the burdens of training, specifically the amount of time it consumes, the physical toll, and beatings. Training schedules are variable depending upon the level of play and coaching preference. Middle school players might train for four to six hours once a day while collegiate players may train for several hours up to four times a day. Training dictates daily schedules and is interrupted only to accommodate classroom time. For example, players would train for two hours at 6:00am (“natural” strength and endurance training), one and a half hours at 10:00am (mountain running, calisthenics), three hours at 3:00pm (ssireum skills), and two hours at 8:00pm (individual training or weights) for a total of eight or nine hours of training a day. Meals are taken in between training sessions. Training was a group activity supervised by either senior players or coaches. Eating, classes, and down time tended to be communal as well since players moved en masse from one activity to the next. Technically no time was unscheduled throughout the day and there were few opportunities for players to pursue individual interests. This situation was summed up best by one senior player who said, “We have no freedom.”

Training time involves physical conditioning as well as technical practice. For endurance and cardiovascular training players do long distance jogs through mountains and around their facilities. For strength training players will take turns lifting and

carrying each other as well as doing push-ups, sit-ups, squats, and tubing³¹³. Technical practice consists of hours long sessions of partner driven exercises in which the coach will explain or demonstrate a technique and pairs of players repeat the technique on each other until mastered; players rotate partners in order to cultivate a “sense” of skills against various body types. None of the training facilities or methods I observed took place in climate-controlled locations; players trained in full summer heat and freezing winter cold. The amount of time spent in training places serious demands on the players’ bodies. Most injuries occur as the result of overtraining, not competition. In an entire winter season I only saw two injuries during competition, both minor. Interviews with former wrestlers reiterated this observation - old-timers had chronic back and joint injuries from training, not wrestling. One senior player said quite directly, “I hate training. I’ve been in the hospital twice, both times from training. We train too much and can’t do anything else.” Another senior player added, “Sometimes I lie to get out of training. I’ll tell the coach I’m hurt and he’ll tell me to rest for the day.” Iron Kim confirmed the situation was the same when he was active. Director Kim likewise once observed, “[Coaches] train players too much, without scientific reasons. They just repeat the way they were trained and you can’t tell them to change. They won’t. Honestly, player performance maxes out after a few years of technical practice. The rest is too much - too long, too hard.”

³¹³ Tubing refers to the use of carting around tractor-tire sized inner tubes filled with sand. While some players use “modern” gym equipment for strength training most do not.

An additional aspect of the intense training is the amount of food players need to eat to maintain their energy. Player meals are served through the dormitory cafeteria several times a day and, in theory, players are self-regulated in their consumption. In practice, their habits are pushed by coaches when working with (or around) weight divisions. Players may be told to eat more at certain times and then to eat less at others. It is not unusual to see ssireum players eating constantly and consuming portions that amount to more in a single sitting than many people eat in a day.³¹⁴ To non-athletes, ssireum players' food intake is prodigious and they have developed an undeserved lay reputation for gluttony.³¹⁵ As previously mentioned, the wide stature and size of players can have people referring to them as "bears" or "cows". The self-effacing humor of ssireum players reflects this point; when asked about funny stories two wrestlers replied, "What is a buffet's worst nightmare? A ssireum team," and, "A ssireum team was riding on an airplane and nearly crashed it when they all went to one side to look at a passing landmark." Conventional knowledge indicates that the trend over time with ssireum players has been to increase their size as much as possible because larger players have the advantage. The revisions in weight classes are supposedly the result of efforts to balance play. It is possible that the improved dietary nutrition of populations combined with the

³¹⁴ Among the many nonchalant feats of superhuman consumption I witnessed, my favorite was watching one player absent mindedly consume three whole fried chickens while watching a half-hour long television program one evening.

³¹⁵ By comparison, 2008 Olympic gold medal swimmer Michael Phelps was widely reported to have consumed 12,000 calories a day for a five hour a day, six days a week training regimen. I never quantified it, but ssireum players are probably in the same neighborhood of intake. The difference is that the focus on Phelps' eating habits as an individual was one of wonder while the focus on ssireum players as a group was one of apprehension.

tendency of coaches to select for physically precocious players has produced this view. In reality the ratio of mass-to-muscle strength actually diminishes at the extremes. While players in the upper weight divisions may appear somewhat obese, those in lower divisions appear exceptionally muscular. In all cases they look broader, larger, or heavier than the general population. Their exceptional physiques and appetites mark them as wrestlers and many players expressed discomfort about this point. "It's hard to get a girlfriend. Women don't like big guys."

The last major complaint from players was the use of beatings in training. All but one player considered beatings a negative experience; the one noncommittal player was characteristically terse in communication and rarely said much during interviews. Starting around the same time as ssireum becomes a serious pursuit, coaches use corporal punishment as a teaching instrument. Elementary school coaches supposedly never strike players while some middle school coaches treat it as an integral part of their job. While interviewing one middle school coach he explained the virtues of ssireum with regard to traditional manners while simultaneously calling over and beating a 12 year old player with a meter long stick with a wrapped handle across the buttocks and shoulders as the latter assumed a hands and knees posture; after administering 14 strikes to the boy the 15th was delivered to the head as the coach told him, "Get back in there and do it right." The player bowed and silently returned to practice. The coach concluded his comments about manners and resumed walking amidst his wards correcting them and striking the offending appendages to emphasize his points.

I had bristled at the situation. It had seemed outmoded and excessive. Iron Kim advised differently, “Forget about it. They’re players, they’re probably used to it.” When asked for clarification he replied, “When I was in high school my coach used to beat me at least 500 times a day.³¹⁶ I didn’t care. I’d just keep on doing what I wanted because his advice was terrible. He was trying to teach me techniques for smaller players. That wouldn’t work for me. Well, one day we were running up a mountain and he hit me on the legs with a plastic pipe 100, 200, 300 times. After the first 20 strikes it doesn’t matter, you can’t feel it anymore so I just kept going. He got to over 1,000 strikes and gave up from exhaustion. He gave the pipe to my senior and said, ‘Beat that guy for making my arm tired.’ So my senior beat me another 500 times. I didn’t care. They just kept passing the pipe until I had made everyone’s arms tired.” When asked if that was a normal situation Iron Kim said, “When I was the senior player on the high school team I had a stick, too. When the team wakes up at 4:00am to go jogging the coach doesn’t go - he sleeps in. So the most senior players run at the back of the line and hit the slowest players to keep them moving. If you don’t the coach will find out and just hit you instead.” When asked if corporal punishment instilled traditional manners, Iron Kim said, “One time the father of one of my juniors came to the dorm and asked me to fix his son. My junior was smoking and his father wanted him to quit. His father told me, ‘It’s okay to beat him if it gets him to stop.’ I couldn’t refuse him. So the next time I saw my junior

³¹⁶ This figure seems like hyperbole, something to which Iron Kim was not ordinarily disposed. In his jogging story it seems quite reasonable; one stroke every six seconds would end up doling out more than 500 in a day. If players were whipped in time with the jog it would be close to a 4/4 beat and assuming the coach or senior had the stamina thousands of strikes would be issued before the warm up concluded.

smoking I hit him. Hard. I beat him until he started crying. He begged me stop and I made him promise to quit smoking. He promised. Well, the next day I caught him behind the dorm smoking a cigarette. He was holding it in a pair of chopsticks to keep the smell from getting on his hands. So I beat him again. Maybe I beat him another five or six times before I just stopped. It wasn't working." When asked how he felt about the experience, Iron Kim frowned and said, "Anyway, my junior's father was a smoker, too, so I don't know what he expected. What did he think was going to happen with his son?"

The players I interviewed referenced similar situations; one of the euphemisms for beatings from other players was, "Trouble between juniors and seniors."

PLAYER CONNECTIONS

One of the themes throughout individuals interactions up to this point has been the junior-senior relationship. The positioning of one's status relative to another person dictates what *should* be done when interacting with them, not what actually is done or how anyone will feel about it. Hierarchical relationships rank players and provide order to their roles. Senior players should provide for junior players and the latter should attend to the former in a way that generally redistributes goods and labor in a network. Actions performed in anticipation of this relationship, doing something before it is explicitly requested, is good etiquette; failing to perform after asked is poor etiquette. Most of the interactions I saw fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum and varied according to how one person felt about the other. There was as much potential for tension as there was for closeness.

Everyone in Korean society has seniors (superiors) and juniors (subordinates). These are essential relationships and specific terms and protocols of address exist for realizing them. In general, formal titles are given preference if they exist; e.g. calling someone “Doctor Kim” instead of “Mr. Kim”. Seniors are free to refer to juniors by their first names as are people born in the same year as one another. Juniors refer to seniors according to a double-gender rule. Men call older men *hyeong* (older brother) and older women *nuna* (older sister); women call older men *oppa* (older brother) and older women *unni* (older sister). Thus terms of address reflect the gender of the speaker and the recipient when going from junior to senior. These same terms and rules are applied in familiar settings as well. Which illustrates another point about this networking - it is omnipresent to the degree that any sphere of regular social interaction can be enough to constitute these relationships. In Korea players had countless seniors and juniors of all different description (other players, non-players, men, women, etc.), but their closest ones were those with whom they spent the most time.

Asking players about junior-senior relationships was difficult. A handful acknowledged that they were sometimes a source of discomfort, but talking about that tension in detail would have been poor etiquette. While the players were not my subordinates in any formal sense they were all younger than me; talking about the bad behavior amongst themselves to me would have been like tattling on each other. This is one area where I relied heavily upon observations and interaction with Iron Kim.³¹⁷ Any

³¹⁷ Refer to the methodology sections in Chapter I for more on the basic dynamics between juniors and seniors.

time we attended an event waves of player heads would bob and bow in unison as they shouted the most formal greetings³¹⁸ to him as we passed. In return, Iron Kim might grunt or nod if the players were not particularly close; for the more familiar individuals he would respond, “Have you eaten?”³¹⁹ Likewise, Iron Kim would repeat a formal greeting to his seniors to which they might inquire about his last meal.

Seniors often provide meals for juniors. Good etiquette is when the provision comes with the discretion of the former; poor etiquette is when the latter must entreat the former. Good seniors will bring snacks and alcohol for their juniors, or will invite (treat) them to a meal. Bad seniors will show up empty handed, “forget” to invite their juniors out, or will eat in front of others without sharing. Good juniors will fetch food for seniors, make delivery orders over the phone, or prepare ingredients purchased by a senior. Bad juniors will pester seniors with complaints about thirst or hunger. On many occasions Iron Kim and I would eat at the leisure, and expense, of our seniors. They would invite us to dinner at a time and location of their choice; such invitations could not be lightly refused. They sometimes ordered the food for us (as many dishes are served “by the person” or in communal portions). We would wait to eat until the oldest

³¹⁸ “안녕하십니까!: 安寧하십니까!” (*Annyeong hasimnikka!*: Hello!) Technically phrased as a question, “Are you well?” it is the most formal greeting used by juniors to seniors or by speakers to audiences. There is no good grammatical equivalent in English and the subtext of formal grammar in Korean is frequently lost in translation as a result. Generally speaking, the shorter the ending in Korean the more informal the speech.

³¹⁹ “밥먹나?” (*Bap mugna?*: Didja eat?) An informal greeting used by seniors to juniors. The grammar implies strong familiarity or closeness. Conventional knowledge explains the greeting developed during the Korean civil war when famine was widespread and a lack of food was a very tangible concern. I cannot recall anyone answering in the negative (i.e. that they were hungry). Usually the reply was, “I’m fine. And you?”

person present started and we would finish when they finished. The etiquette all reinforced our subordinate roles as showing respect to seniors as they provided for us. In some situations I was the most senior individual in a group and therefore responsible for treating the party to a meal. Inevitably the entourage would grow before we actually ate; sometimes being a good senior means inviting your juniors along when *your senior* is treating.

