How did North Korean dance notation make its way to South Korea’s bastion of traditional arts, the National Gugak Center?

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In December 2009, the National Gugak Center published a notation for the dance for court sacrificial rites (aak ilmu). As the thirteenth volume in a series of dance notations begun back in 1988 this seems, at first glance, innocuous. The dance had been discussed in relation to the music and dance at the Rite to Confucius (Munmyo cheryeak) in the 1493 treatise, Akhak kwebŏm (Guide to the Study of Music), and had also, as part of Chongmyo cheryeak, been used in the Rite to Royal Ancestors. Revived in 1923 during the Japanese colonial period by members of the court music institute, then known as the Yiwangjik Aakpu (Yi Kings’ Court Music Institute), the memories and practice of former members of that institute ensured that the music and dance to both rites would be recognised as intangible cultural heritage within the post-liberation Republic of Korea (South Korea), with Chongymo cheryeak appointed Important Intangible Cultural Property (Chungyo muhyŏng munhwajae) 1 in December 1964 and a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2001, and the entire Confucian rite (Sŏkhŏn taeje) as Intangible Cultural Property 85 in November 1986. 2 In fact, the director general of the National Gugak Center, Pak Illun, in a preface to volume thirteen, notes how Sŏng Kyŏngnin (1911–2008), Kim Kisu (1917–1986) and others who had been members of the former institute, and who in the 1960s were appointed ‘holders’ (poyuja) for Intangible Cultural Property 1, taught the dance for sacrificial rites to students at the National Traditional Music High School in 1980. In 1981, this dance was adopted officially at the Confucian shrine for use in the Confucian sacrificial rite. Since then, the high school’s students have performed it keeping the same form.

As Intangible Cultural Property 1, it might be considered curious that it has taken until volume 13 to note the court sacrificial rites’ dance. In fact, the volume sits alongside two other volumes published elsewhere in Korea that signal the reawakened imperative to promote the whole Confucian sacrificial rite as performed within the Intangible Cultural Property: the Korean-language Sajik taeje, published by the commercial concern Minsokwŏn for the National Cultural Property Research Institute (Kungnip munhwajae yŏn’guso; 2007), and the English-language Confucian Ritual Music of Korea, written by Song Hye-jin as an expanded version of her earlier

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1 The prefix ‘important’ (chungyo) or ‘national’ (kukpo) is used in some documents to distinguish cultural properties appointed at state level from those appointed at city of provincial level.

2 The first volume in the dance notation series featured Ch’ŏyongmu, a court mask dance appointed Intangible Cultural Property 39 in January 1971. Note that UNESCO Masterpieces are now enshrined in the large (and growing) UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
Korean-language text and published by the Korea Foundation (2008). More of this later; for our discussion here, the surprise of volume 13 is primarily situated elsewhere, within the notation systems utilised. Whereas earlier volumes in the series gave stick figures, feet, and simple movement indications, volume 13 uses two relatively complex notation systems: the internationally recognised Labanotation, and what it calls ‘chamobŏp’ or, more fully, ‘chamoshik pyogibŏp’. The Labanotation was compiled by two scholars trained at Ohio State University, Yu Shihyŏn and Kim Kira, the former now working back in Korea and the latter in New York as a notation assistant at the Dance Notation Bureau. Now, dance has, according to Jean Johnson-Jones, ‘traditionally been considered an evanescent, illiterate art’ (2009: chapter 2), taught by doing rather than through notation on a written/printed page. Most of the notations which exist have been devised by and for dancers – with a privileging of dancing over movement notation standing as evidence of intent (Hutchinson Guest 1984: xiii). The exception to this is the more academic Labanotation, first introduced in 1927 and introducing a conception of movement as a process of change to the notation of positions. Labanotation concentrates on the fluidity of movement, the ‘dynamic transiency of simultaneous change in spatial positioning, body activation and energy use’ (Moore 1988: 184).

