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**Contemporary Transformative Phases in Korean Dance**

Chae-hyeon Kim

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# Contemporary Transformative Phases in Korean Dance

Chae-hyeon Kim (Korea National University of Arts)

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## 1. A Glimpse of Korean Dance History in Modern Times

From the late 19th century to the early 1980s, dance in Korea gradually and slowly changed. After the 1980s, in contrast, dance rapidly changed. In other words, for the past three decades, dance in Korea went through a lot of changes. The rapid and frequent changes in the dance field itself have become more and more common. In this sense, it is interesting to examine the different tendencies before the 1980s and since. Such an examination offers an opportunity to anticipate the future of Korean dance.

In the late 19th century, Imperialist countries coerced Korea to open her ports for trade. With unequal treaties, modernization of the peninsula started. Although the Korean industrial foundation was very vulnerable, cities like Seoul quickly modernized and Westernized. This was when the Western style theatre with its proscenium stage was introduced, and this required Korean dance presentation to change.

As we all know, Korea became a colony of Japanese imperialism in the first half of the 20th century. In this period, dance in Korea was placed under enormous influence from modern culture through Japan. A dance performance by the Japanese modern dancer, Baku Ishii (1886 – 1962), who was greatly influenced by the German expressionism particularly of Mary Wigman (1886 – 1973), left a lasting impression on the Korean intelligentsia. Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi (in Japanese pronunciation, Sai Shōki, 1911 – 1969) studied modern dance under Ishii. Later, Ishii also taught Cho T'aegwŏn (1907 – 1976). Ch'oe and Cho opened a new chapter in Korean dance history, introducing an art movement called *Sinmuyong* (Modern dance). The idea of *Sinmuyong* was based on several concepts such as the dancer as a performing artist, freedom of the arts, and modernized marketing and distribution. In general, *Sinmuyong* could be classified as a Korean style of modern dance. This new style was based on Korean traditional dance techniques but accepted the proscenium stage without reservation.

Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. After liberation, therefore, we could anticipate that dance would rapidly change in many ways. After 1945, however, the *Sinmuyong* style lasted at least for another 30 years. What was the reason? The socio-political situation. Korea was divided into South Korea and North Korea after 1945. The reality of a divided country gave rise to political and social unrest, seen most notably in the Korean War (1950–1953). This forced many artistic activities to be seriously restricted. It was almost impossible for Korean artists, choreographers and dancers to freely establish any academic and artistic tie with artists or art schools in other countries. It took the South Korean government until 1988 to start freeing up overseas travel. Due to the harsh

environment, many artists suffered from pre-performance and post-performance censorship. This was at times so strong that it compelled many to engage in self-censorship. Although dance in Korea kept Japanese culture at a distance in terms of its presentation, it nonetheless therefore still depended on the earlier Japanese cultural influence. In this period, the number of dancers and choreographers who studied abroad (specially, in the United States) gradually increased, but the effect of this on the dance world of Korea only really began to be felt in the late 1980s. From 1945 to the late 1980s, then, the imagination and creativity of Korean artists, including dancers and choreographers, was limited. This should be regarded as an important reason why the *Sinmuyong* style lasted for more than 30 years, but when considered alongside the colonial period we can say that the period of stagnation in Korean artistic imagination and creativity really lasted more than 100 years.

In 1988, the Seoul Olympics was held in Korea. It was the biggest event to occur since the Korean War. Hosting the Olympics presented an opportunity to bring international attention. When Seoul had been declared the venue of the 1988 Games by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), South Korea was ruled by a military regime. The regime hoped that the increased international exposure brought by the Olympics would legitimize its authoritarian regime amidst increasing political pressure for democratization. To improve its image, in 1988 the regime liberalized foreign travel, albeit reluctantly. It was the first time for Koreans to travel freely abroad with passports in modern Korean history. Following the fall of the military dictator, Chun Doo Wahn, pre-performance censorship was moderated. Ten years later, censorship was abolished. Due to South Korea being an export-oriented economy, it had increased its trade with foreign countries since 1970. This would suggest that Korean people had certain knowledge of foreign affairs during the 1970s and 1980s. Many Korean artists, including dancers and choreographers, tried to contact their counterparts in foreign countries to keep pace with the currents of the time. In spite of this, though, due to the political and social situation within the country, their efforts fared badly. In sum, it was hard to get an opportunity to create contemporary dances with contemporary trends before the 1980s in Korea, and it was only after the 1980s that Korean dancers and choreographers started to pay attention to the new trends emerging in foreign countries that were representative of contemporary views.