I sometimes resented the accumulation of mouths. Having to pay for seven mouths when you budgeted for four can be annoying. So there were times when I avoided announcing a meal until the last minute. Being spontaneous with the schedule was one way to limit how many uninvited guests would arrive. At first I felt somewhat bad about this, as if I were shirking my duty. Then I noticed that on many occasions Iron Kim would avoid answering his phone during off hours at an event. “My junior is calling me. He probably wants some fried chicken.” When asked why he did not answer, Iron Kim replied, “I don’t have any money right now. Anyway, he’s not a very good junior. And I don’t want to feed all his friends. I don’t even know most of those guys.” When asked why he suspected that was the junior’s motivation, Iron Kim said, “I know this type of situation very well. When I was a wrestler we would take turns calling our seniors - whoever lived nearby or we knew was around. We’d invite them to join us, to visit. Then we’d say, ‘Oh, we’re so hungry,’ if they didn’t bring some food with them.” When asked what he thought about seniors that did not bring food or “visit”, Iron Kim said, “Ah, those guys. Well, they’re not very good seniors are they?” When I pointed out

that he was avoiding his junior, Iron Kim grinned, “Like I said, he’s not a very good junior either.”

Providing for a junior extends to all manner of care besides just food. Seniors may redistribute goods, money, advice, information, and opportunities. Seniors should also provide these things with the welfare of the junior in mind and not necessarily the junior’s desires. That is, juniors get what seniors think is good for them, and what is always good for them is not always what they want. Seniors may push juniors into scenarios or behaviors which are uncomfortable if it is believed to be for their benefit. Hence the beatings that coaches or senior players deliver to juniors in order to instill discipline and correct bad habits. Seniors can also coerce juniors into misbehavior depending upon their disposition. Iron Kim would also occasionally dodge phone calls from seniors. One night after a competition we were awakened by Iron Kim’s phone ringing at 3:00am. At first he muted the ringer, but then it rang again. Realizing that he could not avoid answering without arousing suspicion, Iron Kim picked up. “Brother!”³²⁰ How are you? Where? No, we’re at a competition. No, we’re over by the coast. I’m sorry, Brother. Next time. Yes, yes. Good night.” His senior had called to invite us drinking with the common refrain, “I’m lonely - where are you?” If one is in the mood for getting drunk it can be a siren song, “I’m buying.” If one is not in the mood, or does

³²⁰ 형님: 漢字없슴: *Haengnim*; Brother, with a capital “B”; an colloquial, affectionate term of address used with close seniors. Difficult to translate without losing the connotation, it is technically along the lines of “honorable (older) brother”. But that feels awkward in English and has the effect of creating social distance while the Korean term actually seeks to close the space between a junior and senior. Alternately, translating it as “brother” loses the endearing respect because the term is not at all used between Korean men the same way English speaking peers might address one another as “brother” or “my brothers”.

not drink, it can be a terrifying command, “Attend me while I get drunk.” On several occasions Iron Kim and I ended up in extended bar hopping jags sponsored by his seniors that literally did not end until the sun rose.

Stress in the role of a senior comes from worrying about having enough money to provide for juniors or being able to give them what they need. It can also come from juniors when they are noncompliant or inattentive. Seniors count on their juniors for labor and when the latter fail to provide it can be ruinous. At one point Iron Kim had two conflicting work schedules that required him to be in two different places at the same time. Failing one obligation would result in not getting paid or possibly losing future work. Iron Kim called a junior and asked him to cover one of the obligations. The junior agreed but at the designated time he did not show up, a fact uncovered by Iron Kim when the junior did not answer his phone calls. After working through the conflicting obligation, Iron Kim attempted to raise the junior again to scold him. “I’m going to kill him. Why didn’t he show up?” When he finally raised the junior, the latter said, “Don’t worry, Brother. I got my junior to cover it for you.” Iron Kim was still angry and complained to the junior, “I didn’t ask you to get someone to cover it. I asked *you* to cover it. You made a big mistake and need to make it up to me.”

Stress in the role of junior comes from the demands of seniors. Often times a senior’s work takes priority over one’s own. There were many nights in which Iron Kim slept only four hours because his time was split between his own work and that of his seniors. “I can’t rest this week. I need to finish this for Brother first.” The result might be financial compensation, sharing in the payout of a successful project. One afternoon I

travelled with Iron Kim to watch him register for an amateur ssireum competition. He submitted an entry fee along with his paperwork. Afterwards I asked how he could compete considering the permanent injury that retired him from the sport. “Well, my seniors created this team and asked me to be their seventh [player]. Otherwise they can’t compete. I’m not worried because I’ll never have to play. I’ll just go, get dressed, and stand around with the satba on. The competition is the best four out of seven, but it will probably be decided by the fifth or sixth player. My seniors were all strong players. They won’t lose. After we win they’ll give me some of the prize money and pay me back for the registration.” What had seemed to me like a risky proposition in which Iron Kim could have been further injured had he needed to play was actually a modestly lucrative boon from his seniors; after all, they could have called someone else to share in the easy money.

It is important to note that one is *never* simply a junior or a senior; rather, one is *always* both. So while being availed by older individuals or those with greater status is a fact of life, so is the use of younger or lower status persons. It is normal to feel stressed about extra work as well as resources. However, respite is found among cohorts³²¹ - persons of the same age. Persons in the same grade level, age, or status have the fewest differences in authority when interacting. Peers cannot compel one to do work for them nor are they obligated to redistribute resources. With the reduced distance between them

³²¹ 동기:同期: *Donggi*: Peer; someone at the same grade level or age - not a junior or senior. Similar to alumnus (동창:同窓: *Dongchang*), but does not necessarily imply attending the same school (though it does not preclude it either).

peer associations are less stressful in terms of role fulfillment. Maintaining them is more elective because of the de-formalized performances. They also provide lateral breadth to social networks and can cross-connect juniors and seniors; for example, your peer's juniors are also your juniors. While ssireum players spend most of their time with other ssireum players they still have non-ssireum connections and friendships from school or hometowns. Living with Iron Kim we had a half-dozen persons that were regular, almost daily, guests at our apartment; four were peers, one was his junior, and the other was his junior's peer. None of them were ssireum players and two of them were not even (former) athletes.

Interviewing players about their outside connections revealed an important point about the sport. All players indicated they had friends outside of ssireum circles, including other athletes (from shared dormitories) as well as non-athletes (from classes). All players said that their friends watched ssireum. "They weren't interested in ssireum before, but now they are. They watch me play." Some of them distinguished between friends that followed the sport (all types of competition), the league or team (collegiate), or just the player (individual). The main theme was that these friends were aware of the sport but did not follow it in any capacity until they befriended a ssireum player; after making friends with a player they would attend competitions or watch on television. The reason some people follow ssireum is because they know the players. This demonstrates that sports are a conduit for relationships and relationships a conduit for sports. While it may seem like obvious to say that, none of the discussion about (re)popularizing ssireum

incorporated it. Improving connections of players' non-player networks to the sport as an audience would have a halo effect as they in turn bring in additional non-players.

The remaining non-player connection that needs discussion is related to the gender disparity in organized ssireum. No women play at semi-pro or collegiate levels, or play at the organized middle school and high school levels. Instead, they are active almost exclusively in the amateur leagues. In general, ssireum is male dominated in competition and management. While players may never connect with women as competitors they do so in other arenas - as family, friends, and romantic interests. When feasible, players' mothers will attend competitions along with their friends. And players' outside friends may include women, some of whom could be romantic interests. In informal settings I noticed that players spent a lot of time talking about women, what might be referred to as "locker room talk". This talk tended to follow a pattern of general masculine expression; for example, what features in a woman were attractive. Rarely did the talk ever become specific or focused on a knowable individual woman. While players might talk about the importance of long legs in a girlfriend, they avoided talking about a specific classmate's long legs. When asked about girlfriends, the players unanimously answered, "No, I don't have a girlfriend." This was not necessarily surprising since it is typical to deny having had a relationship.³²² When asked why, there

³²² Ostensibly to maintain a woman's honor and eligibility for other men that an ex might conceivably know, though it also distanced the man from any unseemly connotations as well. Dating the ex-girlfriend of even a distant person in a social network was frowned upon as a source of potential conflict. Two non-players I met who were widely known to have dated the same woman openly denied it to each other even after she had left both of their lives. It seemed ludicrously improbably that both men would not know that each had dated her since everyone else in their immediate circle treated it as common knowledge. Apparently denying the relationships was a way of keeping the peace between them.

were two prominent answers, “There’s no time,” and, “Women don’t like big [muscular] bodies.” One player added, “[Ssireum] players have no money. You can’t get a girlfriend without a job. It’s not the right time for that now.” Another admitted, “I’m too shy.”

Despite their replies, at that year’s player graduation event every wrestler arrived with at least one date - some with more than one.

MAKING CLOSENESS

It should be clear by now that the bulk of a ssireum player’s time is spent preparing for competition and not actually competing. Preparation, or training, is communal in nature. Most of what constitutes training cannot be accomplished individually - even folding a satba is a partnered activity and that’s the most basic, essential characteristic of ssireum. Add to this the dormitory living situation and strong hierarchical expectations of roles between players and it becomes impossible to think of ssireum as an individual activity. Playing ssireum is being part of a group. Players spend a decade or more in that group. Through the group they learn solidarity with members and incorporate the messages of organization authority. Etiquette, for example.

Training is an integral part of learning. It teaches skills useful in competition. The method of imparting those skills carries its own subtexts. And the physiological effects of training as a group reinforces the solidarity among members. Which in turn strengthens the value systems they enact together. Among the middle and high school coaches their view of training leaned toward the practical. When asked what the point of training was their answers included imminently mundane concerns. “Teaching pulling and trunk exercises, showing smaller guys how to play inside and big guys to lift.” “To

develop leg power and pulling power.” “Strength and flexibility.” One coach had an extremely direct take, “Training is about basic fitness. If someone can train, they can play.” None of the coaches mentioned esoteric or moral components as being the objective of training. A different question revealed more. When asked what makes ssireum special, the answers from coaches began to mirror those of organizational leadership.³²³ “Ssireum teaches good manners.” All coaches gave some variation on “courtesy”. A few added additional points. “It’s a natural sport, [it’s] exciting. Players learn sportsmanship because there’s no hitting.” “Ssireum is traditional, it requires a traditional mind to play. Players learn manners that way.” “Ssireum is traditional and easy to play. The rules are easy [to understand]. It’s easy to get good.” “For a traditional sport, ssireum is pretty fast and has a lot of skills. It’s exciting.” One coach mentioned, “The *skinship*³²⁴ makes ssireum special. It gives you a good feeling.” While coaches explained the goal of training in practical terms they explained the uniqueness of ssireum in esoteric ones. The implication is that the method of training - not the content - is what instills the values inherent in ssireum. While not articulated in these terms by the coaches, the methods of training relied upon social stratification, relinquishment of volition, corporal punishment, and skinship.

The last item was repeatedly noted by players when posed with the question

³²³ On a few early occasions I asked people if they thought ssireum was special in some way. Their reactions indicated it was a poorly phrased question. They did not need to be primed in order to discuss how or why ssireum was unique. Afterwards I went directly to asking about ssireum’s uniqueness. No one ever challenged the assumption implied in the question.

³²⁴ 스킨십:漢字없슴: *Seukinshib*: “Skinship”, a portmanteau of the English words “skin” and “friendship”; refers to positive physical skin-to-skin contact between people.

about ssireum's uniqueness. All but two players mentioned skin-to-skin contact; the remaining two instead said, "It feels good to play." Other points they noted included the use of sand, the simplicity of rules and play, and the rapidity of play. None of the players mentioned etiquette or courtesy as unique components. The closest any came to the more flowery explanations of ssireum authority was when a solitary player observed, "In ssireum you can see a smaller player beat a larger one." During a visit to see a player in the hospital for a knee injury I ran into three of his peers, all of whom were Olympic-style wrestlers. Taking advantage of the opportunity I asked them some questions based on the standard used for ssireum players. Overall, their answers indicated that wrestlers felt and discussed their sport in much the same way as ssireum players. When asked about differences between wrestling and ssireum, the wrestlers all said ssireum was fast while their sport was much slower. "Ssireum is decided quickly. There is a clear winner. In wrestling the judges consider time, points, and skills. It's much more complex." None of the wrestlers ever mentioned skinship in either their sport or ssireum.