Within Volume 13, the chamobŏp score was compiled by Pak Yŏngnan, an instructor at Yŏnbyŏn [Yanji] Arts University in the Chinese Korean Autonomous Region of northeastern China. ‘Chamo’ signifies the alphabet, so the notation system uses symbols part derived from Korean consonant and vowel symbols. Chamoshik pyogibŏp is, however, a system developed not in Seoul but in Pyongyang, the capital of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), and introduced in 1987 (2009: 12; note that Hutchinson Guest suggests 1986 (1989)). Two articles published in 1987 in the North Korean journal Korea Today discuss it (Yun Yong Ok 1987a and 1987b), noting – though at this point compare what I have just said about Labanotation – that other notations ‘indicate mainly the positions of the parts of the body according to the changing positions and directions in space’ and, it is claimed, omit features of movement (1987a: 10). In passing, it is worth noting that the North Korean system is far from the first attempt to incorporate alphabet symbols – a credit that probably must go to the Imperial Ballet dancer Vladimir Ivanovich Stepanov, in a system introduced in 1892 and adopted by the Bolshoi Theatre School in 1895.

How did the North Korean system come to be included in a volume published by a South Korean government-sponsored institution? Let me put this question in context: North Korea has abandoned court and literati performance arts in favour of populist arts of and from the people that mix Korean with Socialist and Western forms in a take on Maxim Gorky and Andrei Zhdanov’s Soviet ‘socialist realism’. Chamoshik pyogibŏp follows a dictate from the Dear Leader and now Eternal General Secretary, Kim Jong Il: ‘We should produce a scientific and popular dance notation of a Juche type consonant with the specific features and requirements of the art of dance’. Kim offered on-the-spot guidance to those preparing dance notation in

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3 Cited in U Chang Sop 1988: 1. Juche is the state philosophy that translates, somewhat chimerically, as ‘self reliance’
1976, more than a decade before the system was unveiled. However, in Volume 13, published in 2009 and used in South Korea to my knowledge for the first time, it is used to notate dance in court sacrificial rites – the most stylized and classical bourgeois version of dance imaginable, in a Confucian rite designed to honour the ancient originator of a philosophical and ethical system that is in many ways antithetical to socialism (despite, arguably, a similar system of social hierarchy), and in the companion Rite to Royal Ancestors celebrating an absolute monarchy that had little time for the *höi polloi*, the rabble they ruled over. The dance, then, is positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum to socialism and populism. Further, in Volume 13 the North Korean dance notation is given with Sino-Korean (Chinese) characters for the song texts (the first line runs: ‘How great, O sage, your ethics and virtuous conduct!’) and combined with melodic pitches (*hwang*, *nam*, *nim*, *ko...*) in the *yulchabo* (Ch: *lulu*) system used in court documents since the 15th century, although North Korea abandoned all Sino-Korean characters in the 1950s and so these have no place in any *chamoshik pyogibôp* notation emanating from Pyongyang.

In Volume 13, the synoptic presentation of the different styles of notation poses challenges: whereas stick figures and foot movements had in earlier volumes within the series been used in squares approximating to the Korean *chôngganbo* ‘square box notation’, running from top to bottom on the page, the North Korean *chamoshik pyogibôp* is, as with writing, normally written left to right in horizontal systems, while Labanotation works in a single column progressing from bottom to top. Looking at the opening of the section ‘welcoming the spirits’ (*yôngshìn*)⁴ (2009: 22–23), we have photos replacing stick figures to show positions, two prior to the song, then four syllables of the song with two positions/movements for each, running top to bottom in a column. These are paired with textual explanations and three additional columns, one giving foot movements, one marking the facing position of all 64 dancers, and the third the positions and angles for two ceremonial properties (*ŭimuł*) held by the dancers that are characteristic of Chinese *wenwu* civil dance (Kor: *munmu*): a Chinese flute (*yak*) and a stick with pheasant feathers crowned above elaborate knots by a dragon’s head (*chôk*). Next comes *chamoshik pyogibôp*, dividing the six beats down into each beat/square and running these in a vertical column down the page, each beat/square dividing into two, for upper torso above a line and lower torso below. Finally comes Labanotation, given in the customary way but here without explanation, from bottom to top in a single column.