## 2. Considering Change

The 1980s was the so-called Renaissance period in Korean dance. The term 'renaissance' may indicate a rebirth of performing arts on the stage. In Korea, it came about indirectly from the public support to performing arts, such as the building of theatres by the government, rises in national incomes, the increased interest in the arts amongst the population and the increased international cultural exchange. Therefore, dance performances took place on a regular and ordinary basis from the mid-1980s. During the 1970s, the total number of dance performances on stage was around 20 events in Korea per year. But, by the late 1980s, the number was more than 500 performances annually. This, in itself, shows that the 1980s were the Renaissance period of Korean dance. At the same time, the Japanese cultural influence was strikingly reduced and became negligible. Now, I would like to introduce several trends in the dance field since the 1980s.

a) *Decline of the dance trichotomy and destruction in dance*

In my opinion, an artist's will to express himself or herself was the most important factor in consolidating the success of the renaissance of Korean dance. To manifest their will, an artist needs a certain style. Normally, this style is based on individual creation or is a reflection of the times. After the middle of the 20th century, dance in Korea was divided into 'Korean dance' (based on Korean traditional dance), 'Modern dance' (based on Western Modern dance) and 'Ballet' by the dance academia. Hence, it was common that dance performances were classified according to this tripartite division. This classification was called the 'dance trichotomy'. The concept was based on dance educational practice and had a decisive effect on dancers and choreographers. Under this influence, it was common for dance performances on the stage to also be classified in the three ways until the end of the 1980s.

In the early 1990s, however, the concept of the dance trichotomy began to blur. Some dance critics reported that the concept of the trichotomy was disappearing. To get an agreement about this within the dance field was merely a question of time. One sign of blurring was found in the concept of *ch'angjak ch'um*, affiliated with Korean traditional dance, but literally meaning 'creative dance' and signifying a kind of modern dance based on Korean traditional dance. In the early 1990s, some dancers and choreographers working with *ch'angjak ch'um* refused to be completely dependent upon the traditional Korean dance style. Especially, they tried to discard the traditional linear narrative. Considering the social and dance academic situation at the time, perhaps, this kind of experimentation could not have been successful before the 1990s. However, in the 1990s, this new approaching appealed to the new generation, and allowed for the pursuit of a new concept and new idea about dance.

As we would expect, in the atmosphere of the dance renaissance during the 1980s, dancers tried to establish dance as works of art and to develop dance pieces which would meet the needs of art as well as performance. Dance as a performing art needs not only properly systematized performance styles but should also include the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times. Thanks to a lot of constant exertions by dancers and their results, properly systematized performance styles have existed since the 1980s. In Korean dance, the *Sinmuyong* style was in decline, but *ch'angjak ch'um*, adaptations of Korean traditional dance, began to pay off. In the 1990s, two trends appeared in the dance performance field. The simplest explanation for these is that the first came as some dancers applied traditional elements to their dances, but in dances that had different logics to traditional dance, while the second came as some dancers and choreographers tried to deconstruct and reconstruct traditional dance under the stimulus of contemporary dance – taking the notion of this from Western contemporary dances or other styles of performance. These two trends struck at the very foundation of *ch'angjak ch'um*, leaving it hard to categorize it according to the trichotomy concept. Within this concept, in the strict sense, the new attempts at creating dance belonged neither to Korean dance nor contemporary dance.

On the Contemporary dance side, various dances which upset the stability of modern dance were introduced to Korea. A lot of contemporary dance companies from many countries visited Korea to perform. Moreover, the number of dancers studying overseas rapidly increased. The two, taken together, finally led to the downfall of modern dance within the trichotomy. In particular, Martha Graham's style was influential. This

struck at the very foundation of the trichotomy concept and led *ch'angjak ch'um* to become close to what within the trichotomy had been counted as Contemporary dance. Finally, *ch'angjak ch'um* and contemporary dance came to be classified in the same category. Although ballet in Korea in the 1990s remained focused on the classic style, the dance trichotomy concept was thrown in the dustbin of history.

The collapse of the tripartite classification allowed dancers and choreographers to do away with the stereotypes of dance style and dance language. This does not indicate an attack on all traditional values or the uncritical refusal of foreign cultural influence, but it allowed for an active exploration of cultural compromises between styles and languages. This gave an opportunity to create or find individual styles. A lot of new experiments, based on the readiness of the young generation, allowed Korean dancers and choreographers to cross the boundaries between Korean dance, contemporary dance and ballet, and the idea of interaction and communication across the dance field became increasingly common. At the same time, the new experiments frequently demolished the boundaries between dance styles.

#### *b) Hybridity in Dance*

In the early 1990s, the term 'globalisation' became a common topic of conversation. The dance field in Korea proved no exception. Especially, this was seen in a great number of performances by foreign dance companies and an accumulation of experience and knowledge. The ingredients for diversity in dance methodology and style came with the large number of dance companies and educational institutions including universities, with the establishment more theatres and the increased number of dance performances, all of which characterized Seoul in this period. The actualisation of diversity obviously resulted from the shaking off of the dance trichotomy concept. In fact, however, some experimental dance pieces in the late 1980s had already forecast the possibilities of diversity. Therefore, we can say that the diversification of dance and the shaking off of the tripartite division of styles were in active relation.