Ssireum players spend several hours each day in their training engaged in skin-to-skin contact with one another since the sport is played in shorts and belts. This is pro-social, or positive, contact because the players are not competing; they are helping each other train and are responsible for one another's safety and development. A possible explanation for why they describe this as unique and why it makes them feel good is the hormone oxytocin ($C_{43}H_{66}N_{12}O_{12}S_2$). Oxytocin has been recognized for its role in reproduction as it stimulates uterine contractions, lactation, and sexual arousal. Recent research suggests that it plays a role in social behavior such as bonding. Oxytocin

increases trust and reduces fear (Kirsch, et al. 2005; Kosfeld, et al. 2005), improves empathy (Zak, et al. 2007), and provides a sense of security and satisfaction in relationships (Meyer 2007). Of particular interest to ssireum is that oxytocin, "...can facilitate socially reinforced learning and emotional empathy in men" (Hurlemann, et al. 2010). Physical contact between humans can stimulate the release of oxytocin (Morhenn, et al. 2008). It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the contact between ssireum players is important because it facilitates their bonding. Few other team sports, if any, feature extensive skinship in their training regimens. The skin-to-skin contact between ssireum players may indeed be a unique feature of the sport.

Along similar lines, the daily repetition in training and ritualized interactions in ssireum reinforce the framing of the sport and the relationships among participants. Players build libraries of shared experiences together. Training and competition induce physical and psychological stress in the group and then resolve it. Experiencing a stressful situation as part of a group can facilitate the development of attachments among members; it can also initiate a psychologically transformative state. At the conclusion of the stressful situation group members resolve the experience together. If they remain in contact with each other or in a supportive social setting their transformation will be incorporated into their identity.³²⁵ These points are concordant with psychological

³²⁵ For example, Latné (1981) noted that the effect of a group on an individual is a function of the groups strength, immediacy, and number. The higher the status of the group, the larger the group, and the more time spent with them the more likely individuals are to conform within the group.

mechanisms underlying Van Gennep's (1961) explanations of rites and Turner's (2008) take on rituals.

A RITE OF PASSAGE

The career transition from college to semi-pro athlete involved a special festival. At the end of the collegiate season three players from Daehak University prepared to move on to semi-pro jobs. They would be replaced by incoming freshman players. An "informal" event was held to observe the occasion. I arrived at the university hall where meetings often took place in the banquet room. Inside the room was a stage at the rear with four tables placed in the outline of square in front of it. Off to one side was a small buffet table heaped with food. Professor Kim and Coach Kim were seated at the head table and ssireum players in black suits were seated with their dates around the other three tables. Some family members and former players were present. I prepared a plate and took a seat next to Iron Kim. He leaned in close and said, "We did this kind of thing when I was a player. I think every school does. The team spends about a month before the end of the semester preparing for it when they should be training instead. Everybody has to bring a date. The coaches and professors all donate money for this."

As they players filed in the greeting all their seniors. Coach Kim shared beer with them from the same small glass. One of the largest players arrived with the smallest date and everyone laughed at their juxtaposition in size. Then it was time to begin. Professor Kim gave a short speech about the need for developing ssireum. Then Coach Kim ordered the players to all line up and drink a shot with him. Afterwards they moved around the tables in a clockwise fashion receiving additional shots of alcohol from their

seniors. Iron Kim explained, “They need to do this. It helps loosen them up.” As they passed the seniors often ribbed them and prodded them with embarrassing questions. The players were also slipped envelopes of cash.

After making their rounds, the players’ show began. Several members of the team has slipped out to change clothes and returned to the room as another player used the public address system to start pumping a pop song through the speakers. Four players dressed in drag took to the middle of the square and recreated the erotic dance used in the video for the pop song. They repeated the routine with a second pop song with a romantic theme. When that was finished a graduating player entered the square with a microphone and began a roast of Coach Kim. “The coach taught us a lot of things. Including this move. [Slaps another player across the back of the head.] He says he invented it, but we can’t be sure. His most powerful techniques were a mystery until we discovered where he learned them.” At which point the players imitate the motion of opening a bag of snacks and a can of beer in the context of a competition. This goes on for some time.

The players cross-dressed in ragged clothes begin singing dirty limericks and hurling insults while extorting the audience members for additional money. “The university doesn’t support this event, so give generously. Hey, who put the empty envelop in this hat? You? You cheapskate!” The money collection gave way to a comedic display of martial arts using the theme of the ninja fight in the movie *Kill Bill Vol.1*. Wrestlers broke boards using their buttocks, smashed paper bottles on one another, and jumped over each other in a gymnastic bit. The final performance came as two

graduating players, one dressed as a woman the other dressed as a man, reenacted a graphic recreation of a sex act in the back of a taxi cab between drunken lovers. The performance was set to a pop song with sexually charged lyrics and ended with them producing a spray bottle with a penis-shaped nozzle which they used to soak Coach Kim and a selection of seniors in the audience.

At the end, another envelop of cash was produced and Coach Kim delivered an affectionate speech about the players. With one last communal cheer the event was over and the players began milling out of the hall. One by one the rest of the people left. The players' party was a classic festival of social inversion in accordance with Stoeltje's (1992) explanation of such events, a ritual occasion in which the lowest order of status (the players) exerted control over the highest (coach, professors). It was an affectionate undertaking that reaffirmed the hierarchy of status in player life by virtue of its ritualization. Were players always in charge such events would not have the same importance - the party was the observation of players' liminal status (Turner 2008; van Gennep 1961) in which social order had been deconstructed, only to be rebuilt later with their formal graduation from school and indoctrination into their semi-pro careers.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: INTO THE SAND

This chapter concludes the dissertation by returning to the issue of Koreanness in ssireum, reiterating notable trends within the sport, and categorizing why people play.

KNOWING SSIREUM

While conventional knowledge is the inheritance of an imaginary or anonymous collective, interpersonal knowledge runs along direct person-to-person interactions within a group; as described in Chapter VI, for example. This type of communication is a conduit for moving knowledge across time and space within individual lifetimes. That is, interpersonal knowledge has definite persons, faces, or names attached to it. Because of its intimacy it is also very contextually specific in what it means. Interpersonal knowledge of ssireum is acquired directly from other people, like a primary source, and does not engage individual reflection.

Consider etiquette (or courtesy) and ssireum. The conventional knowledge of its role within ssireum is nonspecific in origin. People cannot recall where they acquired it, to them it simply “is”. But that type of etiquette is nonspecific in principle. The method of practice for etiquette is one of interpersonal knowledge. An individual’s working vocabulary for knowing good etiquette when it is seen is based upon contextually specific example learned from others. When the president of a ssireum association makes a speech urging players to maintain proper manners and disposition it is not the same as when a coach beats a player with a wooden stick for failing to grasp a training

exercise. After the lesson has been instilled into the player it will be filed away with a contextually rooted memory. It is not unusual to see corporal punishment employed as an instructional tool in educational settings throughout Korea like this. Indeed, vivid stories of learning different takes on etiquette from authority figures are some of the easiest to elicit.

Interpersonal knowledge takes the vague contents of collective knowledge and builds a pattern recognition library around them. This type of person-to-person transmission anchors abstract ideas in a knowable social context in which concrete examples can be experienced. Participating in that interaction keeps the knowledge circulating and provides cohesion; the stronger, closer, and more numerous the group the more powerful the effect. The knowable group is the one which establishes the parameters for enacting the ideals of the abstract group. In the social stratifications of ssireum and Korea it is interpersonal knowledge which instructs individuals in how to realize the ideals of the group.

Conventional knowledge feeds into interpersonal knowledge, which is eventually evaluated and modified on an individual level. This type of reflexive synthesis is tailored to suit the individual. It is at this level that knowledge can be innovated and passed back into the collective pool, provided it fits within the current parameters of the knowable group. It is the application of values within the moment in pursuit of a discrete goal. It can be as simple as expressing opinions to as complex as rewriting an organization's bylaws.

Regarding etiquette, the vague appeals and refined examples that are inherited are not done so blindly. They must be sorted and evaluated first. This gives rise to variation. While peer pressure and corporal punishment can attempt to inculcate values of harmonious interaction they cannot guarantee an individual will actually take orders well. That is, collective and interpersonal knowledge can establish goals, incentives, and sanctions, but they cannot always enforce them. Despite the emphasis on proper manners and pursuit of noble goals some persons end up being underhanded ssireum players known for their dirty tactics in and out of the ring. They are often described as being non-representative, but that type of description is the product of divergent personal knowledge about ssireum unfolding and negotiating continuity. The authority that eventually comes with ascension in an age-based hierarchy allows these divergences to feed back into the pool of conventional knowledge. Over time this can lead to contradictory ideological positions that fracture a group into new units. Etiquette can be an ideal which prioritizes the refusal of bribes, or it can be one which prioritizes their redistribution.

As the cyclical interaction of conventional, interpersonal, and personal knowledge plays out in ssireum it produces simultaneous and contradictory meanings. Ssireum is a sport of etiquette and peace, though it is the distillation of skills once used by ancient militaries. It fared well under Japanese occupation, though it was still a means of colonial resistance. It represents Korean progress, but contains the essence of traditional values. Players have no real future despite their established history of socioeconomic success. The future of the sport should focus on globalizing it, even

though there is not enough support for a national league. Ssireum is uniquely Korean, but anyone can play. All of these positions, and numerous others, crisscross and compete in claims over the ethnic identity ssireum represents.

Looking at the various sources of knowledge about ssireum as perpetually emergent contributors to a subjective identity bypasses the hairy issues of content and continuity Barth cautioned against. Knowledge about ssireum is a feedback cycle in which an array of criteria and evaluations (re)circulate as long as they are deemed relevant to the identity within that cycle. The point has been to reveal the relationship between ideal and actual criteria at work by including them together. There was no intention of prioritizing any type of knowledge as more objective and therefore important than another. The timeline of data and the narratives used to connect them should make it clear that ssireum is an invented tradition because of the way knowledge and time have been shuffled to produce a progressively overarching identity of Koreanness.

THE METAPHOR

Ssireum reads like Koreanness. The perceptions of the past, the portrayal of collective self, and the supporting motifs are strikingly similar. They all converge in the creation of a groupness that informs the members' existence.

Korea is popularly depicted as deeply culturally, historically, linguistically, and genetically homogenous - the legacy of being once, but no longer, isolated. These fixed views of the past are the starting points for discourse on the collective sense of self within the group. Generally reductionist, they rely upon content or form rather than

manipulated continuity to emphasize homogeneity. They are not universally accepted either.³²⁶ Images of the group provided by ssireum are connected with an ancient agrarian past, presently a dead end in contemporary Korea; contemporary Koreans have moved past their past. As a denominator of uniqueness ssireum is at odds with modernization because it is expressly *not* global. Ssireum is highly localized and limited in scope. The modernization of Korea has restructured childhood. Leisure time has given way to the mania of after-school education. This has made ssireum a zero-sum proposition. Conventional knowledge dictates that children can either wrestle or they can study, but not both.

The Korean collective self pulled from the homogenous view has negative and positive perceptions attached to it. Koreans are resource poor, historically persecuted, and disempowered or disadvantaged as a result.³²⁷ This is another important premise in the narrative of ethnicity in Korea, though it too is contested.³²⁸ It is important because it

³²⁶ For example, see Nelson's (1995) excellent dissection of the subject of projecting Koreanness into the historical records via archaeology, "At this intersection of mythology, history, and archaeology lie many problems for the interpretation of the past. Political and nationalistic motivations for preferring one interpretation over another, although more covert than overt, are at the heart of these problems... Almost any archaeology or ancient history text makes clear that the purpose of archaeology in Korea is the search for Korean ethnicity, expressed as the history of the Korean people".