Separate notations are provided in *chamoshik pyogibôp* (2009: 102–114) and Labanotation (2009: 116–47). The Labanotation does, though, present occasional complexities, not least relating to some of the eight lines within the group of 64 dancers simultaneously having different movements. Hence, the third line of the song for ‘welcoming the spirits’ divides in four: lines 1+3+7, line 5, lines 2+6+8, line 4 – the movement is not actually as complex as this might sound, with lines 1, 3, 5 and 7 facing right and lines 2, 4, 6 and 8 facing left for the first beat/song syllable, all eight lines facing forward for the second beat/song syllable, but lines 4 and 5 turning to face each other for the third and fourth beat/song syllable (page 119). *Chamoshik*

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⁴ More fully, *yôngshìn kusong* (welcoming the spirits with nine completions).
Pyogibop, more simply, introduces additional pairs of lines on a connected system to accommodate this multipart texture, rather as one would in a staff notation of an ensemble or orchestral (music) piece. The length, and the density of each of these scores, indicates that Labanotation ought to offer greater precision. Of course, North Korean commentators would suggest otherwise6. Indeed, the English-language overview of the North Korean system, by U Chang Sop, makes four claims for it:

1. It is based on ‘a scientific analysis of the anatomy and physiology of the human body, all attributes of its movement, specific features of dance actions and all representative elements of the arts of dance.’

2. It is comprehensive.

3. It uses symbols for shapes and gestures that parallel the function of vowels but ‘evoke the shapes and rhythmic images of parts of the body’... Taken in combination, these symbols ‘form dance words and dance sentences...according to definite laws.’

4. It is suitable not just for Korean dance ‘but also the national dances of all other countries, and calisthenics, mass games...’ (U Chang Sop 1988: 1–2).

Such claims are unlikely to go down well with experienced dance notation experts, not least given the introduction of Laban Movement Analysis for calisthenics during the 1930s. Indeed, Anne Hutchinson Guest, in an unpublished report, after having failed to get responses from the North Koreans to a set of detailed queries, comments:

‘Although it serves the needs in the middle range of structured movement description, the freer, general usage needed in education as well as in much avant garde choreography is clearly not taken care of, nor, it would appear, has it been applied to the very advanced level of subtle movement description’ (1992: 2).

The ilmu dance can be characterised as fairly simple, in that from a Confucian perspective it reflects the required order of a stable government, using regularly paced slow movements, the postures having moral definitions (at least according to Zhu Zaiyu’s Wenmiao liyue kao). There should, then, be little problem with applying the North Korean system to the ilmu dance. Also, there are elements of the ilmu dance that have been simplified, first when professional dancers were not available in the early 20th century, and more recently to enable school students to perform. Admittedly, one of these simplifications, the sambangbae bend of the upper body performed in three directions in turn, was removed by 1980. However, the notion of simplification or change brings me to the controversy and dispute which explains the

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5 A North Korean video about the system briefly shows charts of Labanotation, Benesh notation, and the Eshkol-Wachsmann system, with the dates of their creation: 1927, 1956 and 1958. While the implication is that these were studied prior to settling on chamobŏp, North Korean texts, in both Korean and English, fail to say what was learnt, rather stating that the system ‘is fundamentally different from any that have previously been published’ (U Chang Sop 1988: 1). I would note that Benesh stage indications are retained, while some ideas of effort – notably the sudden flick of the wrist so characteristic of Korean folk dance – appear to derive from Laban. For information on Labanotation, see Hutchinson (1977).