The 1988 Seoul Olympics hastened the advent of the period in which the identity of Korean culture and arts was established. Under the pressure of globalisation, many Korean cities including Seoul took on more cosmopolitan aspects that had been started with the onrush of industrialization. It was primarily in the 1990s that a large number of foreign dance companies performed in Korea. By the turn of the 21st century, Korea was transitioning into an information-oriented society. This society is represented by cultural hybridity and the integration of different styles. This circumstance fostered the participation of citizens, but at the same time induced a fast pace of change in all aspects of daily life. Many young Koreans actively accepted the new society norms, as part of the 'N Generation (Net Generation)'. The definition of a member of the Net Generation is someone who has grown up with new technology, networks and collaborations, and who responds instinctively to the demands of business in the digital age. In this society, Korean culture and arts also took on a new aspect.

When we analyse dance events in Seoul during the 2000s, a good number of dance companies from foreign countries continued to be invited through well-organized international information and networking. Generally, companies became renowned

throughout the world. What has been meaningful is that this gave Korean dancers and choreographers a chance to take on a more cosmopolitan outlook. That is to say, these events played a catalytic role in globalisation of dance and art, at least in Seoul. It is hard to define and summarize all cultural phenomena in such a short paper, not least because of the diversity of dance methods and styles going on, and how these strike at the very foundation of the clear division into the dance trichotomy concept that had held until the end of the 1980s. In Seoul, it is much harder to do this than elsewhere. What I can say is that dance companies based on university departments became unpopular, not least because in many cases these were a product of the dance trichotomy concept. Also, the number of professional dancers and companies increased, each presenting their own styles, ideas and dance methods. These worked within what has come to be known as 'independent dance', and their diversity makes it complicated to describe briefly the dance field in Korea. However, to me the future of independent dance in Korea is especially worth watching.

Even if we do not borrow the concepts of post-modernism or post-structuralism, except for traditional dance, the art of dance in the new century has been well established on the basis of deconstructionism, hybridity and integration. However, ballet has in Korea rarely adapted such approaches. But, in the first decade of the century, modern dance and most of the *ch'angjak ch'um* which adhered to the ideas and methods of modern dance, had low levels of expressiveness and low stylistic uniqueness. In the 1990s, the popularization of artistic dance was a synonym for increasing the number of the audience. However, popular dances such as social dance (ballroom dancing) and Hip hop broadened their boundaries to become artistic dance. In other words, the concept of popularization continued to expand. The great level of interest in this kind of dance was a new phenomenon in Korea, and it comes as no surprise, then, that crossovers between artistic and popular dances and other types of art have become very common. Crossovers are generally classified as 'interdisciplinary arts', and also relate to experimental work performed by young artists. Interdisciplinary arts can be considered to eliminate boundaries between genres, introducing new concepts such as the rupture of material, deconstruction and the rediscovery of art space.

### *c) Pluralistic Trends in Dance*

The pluralistic stream, of course, is a universal flow in contemporary society. In Korea, democracy, postmodernism, the information-society and leisure-society have together triggered pluralism in a way that exerts positive impacts on dance. Here, I want to introduce two effects that result from the impacts. First, dances for all generations, but especially for the old and the young, are developed and taught; there is a craze for social dance as well as for dance therapy. Second, the increase of certain dancers, influenced by pluralism and based on it, naturally raise flows in dance.

New pluralistic works are realized in a diversity of shapes. These may embody the aesthetic character of Korean dance in a visible form, compose dances of deep expression in a way that incorporates the remodeling of Korean dance and dance space, and shape a new dance aesthetic and image from the deconstructed perspectives that sits close to contemporary dance, working in relation with performance-art or assemblage and with hybridity like collage. The new phenomenon of pluralism in dance encourages practitioners

to change the way they think about dance. In Korea, the emergence of contemporary dance signifies that dance has begun to shake off the crust of classical modern dance, and has made it usual for dancers to apply more liberal approaches to dance creation.

In the last decade, dance in Korea has entered a phase of globalization in which it is usual to meet foreign works, to mix with foreigners, and to exchange stimuli on a mutual basis. Of course, in cyberspace globalization was already an established fact due to digital culture. But, for this reason, dancers were encouraged to refresh their senses and perspectives so that they gradually and actively became accustomed to have performances of international sensibility shared with international dancers.

This paper is partly based on my article, 'Dance in Korea, Now and Tendencies', presented in Autumn 2010 in Germany.