³²⁷ Relative to what? The referent is usually unstated, but the implication is Korea is resource poor compared to geo-continental world powers like China, Russia, or the US. It is probably unstated because it is a poorly constructed comparison in the first place.

³²⁸ For example, see Haggard, et al. (1997). In breaking down the occasionally invoked view that Japan modernized Korea during colonization they also make the point that, according to historical documents (including Japanese business records), Korea did have agricultural and mineral resources at the time of colonization. While the trend in the records indicates that production decreased under colonization it appears to have been the result of tampering with infrastructure and poorly planned production manipulation by the Japanese that precipitated the drop. That is, Korea was more than just strategically important geography - they had resources which the Japanese pillaged, but did not exhaust. Rather, the Japanese mismanaged what was there. But such a point does not fit well with the comeback aspects of Korea's underdog narrative.

sets the stage for the comeback action in Korea's success story. Despite the resource impoverishment and continuous invasion by foreign nations, Korea has always been strong in the peaceful solidarity and willpower of its human capital. Koreans are rich in people. It was the wealth in human power which allowed the nation to collectively bootstrap itself up in international economic rankings to become a global power.

Concordantly, ssireum is like Korea - peaceful, vigorous, and brimming with solidarity; yet it is also requires protection, is increasingly marginal, and facing decline.

The symbols which focus on the unity and interpretation of Koreanness are of course also at work in ssireum. Thus ssireum takes on elements of nationalism that, by all accounts, are contemporary associations - provided one accepts that nations and their affiliated attachments are historical developments and not omnipresent states of ethnic existence.³²⁹ If one starts with the position that Koreanness is a natural, ever-present condition then it is intuitive to overlap sports with national ideals. This is where ssireum's role as an invented tradition is most important as it maintains the boundaries of the group, defines the authority within it, and socializes its members. The use of romantic motifs such as the Taegeuk reinforces this connection. As belt colors come together to harmonize with the national flag, so do wrestlers come together to represent the nation. Ssireum becomes a means of transmitting traditional values such as etiquette

³²⁹ Keeping in mind the manipulation of archaeology and history throughout the world in the pursuit of national identity it is not universally accepted that nationalism is a socially constructed phenomena. Among nationalists one's devotion to the (abstract) concept of a "nation/state" is a natural condition. That is, to nationalists the omnipresence of "the nation" makes sense. From the perspective of a world dominated by nations how else would one order it in a logical fashion?

and manners. Restoring ssireum is a service to the nation. If ssireum is to truly prosper it must internationalize. Dictatorial authority and submission are the key. As opposed to eliminating in-fighting through altruistic collective action, attrition through competition and increased codification take precedence over cooperation.

THREE FEATURES

The processes of ssireum cannot be stripped out of the daily life contexts in which they reside and still make sense. The hierarchical distribution of authority, longitudinal scope of overlapping networks, and general value systems are not features specific to ssireum. Most settings in Korean life are dependent upon that type of social interaction and rationale for setting agendas, distributing resources, mobilizing labor, and so forth. They are valuable to ssireum because of their ubiquity. They do not juxtapose ssireum to a larger society nor isolate it as a subculture. While athletes may live in a distinct type of status their sport is very much mainstream because the financial and regulatory systems which sustain it are keyed into the everyday life of economics and governance in Korea. Ssireum is not self-sustaining. It cannot exist without the presence of a larger social framework.

Consider the complex processes and exchanges leading up to the performance of a ssireum event. They could not occur without being informed by a larger set of meaning. However, that set of meaning is not exhaustive. At some point it cannot address the rationale for interaction in a specific setting like a ssireum event. It is at that point ssireum puts forth its own set of knowledge to carry the process forward and the event to fruition. The event then projects that ssireum specific set of meaning back to the larger

setting in which the event occurs. There are three prominent features in the phenomenon of ssireum that contribute to its form, content, and continuity.

First, the age-rank hierarchies and lateral social networks which characterize Korean interaction at large are also present in ssireum. The difference is that they are hard-coded customs, such as language, in the former while they are ideologically prioritized as “traditional manners” in the latter. As an invented tradition ssireum takes what would otherwise be a staple feature of daily social interaction and formalizes it as important because of its association with the past. Hierarchical authority and deference are essential values in ssireum for Korea. But in terms of ssireum’s global designs, it is unclear how this would be received in other cultures; since hierarchies are not coded into the sport they only present an ideological issue - would people in other countries see deference to this type of authority as good traditional manners? Would it even come up? Since presumably people could still play without it, hierarchical authority may fall into the range of potential for ssireum to make people “more Korean” as opposed to “Korean”.

Second, there is a positive linear relationship between age (as seniority) and the preoccupation with the metaphysical importance of ssireum as a living philosophy. This corresponds with the tone of formalization mentioned above. For the youngest players ssireum is a game and their primary association with it is pleasure. They like to play. As their relationship with ssireum continues they incorporate it into their sense of self and begin to extend it as a metaphor. This is how ssireum becomes connected to the generally vague nationalistic development rhetoric of sport and culture.

Third, despite the emphasis on homogeneity the nature of ssireum is divergent and, at times, bitterly contested. The contemporary history of ssireum shows increased centralization of authority alongside the expansion of rules, all ostensibly in pursuit of standardizing the game to ensure that all are playing it the same way. Still, there has been a diversification of venues for play and conflict has surrounded it at every step as interpretations of the nature of the sport compete for dominance. Ethics, wealth, regionalism, and development goals in ssireum continue to defy homogenization.

The last 100 or so years of history in ssireum have seen it transformed from a folk game into a national sport. It is, as an invented tradition, a means of reaffirming groupness. In this case, a specific take on Koreanness - the promise of *communitas*, the need for competition. Within ssireum everyone is supposedly playing the same game. But this performance is only an ideal. It is not actually the case. Ssireum is not one game, it is many.

WHY SSIREUM?

This dissertation started with the above question. There was never any serious expectation that there would be only one answer. It was obvious from the beginning that there were many ways to interpret the question and answer it. My contribution interprets the question to mean, “Why does ssireum work?” or slightly rephrased, “How does ssireum work?” The answer, given throughout this dissertation, rests of the description of the sport as an invented tradition. Of the various things that ssireum does, the sense of Koreanness it imparts stems from the way it defines boundaries, legitimizes authority, and socializes participants. It takes symbols from a suitable historical past and embeds

them in a ritualized performance that contributes to a collective sense of self. This is my answer. No one I met during fieldwork explained ssireum in this capacity.

In fact, some may take umbrage with this view because, unfortunately, the term “invented tradition” can carry a negative lay connotation with regard to authenticity; calling a tradition invented to someone unfamiliar with the concept can imply that said tradition is somehow not “real”. As outlined in the beginning, I am unconcerned with issues of authenticity as an objective dimension in this case. People treat ssireum and its associated history and interpretations as real and that is enough to satisfy my personal sense of truth. The depiction of ssireum as an invented tradition should not undermine any claims about its authenticity. Instead, what “invented” in this case means is that the history of ssireum is, by most accounts, imprecise. The lives, minds, and rationale of the people who played, recorded, or were recorded playing ssireum are lost to those living in the present. We have inherited an incomplete picture and filled in the gaps using our imagination. The ensuing performances of ssireum have reshuffled history in a way that fits a vision. For example, the more proximate historical depictions of ssireum show it being played in ordinary shirts and pants. Yet contemporary ssireum has bypassed these images in favor of matching a more distant vision of the sport, one played bare-chested in shorts and belts. This does not invalidate ssireum, but it does point out that more than a modicum of willful manipulation has been afoot. Selective historical interpretations and commodification are socially driven forces, in this case driven by the need to emphasize unity and a favorable collective self.

Another way of interpreting the question is, “Why do people play ssireum?” Why play ssireum instead of another sport, or why play it at all? Why continue playing it? Presumably ssireum provides something that other sports cannot or do not. It developed at a time in Korean history when foreign sporting trends were on the rise. But those sports cannot be attached to a suitably favorable historical past. They can be Korean in practice, but not Korean in origin. They bring their own readings, such as how soccer allows participation in a larger world system. By comparison only a handful of gaming pastimes which make use of the human body existed in ancient Korea and could give a reading of local distinctiveness. In this sense ssireum provides a means of performing a ethnic past using the human form. But people’s categories are not so often shaped by contemplation as by experience. It is not likely, nor evident, that anyone playing in ssireum thought about it in these terms. The awareness of ssireum’s distinctiveness comes from doing it, not introspection. Ssireum is good to play.³³⁰

I sorted the reasons why people reported they play, or continued to play, ssireum in five categories.³³¹ Starting with the beginning of a player’s life cycle there are as follows:

The first, and perhaps most important reason, anyone starts playing ssireum is because they enjoy it. Ssireum is fun. Even the youngest children can grasp the concepts

³³⁰ It may also be said that because “ssireum is good to play” it follows that later in life “ssireum is good to think”.

³³¹ The only authority presumed in this categorization is the amount of time and breadth of experience I spent living and interacting with people in the ssireum industry. There could be many ways to sort the various explanations. This is just one way.

of playing it and enjoy the exhilaration that comes from putting their bodies in motion towards a specific goal. It feels good to be good at something. Ssireum is an opportunity to experience that. One wrestler said, “I like winning. Trying different skills, doing your best. It’s fun.” As an audience member it is easy to identify with this feeling, especially if you have played before.

Second, people play because they have no choice. Players are recruited as youths, a time in their life when their social capital is at an all time low, usually based on their early maturation or physical characteristics. Once “in” the game players cannot quit easily, though some players stop as soon as they are able. The difficulty comes from having incorporated ssireum into their identity. If what you do is an important part of how you view yourself changing what you do cannot be done lightly even in the absence of other compelling external motivation. One wrestler said, “Yes, I thought about quitting ssireum. But I’ve already spent half my life as a wrestler. What else would I do?” This compulsion is also present in coaches and officials that feel a responsibility to maintain their involvement with ssireum long after they cease being able to play. All coaches are former wrestlers.

Third, people play for access to higher education. The collegiate league is built around the prospect of giving players a path to college. Ssireum may be the only such path towards a college diploma for high school students that are not academically inclined in the standardized testing sense. This was especially important among the generation of retired wrestlers that were active during the golden era of ssireum. In the post-war environment ssireum was an arena where they could distinguish themselves for

a chance at a brighter future. While those same men almost unanimously forbid their own children from becoming athletes the situation has not necessarily changed as much as they imagine. One wrestler said, “I had a chance to join a semi-pro team, but I wanted to finish school first. I’m going to need to be a businessman one day. You need an education for that.” Middle school coaches reported using this concept to persuade parents into letting their children play as it plays against their insecurity in their children’s academic prowess.

Fourth, people play for money. Few expenses are spared in enacting ssireum. Salaries and fringe benefits are lush for a time. As previously noted, players can still earn good money in the semi-pro league. In some cases they can, for the time they play, make more money than a typical “salary man” just out of college. Players often bankroll career changes using their ssireum earnings, especially when they see insolvency looming in the industry. One wrestler said, “I’ll play on my senior’s semi-pro team for a while then start my own business.” Aside from players, the industry represents a lucrative resource for its affiliates - advertising, provisioning, and kickbacks are all sources of income.

Fifth, and last, is identity beyond Koreanness. Regional mentalities dominate many day-to-day interactions in Korea and some players are in the game for their “space”. Others play because they have developed strong bonds with their peers and are reluctant to leave them. The *communitas* felt in the industry not only distinguishes between Korea and the outside world, but also the various spaces within Korea. One wrestler said, “Eventually I want to be a ssireum coach in [my hometown]. We didn’t

have any strong teams there. I had to go away for middle school and high school while I played. That's not good." Likewise, players come to see themselves as a unique population or bearers of ideals. Perpetuating that population or ideals is important to them. This may be the greatest motive in seeking the internationalization of ssireum; such action has the promise to continue to distinguish Korea from the outside while also establishing *communitas* at the crossroads of competition. Ssireum might make the world more Korean.