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imperative for publishing Volume 13 in 2009 (alongside the other two texts on the Confucian sacrificial rite). The Confucian shrine sits within the campus of the Confucian university in Seoul, Sungkyunkwan, and the new millennium coincided with efforts by Confucian organisations to wrest control. A number of changes to the sacrificial rite were introduced: lighter blue cloaks replaced indigo for male Confucian scholars charged with making wine offerings, women were introduced to give tea offerings, the ritual date was recalculated moving from the shifting lunar calendar to a regular solar date, and so on. Sungkyunkwan also established a dance department, and efforts were being made to move dance responsibilities from the high school to Sungkyunkwan students. If the ilmu dance had been simplified or changed by those who had trained at the court institute during the Japanese occupation, and if it had been simplified or changed in the course of establishing the dance authorised to be performed within the Intangible Cultural Property, then challenges could be mounted. And they were, in dissertations and articles by Kim Yong (2001, 2002, 2006) and Yi Chongsuk (Yi 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d), coupled to an equally critical reassessment of the music performed at the sacrificial rites (Nam Sangsuk 2007a, 2007b, 2009). In autumn 2007, the dispute led the government to withdraw its sponsorship.

Note that the cover to the volume illustrates the arrangement of 64 dancers in eight rows of eight, but this, as the current form, only dates back to 1897; while the treatise Akhak kwebōm gives an arrangement of six by eight dancers, court screens and other surviving documents tend to give six by six. This makes a subtle point. The difference resides in Chinese practice: simply put, only an emperor should have 64 dancers, where male nobility, or the king of a vassal state such as Korea, should have either six lines of six or eight, with four by four for female nobility and two by two for scholars. Hence 64 have been used only since 1897, when Korea declared itself an empire (confirmed in Volume 13 (Yi Sukhūi 2009: 152)); less dancers are prescribed in the nineteenth century Korean text, the Sogak wŏnbo (in fact, ‘1892’ is marked in the original to this, which is presumed to be the date of its revision). So, changes in the twentieth century can be considered as restoring the ilmu dance to an older form, as in earlier Chinese practice. Then again, the argument against this has it that using Korean court scenes and other earlier Korean sources for contemporary practice prescribes an inferior form of the dance.

The controversy is countered in Volume 13 by giving space to a historical account, discussing how the dance has been transmitted from the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) onwards in Korea (with a brief foray back to the third century) (Yi Sukhūi 2009: 149–60), and by presenting a detailed discussion of the dance content in the past and present (Kim Yŏngsuk 2009: 161–75). The author of the second of these, Kim Yŏngsuk, is crucial here. She began to train as a high school student under Sŏng Kyŏngnin in 1975. She rose to become ‘assistant teacher for transmission and education’ (chŏnsu kyo'yuk chogyo), a position beneath ‘holder’ within the Korean state preservation system for intangible heritage, for Property 1, music and dance at the Rite to Royal Ancestors. She graduated from Ewha Women’s University, then took an MA in Confucianism at Sungkyunkwan University, within her dissertation returning to the Ming dynasty Sancai tuhui, making adjustments to the ilmu dance after discussions with the ‘holders’ to what she had been taught by Sŏng that would

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be more faithful to an older form (interview, November 2007). She has trained the generations of high school students who dance ilmu at the state sacrificial rites, and bears the responsibility for maintaining the dance as authorised within the Intangible Cultural Property. Essentially, then, the inclusion of both the North Korean dance notation and Labanotation seal the authority of the dance as Kim preserves, teaches and performs it. While Labanotation adds academic cudos by using a complex and highly regarded international gold standard, the former conforms to nationalism, and applies a Korean solution to dance notation.

Finally, as effectively a brief footnote to this tale, I ought to delineate the basic way that chamoshik pyogibop operates. A set of vowel-derived symbols for shapes and gestures couples to a set of consonant-derived and representational symbols for positions and directions. Whereas Korean syllables build from a central vowel with consonants either side, the dance notation does the opposite, with the consonant in the centre. The body is then divided at the waist, with symbols above for the upper torso and symbols below for the lower torso. The notation conveniently can be juxtaposed within a single system with music staff notation, text, and directions for lighting and dramatic action, all moving left to right across a page.

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The synoptic notation score, from Volume 11 (below)

‘Welcoming the Spirits’ from Volume 13, Labanotation (left), Chamo notation (right)