WHY NOT SSIREUM?

It is not always a choice to play ssireum. For some players they are pulled into the sport with little personal discretion. For others, they cannot stay in the game. Iron Kim and the high school coaches all told me stories of enthusiastic individuals who, through no lack of diligence, were dropped from the game because they were inept. These potential players either did not have the right body type or could not develop their sense of play and balance. At least at the career level. Presumably they could have played amateur, though their fates remained unknown.

Of players who were once in the game, there are trends in their retirement - injury and age. Injury over the duration of an athletic career is almost unavoidable. At least two studies have looked into the nature of injury among players (Kim, et al. 2000; Lee, et al. 1999). Iron Kim, and others, were eventually forced into retirement because of repetitive injuries sustained during training. Conventional knowledge suggests that injury is the single greatest threat to a player's career and later quality of life. The disposition towards injury increases as players age though it is possible to ride out a

career into the mid-30s if uninjured. But by that age conventional knowledge again suggests that players contracts will not be renewed because they are too old and should be transitioning to different careers - either business or coaching, paths which can be trod indefinitely.

Thus some who want to play cannot, some who play cannot continue, and everyone who *does* play must eventually stop. Some retire completely, some stay active in the industry. But none of this accounts for audiences, the object of much focus in attempts to revitalize the sport. As mentioned previously, some audiences watch because they have played ssireum or they know someone who does. Some audience members come to tournaments because it offers free or low cost entertainment for an afternoon. Others come for prizes. What of the audiences that don't come to see ssireum? It is possible they have simply never been introduced to the sport. A common theme when talking to wrestlers was that their friends had little or no exposure to ssireum prior to meeting. Talking to first-time spectators at events echoed this point - many had never seen ssireum before and ended up in the audience by chance. Ssireum is exciting to watch, especially if you have played. The venue is intimate, there are plenty of chances to be close to players, and it can serve as a meeting point for community members.

But something is also missing from ssireum. The visual scale of the sport is small - two people in a roughly seven meter ring of sand. No amount of big-screen simulcast or replays at an event can enlarge this to the level of space a baseball or soccer game occupies. Ssireum is manifestly intimate and close. The logistics of performance and the

experience an audience receives as a result cannot overcome this point.³³² While ssireum as an industry may be modeled and managed as a professional-style sport watching it is a fundamentally difference experience compared to foreign team sports. When comparisons between ssireum and baseball audiences are made it seems to be missing the point. More appropriate comparisons might be with boxing, wrestling, or mixed martial arts events - most of which have similarly small turn outs compared to baseball.

As it stands, ssireum is ssireum. If fun is the primary reason people develop a relationship with the performance of ssireum then absence of enjoyment is the reason that no relationship is cultivated. Or why it ends.

THE BODY ATHLETIC

Ssireum is a tight, microcosmic approximation of how traditions and groupness play out across Korea. The episodic events contained within ssireum, the competitions, are finite and can be sequentially discussed. But simply watching a ssireum match will not make someone Korean. What the competitions do is bring into dramatic focus the loose collection of knowledge in ssireum and associate with a vivid sensory experience. The processes of ssireum do not have clear beginning and endings. They are continuous streams of interaction which carry values and knowledge across time and space and often go unnoticed because they are nestled in mundane daily life contexts.

³³² I attended a half dozen baseball games in various cities across Korea. Aside from baseball and ssireum both falling under the rubric of sports, there is little else in common between them. The dimensions of the venue, the way it is framed for audiences, the visual-spatial process of watching a team, and even audience behavior are distinct. While I preferred watching ssireum it is easy to understand that the two are different experiences and that some people prefer baseball. The reasons why people prefer one over another are interesting and merit their own analysis.

Tying these processes and events together in ssireum is the body. The human form is at the center of ssireum and the aesthetic experience of identity cannot be enacted without it. As such, the body is by necessity the subject of much scrutiny. The processes of ssireum mould the body and the events are the public culmination of that appropriation. It is through the body ssireum is both played and known. Ssireum cannot be separated from the human form. It is the most essential symbol of the sport. No other sport displays the body or defines competition between them in the same way. The implications of this are profound. It is in the body that we see ourselves. While the underlying psychological mechanisms are beyond the scope of this dissertation their effect cannot be debated. Putting something in the context of a human body changes it. Ssireum is literally written through the bodies of players.

Players experience ssireum through their bodies. They learn through motion. Audiences read ssireum through the players bodies as well. Everything that has been recorded in those form through training is brought forth and performed using the same medium for audiences. A player's history is read through seeing his form in motion. By donning belts colored to invoke a worldview prioritizing balance the wrestlers can enact that moral imperative. By bowing, refraining from overt violent striking, and being willing to fall in pursuit of success the players use their forms to ritualize conflict and diffuse it through peaceful struggles.

Intrinsic to ssireum is the role of the satba in directing technique. It literally anchors wrestlers to one another and distinguishes the sport from most other forms of wrestling. To play successfully you must be aware of how to advantageously grip a satba,

how to break an opponent's balance while they are holding on to you, and what techniques can advance your position while inhibiting your opponent. While players can technically release their grip on a satba it is generally unwise to do so as that relinquishes control of your satba to an opponent.³³³ Removing the satba from ssireum would inherently change the nature of the game by rewriting the strategies and techniques of play as well as the senses needed to successfully accomplish them. The skin-to-skin contact and satba converge in explanations of the aesthetics of ssireum. Skinship among players, the contact between their forms, is accomplished through the satba. It connects them to the value system they are performing. They must care for and develop one another's bodies. The time spent doing this is one of the most intimate, non-intellectual types forms of understanding possible. Touching is learning. Watching people touch is a powerful vehicle for meaning.

The most simple reading of ssireum is that it is a game between two people. But in that game ssireum players are literally enacting a view of their place in the world on some level. Ssireum frames questions, "Who are we? How do we recognize each other? Where are we going?" and delivers a highly specific set of answers. Players represent a Korea-centric worldview in which the past has been interpreted to suit the needs of the present. Their game has been made to look ancient; they have been made to look ancient. The economic and global aims of ancient performance are a way to reorder the global

³³³ I was told by several coaches that it was possible to win by releasing the satba for strategic effect, but I only saw it used successfully once. Locked together in an widely spaced embrace that was very low to the ground one player released the satba and used his free hand he reached up and inside his opponent's arm in order to then grasp and push the opponent's hand into the sand. It was a clever victory.

playing field of sports in favor of Korea. Reverse the flow of forces from the outside-in to the inside-out. Export ssireum to other nations, make it an Olympic sport, and write Koreanness on the bodies of people across the world.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Professional ssireum's "Death by IMF" and the threat of globalization reiterates the vulnerability felt through interaction with the outside world. The category of ethnic distinction may become weakened through easy interaction with outsiders. The prospect of losing that distinctiveness creates anxiety - it changes the game. That anxiety clouds the issues surrounding the game and specific plans of action are supplanted by rhetoric and reaction. So far no one has questioned the validity of the gloomy picture being portrayed.

The golden era of ssireum supposedly killed by the IMF may have been a bubble enabled during the economic growth of the nation. The nostalgia at work could be hampered by having unreasonable expectations based on an artificially high, or unsustainably high, period of popularity in ssireum. The sport was not in a particularly good position to be a vehicle for dominant expressions of Koreanness. The history of the sport is one of low status persons or subaltern norms. Ssireum will not be able to stay relevant in the long run if it is an impediment to the aggressive educational mania fostered in the decade before its rise. Without addressing this limitation ssireum will continue to distance itself from widespread participation. The low-status and educational impediments of training make it an outsider's sport. While the Koreanness in ssireum may be widely acceptable there is too little participation in it.

The view among ssireum authority is that the sport must point forward, not backward. I was often asked for an opinion on how to realize this goal. This is the inevitable result of being engaged with the people that let me into their lives in Korea. From the start anthropology has been engaged with its objects of inquiry (Bennett 1996). That relationship has been realized different ways (Low and Merry 2010). This dissertation is the product of sharing and support as it would have been impossible to write without becoming a part of the scene I was studying; accordingly, I became sympathetic to the issues my friends and colleagues faced. The following paragraph summarizes my thoughts on those issues, namely, “How can we revitalize ssireum?” Before proceeding, it should also be pointed out that this dissertation is also a social critique; there is a subtext present pointing out the deleterious effects of popular Korean educational and status mania, and the ways market ideologies have been misapplied and constrained the discussions of issues in ssireum (and Koreanness). This echoes Shin’s (2003) cautionary statement about Korean globalization, “A firm sense of the nation as organic, ethnic, and collectivist can be tapped as a resource... However, one must also be aware of the potential for authoritarianism latent in the process.” With that in mind, I came to see the vitality of ssireum *within* Korea as being distinct from its role outside of Korea.

To overcome any prejudices about ssireum and improve its popularity it would be necessary to increase participation in the sport in Korea. Globalizing ssireum is a good long-term goal, but it does not address more immediate concerns. The greatest appreciation and affection for the sport comes from playing it. Right now in Korea not

enough people are doing that. Collegiate and semi-pro teams have expanded over the last decade while primary school teams have reduced in number. The industry cannot continue to exist without new generations learning to play and having venues in which to do it. The first and most influential venue for exposure to ssireum seems to be elementary school. The best way to increase the social status of ssireum is to decrease the fervor of committed time so that players can leverage themselves in higher-status post-ssireum lives. This in turn could give them more clout for advantageously favoring the sport and expand the reach of ssireum in defining Koreanness. Broader participation, reduced training demands, and transparency are essential. Increasing the number of primary school teams, their funding, and support would be an excellent place to start.³³⁴ Reduce the training schedules of athletes and hold them accountable to higher civic involvement and academic standards; players would no doubt embrace these demands if it reduces their training schedule. Be clear about future salaries, career longevity, and post-play professions in order to raise awareness of the viability of career athletics. Putting money at the bottom instead of the top could be more cost effective. If the connection between ssireum and education is not strengthened it will continue to wane over time and further hamper the development goals of the industry. In short, re-

³³⁴ For example, there was no shortage of money going into semi-pro teams. The KSA could draft resolutions to divert a percentage of semi-pro teams' funding to regional schools. This money could be used to support elementary and middle school ssireum coaches, provide transportation for student teams to have access to semi-pro facilities, or provide material cost support (belts, sand, food, etc.). Alternately, the KSA could require collegiate teams to rotate players out as coaches for elementary or middle schools. This would alleviate the training demands on players, improve connections between universities and schools, and give players valuable coaching experience.

appropriate the image of ssireum players as elite Koreans via existing network connections before moving on to end-game Olympic goals.

FUTURE STUDY

This dissertation has been a snapshot of ssireum from a particular angle. Within the image of ssireum as an invented tradition there have been numerous other aspects of the sport discussed. Many of them are worthy of study in their own right. Future research could should also take into account the limitations of this work as well.

First, a more detailed picture of the collegiate ssireum league at large should be pulled together in order to see the total range of experiences within the sport. This would involve the development of surveys for players and coaches based upon the results of the interviews with the team represented in this dissertation. These surveys could assess the demographics of the league as well as looking into how and why its members became involved. This data could then be compared with players and coaches in other sports leagues, such as soccer. This would provide a more solidly empirical view of the collegiate ssireum as well as how it is similar to, and different from, other sports.

Second, the distribution of women in ssireum presents an interesting opportunity to explore the role of gender in Koreanness. Women do participate in ssireum, but that participation is very limited. The means and rationale by which that participation is reduced warrant further exploration. Why do more women not play? Are they discouraged? Do they not want to? How is this important to women in Korean society as well as ssireum? What do Korean sports say about gender? To facilitate research in this

direction it would be important to employ female researchers because gender influences both access and informant responses.

Third, the analysis of primary school teams and semi-pro teams should be expanded to see how, if at all, the level of play influences the performance of ssireum. This should include a network analysis to look at how persons and resources circulate through these levels of play. Again, are these comparable to other sports? How does the experience affect the role of the sport within Korean culture? Is it possible that other sports are more popular or better funded than ssireum because they have different organizational structures? A detailed look at the system across the board would provide an excellent case study for Korean social dynamics at large.

Fourth, more detailed discourse analyses on elite persons within ssireum should be conducted in order to pinpoint their effect on the transmission of values within the system. This paper proposed one way of understanding how values are circulated and refined within a group but there was not enough access to these individuals to assess the magnitude of their effect. Detailed interviews with team managers, league organizers, and bankrollers could look at how concrete their ideal depictions of the sport are, how players and coaches react to those ideals, and how they influence the organization of the sport. This would provide a means for situating the practice of authority within a sport and determining how much and what types of influence it exerts.

THE EXOTIC IS QUOTIDIAN

This dissertation has presented a formal review of ssireum as a novel Koreanness which seeks to bridge the traditional and global within the frame of sport. Ssireum has

appropriated market ideologies in its global designs, but with an emphasis on *communitas* over competition. While the implications are interesting in the abstract, I have attempted to root them with ethnographic data. Global phenomena look different in daily life.

For participants in *ssireum* these same issues are not abstract, they are a natural part of their existence. Easy to raise and difficult to resolve, *ssireum* is a way of understanding the world that comes naturally. I would like this closing section to illustrate this point one last time, through the words of someone in the midst of such understandings, someone whose words so easily captured complex tensions over a rather ordinary lunch.

It was a warm, early summer afternoon. Iron Kim and I had travelled to his hometown to meet his junior Mr. Hubae, a former semi-pro wrestler who was working as a middle-school coach. Mr. Hubae had skipped the collegiate league and spent only a few years playing semi-pro before retiring from an injury. We picked him up from his school and went to lunch together at a soup house. Mr. Hubae was in his mid-twenties and still very fresh faced and enthusiastic about *ssireum*. He spoke freely and earnestly about the sport while we ate.

“I started playing *ssireum* when I was in high school. That’s late and I was only so-so. My senior got me a job on the semi-pro team where he worked and I did okay. I never finished college, but I got my license to coach. The pay is not good, but I have a free dormitory. The middle school wants to make me a physical education teacher. For now, I said no. Teaching would reduce my coaching time. I have some pride about

ssireum and don't want to disconnect from it. My dream is to become a head coach at a high school or college.”

When asked about coaching he explained, “I look for players by talking to physical education teachers, using networking. Then I meet with the parents to convince them to let their son play. They are all fresh players at this level so I never refuse anyone. Some coaches will do that - tell a kid not to play. That's not good. I think they can all become good players. That's the coaches job. My job. Each player is different with different strengths and weaknesses. The point is to balance them, make them more well-rounded.”

Asked about the future of the sport, Mr. Hubae said, “All my players want to go to the university level. I tell them it will prepare them for semi-pro. They can't understand it is important to get an education, so I focus on the job. I tell them they can make better money if they finish college first. Even if they go semi-pro ssireum is just a Korean sport. It's limited. You can't dream about the Olympics as a ssireum player. Every player thinks like this sometime.”

When asked about the limitations of the sport he said, “Ssireum is our traditional sport. It's unique. Every country has some traditional sport. Other countries think taekwondo is Korea's best traditional sport, but it isn't. It's not exactly Korean. Ssireum is ours. I want the world to know ssireum is our best traditional sport. Ssireum has a real connection to our history, our culture. If people in other countries know about ssireum it will be more popular.”

When asked about the future of ssireum, Mr. Hubae said, “People these days think ssireum will never be popular. They don’t want to develop it. We should do that. If I have a son I hope he will play ssireum. He would have to train on another team. It’s too hard to coach your own son. If he plays, he should have a mind to be the best. If he succeeds, then I succeed, too. I was never a great player, but I have still have dreams.”

When I pointed out that many other coaches and officials did not want their children to play, Mr. Hubae replied, “That’s not good. People should use their power to help their families get good education and jobs [in ssireum]. That’s important. Especially if their kids aren’t good students.”

Finishing our meal, I asked why he feels ssireum is so important. He gave a broad smile and observed, “If I stop playing or coaching that’s not good. We need to take care of our players, our ssireum. If we don’t do it, who will?”

Train to win, play to play.

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APPENDIX A

ENGLISH TO KOREAN GLOSSARY

Transliteration	한글	漢字	Translation
<i>Ajumma</i>	아줌마	韓子 없슴	"Biddy"; an abrasive contraction of the proper term for a presumably married woman with children; the meaning ranges all the way from "lady" to "battle-axe" depending on context.
<i>Andari-gyeolgi</i>	안다리걸기	漢字 없슴	Inner reap - medio-lateral retrusive flexion of the posterior leg surface against the [opponent's] medial leg surface
<i>Annyeong hasimnikka?</i>	안녕하십니까	安寧하십니까	Technically phrased as a question, "Are you well?" it is the most formal greeting used by juniors to seniors or by speakers to audiences. There is no good grammatical equivalent in English and the subtext of formal grammar in Korean is frequently lost in translation as a result. Generally speaking, the shorter the ending in Korean the more informal the speech.
<i>Apmureup-chigi</i>	앞무릎치기	漢字 없슴	Front knee shove - protraction of the palm against the [opponent's] anterior knee joint
<i>Baedu</i>	백두	白頭山	FSC weight division 96kg or more, named after Mount Baekdu along the border between North Korea and China, considered the sacred birthplace of the Goguryeo civilization.
<i>Baek Ho</i>	백호	白虎	White Tiger, the minor division in professional ssireum.
<i>Baek Ho</i>	백호	白虎	White Tiger, third of four FSC weight classes; previously minor division pro-ssireum.
<i>Baek Ma</i>	백마	白馬	White Horse, first of four FSC weight classes.
<i>Baekje</i>	백제	百濟	Baekje (18BCE to 660CE), one of the three civilizations of the Three Kingdoms Era of Korean history.

<i>Baji</i>	바지	漢字 없슴	Traditional baggy long pants.
<i>Bakdari-gyeolgi</i>	박다기걸기	漢字 없슴	Outer reap - latero-medial retrusive flexion of the posterior leg surface against the [opponent's] lateral leg surface
<i>Bap mugna?</i>	밥먹나	漢字 없슴	"Didja eat?"; An informal greeting used by seniors to juniors. The grammar implies strong familiarity or closeness.
<i>Bareun Ssireum</i>	바른씨름	漢字 없슴	Right-side, or "proper," ssireum in which the belt is worn around the waist and right thigh.
<i>Bbalgan Satba</i>	빨간삿바	漢字 없슴	Unused Korean term meaning "red belt".
<i>Bbusari Ggachi</i>	뿌사리 까치	漢字 없슴	<i>Bucolic Magpie</i> , a comic book centered around a young ssireum player which started in 1994 and ran for at least nine issues; the title comes from a regional expression used to describe the tranquil power of cattle as well as the good fortune that magpie's represent.
<i>Buyeo</i>	부여	夫餘	Buyeo Kingdom, presumed to have originated sometime in the 2nd century BCE and lasted until 494 CE; it existed in an area covering Manchuria and parts of North Korea.
<i>Byeongjahoran</i>	병자호란	丙子胡亂	Second Manchu Invasion of Korea, 1636-1637 CE.
<i>Cheon Lyong</i>	청룡	靑龍	Blue Dragon, fourth of four FSC weight classes; previously major division pro-ssireum.
<i>Cheong Lyong</i>	청룡	靑龍	Blue Dragon, the major division in professional ssireum.
<i>Cheong Satba</i>	청삿바	靑삿바	Sino-Korean term meaning "blue belt".
<i>Cheongjanggeu b</i>	청장급	靑壯級	Light weight.
<i>Cheonha Jangsa</i>	천하장사	天下壯士	Grandmaster.

<i>Cheonha Jangsa Madonna</i>	천하장사마돈나	天下壯士마돈나	<i>Grandmaster Madonna</i> (official English title is <i>Like a Virgin</i>), a 2006 film about a fictional transgendered young man who enters a ssireum competition to win money for a sex reassignment surgery.
<i>Cheonjang</i>	천장	靑壯	Third of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Chiuhui</i>	치우희	蚩尤戲	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Choi Chan-Sik</i>	최창식	漢字未詳	Mr. Chan-Sik Choi, the 38th president of the KSA.
<i>Choi Hong-Man</i>	최홍만	崔洪萬	Mr. Hong-Man Choi, an enormous ssireum wrestler who retired to enter MMA competitions.
<i>Choi Tae-Jeong</i>	최태정	漢字未詳	Mr. Tae-Jeong Choi, the 39th president of the KSA.
<i>Chukgu</i>	축구	蹴毬	Soccer (sport).
<i>Chunghyeo Wang</i>	충혜왕	忠惠王	King Chungye (1315-1344 CE), the 28th king of Goryeo.
<i>Chuseok Jangsa</i>	추석장사	秋夕壯士	Fall Harvest Champion.
<i>Dae Hakbu</i>	대학부	大學部	College team.
<i>Daehan Cheyukhei</i>	대한체육회	大韓體育會	Korean Amateur Sports Association.
<i>Daehan Ssireum Hyeobhei</i>	대한씨름협회	大韓씨름協會	Korean Ssireum Association.
<i>Daehan Ssireum Yeonmaeng</i>	대한씨름연맹	大韓씨름聯盟	Korean University Ssireum Federation, founded in 2003 to oversee all university ssireum events; currently part of the Korean Ssireum Association. The first president was Mr. Seong-Ryul Kim (김성률) of Gyeongnam University (경남대학교) who governed until his death in 2004. The second president was Mr. Byeong-Ju Nam (남병주) of Boguk Construction who governed from April, 2004 to January, 2009. The third president was Mr. Ki-Yeong Eum (엄기영) who began governing in July, 2009.

<i>Daekwaedo</i>	대쾌도	大快圖	<i>Fête</i> , an 1846 painting by Yu-Seok.
<i>Danche</i>	단체	團體	Group (play).
<i>Dangjin Jangsa</i>	당진장사	唐津壯士	Dangjin (city) Champion.
<i>Dangun Wanggeom</i>	단군왕검	檀君王儉	Mythic founder of Korea.
<i>Dano</i>	단오	端午	Double Fifth, a holiday occurring on the fifth day of the fifth month in the traditional Korean lunisolar calendar in which shamanistic and ancestral spiritual rites were observed alongside auspicious celebratory activities.
<i>Danseongsa Geukjang</i>	단성사극장	團成社劇場	Danseongsa Theater.
<i>Dari Kisul</i>	다리기술	다리技術	Leg skills.
<i>Deulbea-jigi</i>	들배지기	漢字없슴	Lift-n-toss - elevational flexion of the anterior surface of the thigh and dorsal flexion of the trunk to elevate [opponent] against the abdomen
<i>Dodaehang</i>	도대항	道對抗	Provincial competition.
<i>Donggi</i>	동기	同期	Peer; someone at the same grade level or age - not a junior or senior. Similar to alumnus (동창:同窓: <i>Dongchang</i>), but does not necessarily imply attending the same school (though it does not preclude it either).
<i>Donghak Nongmin Undong</i>	동학농민운동	東學農民運動	Eastern Learning Peasant Movement, an anti-government/elite/foreign peasant rebellion that precipitated the First Sino-Japanese War when Korea could not suppress the revolt and China moved to intervene, thereby prompting Japan to counter China's military presence in the peninsula.
<i>Dongmyeong Seongwang</i>	동명성왕	東明聖王	King Dongmyeong (37-19 BCE), sometimes known as Jumong or Chumo, the founder of the Goguryeo civilization.
<i>Durumagi</i>	두루마기	漢字없슴	A flowing overcoat tied across the chest.
<i>Eulsa Joyak</i>	을사조약	乙巳條約	Eulsa Treaty, 1905.

<i>Eum Yang</i>	음양	陰陽	“Yin-and-Yang”, the Taoist philosophical concept of harmonious opposition, or simply “balance”.
<i>Gabo Gaehyeok</i>	갑오 개혁	甲午改革	Gabo Reforms, a series of sweeping national reforms undertaken in Korea from 1894 to 1896.
<i>Gaebal</i>	개발	開發	Development.
<i>Gaein</i>	개인	個人	Individual (play).
<i>Gakhui</i>	각휘	角戲	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Gakjeo</i>	각저	角抵	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Gakji</i>	각지	角支	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Gakryeok</i>	각력	角力	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Gakseoli</i>	각설이	却說이	Singing beggars, a staple trope found at festivals and market setting. Cross-dressed in exaggerated and filthy costumes these performers sing rude or lascivious verses (often about the audience) while selling taffy (옛: <i>yeot</i>).
<i>Ganghwado Joyak</i>	강화도 조약	江華島條約	Treaty of Ganghwa, 1876.
<i>Gantonghada</i>	간통하다	姦通하다	To commit adultery.
<i>Geomdo</i>	검도	劍道	Kendo (sport).
<i>Geosang</i>	거상	巨象	Elephant, second of four FSC weight classes.
<i>Geumgang</i>	금강	錦江山	FSC weight division 75-85.9kg, named after Mount Geumgang (part of the Taebaek Mountain Range) in North Korea.
<i>Gi</i>	기	漢字없슴	A gerundial suffix which is added to (usually transitive) verbs to have them function as nouns. For example, <i>chida</i> (치다: to hit/shove) becomes <i>chigi</i> (치기: hitting/shoving).
<i>Girok Misang</i>	기록미상	記錄未詳	History unknown.

<i>Gisul</i>	기술	技術	Skill, a Sino-Korean word difficult to express concisely in indigenous vocabulary.
<i>Goguryeo</i>	고구려	高句麗	The Goguryeo civilization which existed from around the middle of the 1st Century to the end of the 7th Century.
<i>Gogyo Bu</i>	고교부	高校部	High school team.
<i>Goryeo Sa</i>	고려사	高麗史	<i>The History of the Goryeo Dynasty</i> , commissioned by King Sejong nearly a century after the fall of Goryeo it is based upon primary and secondary sources that are now extinct. The work is written in Hanja and consists of over 139 volumes.
<i>Goryeo Wangjo</i>	고려왕조	高麗王朝	Goryeo Dynasty (918 to 1392CE), the first unified state to exist in what is now the Korean peninsula.
<i>Gwangeo</i>	과거	科擧	Civil exams, started in the 8th century under Silla, revised in the 14th century under Goryeo, and broadly expanded under Joseon rule until they were officially abolished under the Gabo Reforms.
<i>Gwanggaeto Taewang</i>	광개토태왕	廣開土太王	Gwanggaeto the Great (~374-413 CE), the nineteenth ruler of Goguryeo.
<i>Gwantonghada</i>	관통하다	貫通하다	To pass through.
<i>Gyengjang</i>	경장	輕壯	First of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Gyeonglyanggeub</i>	경량급	輕量級	Light weight.
<i>Hada</i>	하다	漢字없슴	To do; often combined with nouns to create compound verbs. For example, <i>saenggak</i> (생각: thought) plus <i>hada</i> (하다: to do) creates <i>saenggakhada</i> (생각하다: to think).

<i>Haengnim</i>	형님	漢字 없슴	Brother, with a capital “B”; an colloquial, affectionate term of address used with close seniors. Difficult to translate without losing the connotation, it is technically along the lines of “honorable (older) brother”. But that feels awkward in English and has the effect of creating social distance while the Korean term actually seeks to close the space between a junior and senior. Alternately, translating it as “brother” loses the endearing respect because the term is not at all used between Korean men the same way English speaking peers might address one another as “brother” or “my brothers”.
<i>Hagwon</i>	학원	學院	Academy; a for-profit type of private academy in Korea which teach a variety of subjects, though most often English, as a means to advance education and “get ahead” in society. Some Koreans view hagwons as providing an important supplement to compulsory education while others see them as profiteering from, and contributing to, social and economic inequality. If a family can afford it their children frequently begin attending hagwons as early as pre-school and continue to do so throughout their public education.
<i>Hanbok</i>	한복	韓服	Traditional Korean clothing.
<i>Hangangeui Gijeok</i>	한강의 기적	漢江의 奇蹟	“The Miracle on the Han”, a phrase used to refer to the “miraculous” modernization of Korea, especially Seoul, following the Korean War; this is an appropriation of “The Miracle on the Rhine” (<i>Wirtschaftswunder</i>) which refers to West German and Austrian economic recovery following the end of World War II.
<i>Hangeul</i>	한글	漢字 없슴	The Korean phonemic alphabet commissioned by Sejong the Great in the middle of the 15th Century to replace Hanja.
<i>Hanguk Bangsong</i>	한국방송	韓國放送	KBS, Korean Broadcasting System.

<i>Hanguk Minsok Ssireum Hyeobhei</i>	한국민속씨름 협회	韓國民俗씨름協會	Korea Folk Ssireum Association.
<i>Hanguk Ssireum Hyeobhei</i>	한국씨름협회	韓國씨름協會	Korea Ssireum Association.
<i>Hanguk Ssireum Yeonmaeng</i>	한국씨름연맹	韓國씨름聯盟	Korea Ssireum Federation.
<i>Hanja</i>	한자	漢字	The Sino-Korean logographic writing system based on Chinese characters used in nearly all historical Korean texts prior to the advent of Hangul.
<i>Hanja Eo</i>	한자어	漢字語	“Sino-Korean Vocabulary”.
<i>Hanla</i>	한라	漢拏山	FSC weight division 86-95.9kg, named after Mount Hanla, a shield volcano on Jeju Island.
<i>Hansik</i>	한식	寒食	Spring sowing and ancestral veneration day occurring on the 105th day after the winter solstice in the Korean lunisolar calendar.
<i>Heori Gisul</i>	허리기술	허리技術	Trunk skills.
<i>Hong Satba</i>	홍삿바	紅삿바	Sino-Korean term meaning "red belt".
<i>Hubae</i>	후배	後輩	Junior; a person younger than the referent, subordinates in a social network; ; not to be confused with the kinship or educational meanings of the word in English.
<i>Huhan Seo</i>	후한서	後漢書	<i>History of the Later Han</i> , one volume in the <i>Twenty-Four Histories</i> (二十四史), compiled by Fan Ye (范曄:范曄:蔚宗) in the 5th century covering the history of the eastern Han from 25-220 CE.

<i>Hwangsa</i>	황사	黃沙	Yellow Dust, a seasonal phenomenon in East Asia in which desert sand from China, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia is picked up by air currents and carried across Korea, Japan, and parts of Russia. The dust clouds accumulate pollen and pollution along the way and deposit sheets of yellow-brown grime across everything exposed to the elements.
<i>Hwanin</i>	환인	桓因	Lord of Heaven, the father of Hwanung and grandfather of Dangun Wanggeom in the Korean origin myth.
<i>Hwanung</i>	환웅	桓雄	Divine Regent, the son of the Lord of Heaven and father to Dangun Wanggeom in the Korean origin myth.
<i>Hwarang</i>	화랑	花郎	A class of warrior elites in the Silla kingdom.
<i>Hwimun Godeung Hakkyo</i>	휘문고등학교	徽文高等學校	Hwimun High School.
<i>Hyeong</i>	형	兄	Older Brother, an honorific slang men use for their most familiar male seniors. Honorifics like this reflect both the speaker and honoree's gender; not counting regional slang there are at least four separate basic honorifics: male-to-male, male-to-female, female-to-male, and female-to-female. Using these terms indicates presumed intimacy, otherwise junior persons use titles to refer to seniors and seniors are free to call juniors by their given names. Hearing these terms can range from deeply friendly, "Hyeong, it's good to see you!" to sycophantic, "Hyeong, I'm so thirsty [please treat me to some beer]."
<i>Hyeonjong Sidae</i>	현종시대	顯宗時代	<i>King Hyeonjong's Chronicles</i> , records of the 18th king of the Joseon Dynasty.
<i>Hyung-Makyeom</i>	흉막염	胸膜炎	Pneumothorax; pleurisy.
<i>Ilbanbu</i>	일반부	一般部	Semi-professional sports team.
<i>Im Dong-Kwon</i>	임동권	漢字未詳	Dong-Kwon Im.

<i>Inje Dae Hakkyo</i>	인제대학교	麟蹄大學校	Inje University.
<i>Ip Ssireum</i>	입씨름	漢字 없슴	Literally "mouth wrestling", can also be read as arguing or debating.
<i>Jaebeol</i>	재벌	財閥	A type of Korean “business family” conglomerate. The jaebeol originated in post-war ROK when some businessmen and their families took control of former Japanese assets in the country and then worked in collusion with the early military dictatorships to rapidly modernize Korean industries. Jaebeol made extensive use of foreign technology and aid in their growth. The “Big Four” contemporary jaebeol of Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK are essentially family-owned multinational corporate associations that monopolize lucrative industries in Korea and abroad.
<i>Jaemi Itda</i>	재미있다	漢字 없슴	Enjoyably interesting; stimulating fun. This phrase hovers between “fun” and “interesting” in English. It is sometimes mistranslated as “funny”, but it does not carry the same feeling as “humorous”.
<i>Jaenggyo</i>	쟁교	爭交	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Jajangmyeon</i>	자장면	炸醬麵	A Sino-Korean dish of wheat noodles topped with a salty, oily black sauce.
<i>Jang Mi-Ran</i>	장미란	張美蘭	Ms. Mi-Ran Jang, a Korean Olympic-class weightlifter who has received numerous gold medals throughout her career.
<i>Jangchung Cheyukkwan</i>	장충체육관	獎忠體育館	Jangchung Gymnasium.
<i>Jangsa</i>	장사	壯士	Seventh of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Jangsageub</i>	장사급	壯士級	Heavy weight.
<i>Jeogori</i>	저고리	漢字 없슴	Traditional Korean jacket.
<i>Jeon Joseon Ssireum Daehwei</i>	(전)조선씨름대회	(前)朝鮮씨름大會	Joseon Ssireum Championship Contest.

<i>Jeon Joseon Ssireum Hyeobhei</i>	(전)조선씨름협회	(前)朝鮮씨름協會	Joseon Ssireum Association.
<i>Jeonggu</i>	정구	庭球	Lawn tennis (sport).
<i>Jeongmichil Joyak</i>	정미칠 조약	丁未七條約	Treaty of 1907.
<i>Jeongsin</i>	정신	精神	Mindset.
<i>Jeonguk Cheuk Daehwei</i>	전국체육대회	全國體育大會	The National Sports Festival, the oldest and longest running sports competition in Korea; running annually with few exceptions since July 13, 1920.
<i>Jeonguk Minsok Yesul Gyeongyeonn Daehei</i>	전국민속예술경연대회	全國民俗藝術競演大會	National Folk Arts Festival.
<i>Jeonguk Ssireum Seonsugwan Daehwei</i>	전국씨름선수권대회	全國씨름選手權大會	National Ssireum Championship Contest.
<i>Joseon Ilbo Sagangdang</i>	조선일보사강당	朝鮮日報社講堂	Chosun Daily News Auditorium.
<i>Joseon Wangjo</i>	조선왕조	朝鮮王朝	Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897CE), the last royal dynasty in what is now Korea.
<i>Jung Hakbu</i>	중학부	中學部	Middle school team.
<i>Jungdeungbu</i>	중등부	中等部	High school sports team, archaic usage.
<i>Jungryanggeub</i>	중량급	重量級	Middle weight.
<i>Jungyeol</i>	준결	準決	Semi-finals.
<i>Kang Ho-Dong</i>	강호동	姜鎬童	Mr. Ho-Dong Gang, a former ssireum player and Grandmaster, now one of the most popular (and prolific) MC personalities in Korean television.
<i>Kim Dong-Su</i>	김동수	漢字未詳	Mr. Dong-Su Kim, one of the founders of the FSC.
<i>Kim Hae-Su</i>	김해수	漢字未詳	Mr. Hae-Su Kim, one of the founders of the FSC.

<i>Kim Hong-Do</i>	김홍도	金弘道	Kim Hong-Do (1745-1806 CE), a painter from the late Joseon period famous for his depictions of daily life.
<i>Kim Jae-Gil</i>	김재길	漢字未詳	Mr. Jae-Gil Kim, a producer at KBS who worked with Gyu-Hang Lee and Tae-Seong Kim to establish ssireum in the network's lineup.
<i>Kim Jun-Geun</i>	김준근/기산	金俊根/箕山	Mr. Jun-Geun Kim, pen name Gi-San, a late Joseon painter active at the turn of the 20th century.
<i>Kim Tae-Song</i>	김태성	漢字未詳	Mr. Tae-Seong Kim, a ssireum expert and FSC founder who worked with Gyu-Hang Lee to keep ssireum televised on KBS.
<i>Kwangmydae Geukjang</i>	광무대극장	光武臺劇場	Kwangmudae Theater.
<i>Kwontu</i>	권투	拳鬪	Korean term for boxing.
<i>Lee Gyu-Hang</i>	이규항	漢字未詳	Mr. Gyu-Hang Lee, the MC for the first televised ssireum competition in Korea who was instrumental in getting KBS to sponsor ssireum; Lee would go on to MC ssireum for over 30 years.
<i>Lee Man-Gi</i>	이만기	李萬基	Mr. Man-Gi Lee, one of the most famous wrestlers from the golden era of modern ssireum he won the Grandmaster Championship a total of ten times.
<i>Lee Tae-Hyeon</i>	이태현	漢字未詳	Mr. Tae-Hyun Lee, an outstanding ssireum player who retired, earned a PhD, dabbled in MMAs, and later returned to ssireum.
<i>Minjeong</i>	민정	民政	Civic democracy.
<i>Minsok Noli</i>	민속노리	民俗노리	Ethnic games.
<i>Minsok Ssireum Euiwonhei</i>	민속씨름위원회	民俗씨름委員會	Folk Ssireum Committee. Unrelated to the former organization with the same name, this incarnation was formed as subsection of the Korean Ssireum Association (대한씨름협회) and was active from late 2007 to early 2009.
<i>Minsok Ssireum Wiwonhei</i>	민속씨름위원회	民俗씨름委員會	Folk Ssireum Committee, FSC.

<i>Muban</i>	무반	武班	The warriors within the Yangban class.
<i>Mudang</i>	무당	巫당	Spirit medium, sometimes translated as “shaman”; generally a woman who channels the supernatural world in order to address clients’ questions or concerns.
<i>Mujehangeub</i>	무제한급	無制限級	Free-weight.
<i>Munban</i>	문반	文班	The scholars within the Yangban class.
<i>Munhwa Jaebo Hobeob</i>	문화재보호법	文化財保護法	Cultural Properties Protection Law.
<i>Myeongjong Sidae</i>	명종시대	明宗時代	<i>King Myeongjong’s Chronicles</i> , records of the 13th king of the Joseon Dynasty.
<i>Naewei Gyeongje Sinmun</i>	내외경제신문	內外經濟新聞	The Korea Herald, a major Korean newspaper.
<i>Nam</i>	남	男	Man/men.
<i>Nam nyeo chilse budongseok</i>	남녀칠세부동석	男女七歲不同席	“Men and women older than seven do not sit together.” An aphorism which succinctly proscribes normative gender segregation. In practice, when a man and woman are seen together in public people automatically infer they are somehow romantically or sexually entangled. Unless one is ready to declare such a relationship considerable energy goes in to obfuscating it, often through group dates involving three or more people.
<i>Oenbae-jigi</i>	왼배지기	漢字없슴	Left-side belly toss - dorsal flexion and sinistro-lateral rotation of the trunk to elevate [opponent] against the abdomen
<i>Ondol</i>	온돌	溫突	Under-floor heating, the Korean preference for which supposedly dates back several thousand years.
<i>Po</i>	포	袍	A general term for outer robes or overcoats commonly worn in Korean up to the Joseon Dynasty.
<i>Pungseokdo</i>	풍속도	風俗圖	Folk life drawings.

<i>Pureun Satba</i>	푸른삿바	漢字 없슴	Unused Korean term meaning "blue belt".
<i>Reseuilling</i>	레슬링	漢字 없슴	(Western) wrestling as etymologically distinguished from ethnic Korean wrestling.
<i>Samguk Sagi</i>	삼국사기	三國史記	<i>Annals of the Three Kingdoms</i> , the oldest Korean historical account of preceding civilizations, written sometime around the 12th century as commissioned by King Injong of Goryeo.
<i>Samguk Yusa</i>	삼국유사	三國遺事	<i>Archaisms of the Three Kingdoms</i> , a Korean text recorded around the end of the 13th century which contains legends, folktales, and historical accounts of ancient Korean civilizations.
<i>Samjogo</i>	삼족오	三足鳥	Three legged crow; motif common across many cultures in East Asia. In the case of Korea, the crow was the emblem of the Goguryeo kingdom and thought to be superior in power to either the dragon or phoenix.
<i>Sangbak</i>	상박	相撲	Ancient Sino-Korean term for ssireum.
<i>Sangbak</i>	상박	相撲	<i>Wrestling</i> , an actually unnamed painting from the 18th Century by Kim Hong-Do in his "Folk Life" series (풍속도:風俗圖) which depicts a scene strongly evocative of ssireum.
<i>Saruda</i>	사루다	漢字 없슴	Verb meaning "to repetatively work [something]", one suggested origin for ssireumhada.
<i>Satba</i>	삿바	漢字 없슴	The belt worn around the waist and thigh by ssireum players during competition; a key component of this unique style of play.
<i>Segye Ssireum Yeonmaeng</i>	세계씨름연맹	世界씨름聯盟	World Ssireum Federation, WSF, started in 2009 with the goal of internationalizing ssireum.
<i>Sejeong Daewang</i>	세종대왕	世宗大王	Sejong the Great (1397-1450 CE), the fourth king of the Joseon Dynasty.
<i>Seollal Jangsa</i>	설날장사	설날壯士	Lunar New Year Champion.

<i>Seonbae</i>	선배	先輩	Senior; a person older than the referent, superiors in a social network; not to be confused with the kinship or educational meanings of the word in English.
<i>Seonsu</i>	선수	選手	Literally, player. Referring to those who play ssireum as wrestlers does not quite capture the feeling of what they do. Player feels more appropriate.
<i>Seorabeol Yesul Chogeub Daehak</i>	서라벌예술초 급대학	徐羅伐藝術初 級大學	Surabul College of Arts which apparently merged with Chung-Ang University (중앙대학교:中央大學校) in 1977.
<i>Seukinshib</i>	스킨십	漢字없슴	“Skinship”, a portmanteau of the English words “skin” and “friendship”; refers to positive physical skin-to-skin contact between people.
<i>Sileobbu</i>	실업부	實業部	Sponsored team.
<i>Silla</i>	신라	新羅	Silla (57BCE to 935CE), one of the three civilizations of the Three Kingdoms Era of Korean history.
<i>Sinsi</i>	신시	神市	City of God, founded by Hwanung in the Korean origin myth.
<i>Sojang</i>	소장	少壯	Second of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Sojanggeub</i>	소장급	少壯級	Feather weight.
<i>Soju</i>	소주	燒酒	“Hooch”; a distilled alcoholic beverage native to Korea; this ubiquitous, inexpensive, and clear alcohol is comparable in taste to vodka or sake and is typically consumed neat from shot glasses.
<i>Son Gisul</i>	손기술	손技術	Hand skills.
<i>Ssauda</i>	싸우다	漢字없슴	Verb meaning "to fight", one suggested origin for ssireumhada.
<i>Ssireum</i>	씨름	漢字없슴	Korean-style belt wrestling.

<i>Ssireum Jang</i>	씨름장	씨름場	Ssireum-hall; a dedicated, enclosed ssireum training facility usually featuring a small staging area for dressing and a large sand floor for instruction and practice. The “jang” phoneme is also used in a word familiar to student of Korean (<i>dojang</i> :도장:道場) or Japanese (<i>dojo</i>) martial arts where it means “[martial arts] training hall”.
<i>Ssireum Teo</i>	씨름터	씨름據	Ssireum Foundation, a quarterly newsletter about ssireum published by the KSA starting in 2009.
<i>Ssireumhada</i>	씨름하다	漢字없슴	To wrestle/grapple/struggle with something.
<i>Ssireumhada</i>	씨름하다	漢字없슴	Verb which means “to wrestle [with something]”, but it is derived from ssireum as opposed to the other way around. Alternate possible origins for ssireum include the indigenous verb <i>ssauda</i> (싸우다: 漢字없슴), which means “to fight”, and <i>saruda</i> (사루다: 漢字없슴), a archaic verb which is used to describe repetitive motions such as struggling to lift something, turning a crank, or even coitus. None of these theories are unanimously accepted.
<i>Sunwi</i>	순위	順位	Ranking.
<i>Taebaek</i>	태백	太白山	FSC weight division 75.9kg or less, named after the Taebaek Mountain Range which are the main ridge of Korea, extending along the east coast from North to South Korea.
<i>Taegeuk</i>	태극	太極	The Korean red and blue cognate of the black and white symbol commonly known in the US as the “yin-and-yang symbol”.
<i>Taekkyeon</i>	택견	漢字없슴	A traditional dance-like martial art from Korea oriented around kicking; supposedly dating as far back as ssireum it is practiced as type of modern competition.
<i>Taekwondo</i>	태권도	跆拳道	A Korean martial art.

<i>Tong Ssireum</i>	통씨름	漢字 없슴	Waist-ssireum, meaning that the belt is worn around the waist only; sometimes known as <i>heuri ssireum</i> (허리씨름) or <i>ddi ssireum</i> (띠씨름).
<i>Tongil Cheonha Jangsa Ssireum Daehei</i>	통일천하장사 씨름대회	統一天下壯士 씨름大會	Unified Ssireum Grandmaster Competition.
<i>Ungnyeo</i>	웅녀	熊女	Bear Woman, wife of Hwanung and mother of Dangun in the Korean origin myth.
<i>Urieui</i>	우리의	漢字 없슴	Our.
<i>Urineun</i>	우리는	漢字 없슴	We.
<i>Wein Ssireum</i>	왼씨름	漢字 없슴	Left-side ssireum, meaning that the belt is worn around the waist and left thigh.
<i>Yagu</i>	야구	野球	Baseball (sport).
<i>Yangban</i>	양반	兩班	The traditional ruling class of nobles in dynastic Korea.
<i>Yeeui</i>	예의	禮儀	Courtesy; similar to etiquette, refers to civility and manners.
<i>Yejeol</i>	예절	禮節	Etiquette; a term used to describe refined, gentlemanly, traditional good manners.
<i>Yeoja</i>	여자	女子	Woman/women.
<i>Yeoksa</i>	역사	力士	Sixth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Yeokskgeup</i>	역사급	力士級	Middle weight.
<i>Yeopmureup-chigi</i>	옆무릎치기	漢字 없슴	Sideways knee shove - medio-lateral extension of the palm against the [opponent's] medial knee joint
<i>Yetmal Ot</i>	옛날옷	漢字 없슴	Old-timey clothes.
<i>Yongjang</i>	용장	勇壯	Fourth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Yongsa</i>	용사	勇士	Fifth of seven (lightest to heaviest) KSA weight divisions.
<i>Yongsageub</i>	용사급	勇士級	Welter weight.
<i>Yudo</i>	유도	柔道	Korean term for Japanese <i>judo</i> .

<i>Yugakkwon Gurakbu</i>	유각권구락부	柔角拳俱樂部	Yugakkwon Club.
<i>Yuksang</i>	육상	陸上	Track and field (sport).
<i>Yu-Seok</i>	유숙/혜산	劉淑/惠山	Yu-Seok, pen name Hye-San, (1827-1873) a late Joseon painter.

APPENDIX B

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