Dancing Hybrid Bodies in Colonial Modernity of Korea before 1945

Discontinuing Traditional Routines and Rethinking Dance Modernism

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From the perspective of a colonized child, I imagine what would happen when routines of everyday life were not allowed by outer forces. With that question, I try to draw attention to think of the moment of experiencing cultural hybridization in order to investigate the complex interaction of the colonized routine and practices of liberation (cf. Ya-Ping 2013: 45). Not demonstrating any anger, disappointment, or fear, I suggest that a routine is strongly related to power dynamics and it has the potential of self-protection. At this stage, on the other hand, I would like to address that Western modernity could be considered as routinized discourse, in which concepts, such as rationality, the liberation of women, individuality as well as mobilization, have spread and have been translated into globalized other nations.

In the context of Korean history, what does the modernizing process of Korean dance look like? And what does the modernity of dance in Korean culture mean, while being colonized in the modern era? Situated in the age of globalization and modernization influenced by Japan and Western countries, Korean modernity seems to be complex. The prevalence of Western modernity can, however, impede a proper understanding of Korean history and the development of its own culture. Korean modernization took place during the colonial era and the modernization process and its experience were situated in being colonized. Korean dance culture is not an exception.

This paper attempts to document Korean modern dance concentrating on three protagonists of modernist dance in Korea in the time period before 1945: whose dancing bodies were nationalized as Korean under Japanese imperialism, but at the same time occupied the position of "strangers" (Bauman 1990:

144) representing the new aesthetics of dance and the new gender ideology in Korea. Traveling back and forth between East Asia and the West, crossing nationalities, and moving towards the "uniformization" of the physical and cultural movement, they blurred the boundaries between tradition and modernity and between routine and indeterminacy (1990: 151–152).

In order to examine the colonial modernity of Korea focusing on the aspect of discontinuity as the force, but at the same time as the potential for changes for an alternative based on the Korean history under the Japanese colonial rule in the early 20th century.

Problematizing Koreanness: Korean nation as negativity

For the "inferior" Korea and its improvement, the Empire of Japan annexed Korea in 1910; Korean culture was considered a part of Japan until 1945 in order for Japan to establish control over its new protectorate (Blakemore 2020). For 35 years of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), Korea was consciously colonized by the geographic neighbor Japan through not only military rules but also cultural governance by emphasizing modern cultural norms as a "mental awakening" to adopt an alien system of modern ideology. That made Koreans doubt the indigenous identity, culture, and values of Korea (cf. Shin/Robinson 1999: 8). It was an ideological conflict, as Koreans were already in the process of being ready for their own response to the multiple layers of cultural, and colonial hegemony of modernity (cf. 1999: 8–9).

Focusing on the "hegemonic" aspects of Japanese colonialism, Koreans were stigmatized as the "inferior" and "negative" being for Japan to maintain the domination on the practice of daily life, education, economy, and politics, as well as language. The Korean culture was repressed, and consciously hidden, and the Korean traditional routines were not allowed to be visible. Colonial routine made Korean tradition absent and forced it to discontinue. As a result, the Koreans, as the colonized, experienced the process of modernization, while forced to forget their own indigenous culture and identity, and to adapt to the new system in order for them to become nationally civilized accompanied by overt violence regardless of whether pro- or anti-national beings politically.

This paper will try to explore the bodily experience of the discontinuity of tradition in the modernization process of Korean culture. The modernist dancing body in Korea is unmarked yet in line with the global understanding

of dance historiography, while the Western concept and the form of modern dance are dominant. In that routinized discourse of modern dance, which indicates mostly "Western" modern dance, other forms of modernity of dance are either otherized or represented as "difference" and "impurity" (Young 1995: 180) in comparison to the centralized Western modern dance and by a system of domination (cf. 1995: 180) from the perspective of colonialism.

Becoming hybrid: resistant force and potential of resilience

Using the postcolonial term "the third space" (Bhabha 2012: 9) from the cultural perspective, it is reasonable to assume that the state of "being in-between" connotates the difficulties, struggles, as well as resistance, displacement, and empowerment of Korean culture (cf. 2012: 11) over years precisely in relation to the Japanese and the Western colonial powers (cf. Ya-Ping 2013: 45) politically in the early twentieth century. It challenged, however, the emergence of differences and initiated new recognition. The state of being in-between in an insecure situation challenges the routine and its discipline, which implies a usual movement within a natural and stable frame. Consequently, it demands searching for a new awareness of the body.

I argue that the modernity of Korean dance is to be considered as the third space, it was situated in the ongoing negotiation for survival. Questioning the existence problem, Korean sought to mediate finding new authorization in between the boundaries as the "contact zone" of maintaining the "primitive" and practicing the "newness" by respecting cultural differences (Young 2012: 155).

Drawing attention to blatant violence, the colonized experienced fundamental abandonment of the customs they had achieved in their daily lives radically. Changes in Korea's cultural routine are the by-product of colonization in response to the Japanese Empire. Japanese modernism emphasized the normalization and civilization of the daily life of the colonized people, so that Western ideas of modernity should be inherited and reproduced. At the same time, however, Korean modern dance was able to intervene in political considerations (cf. Franko 2006: 4) as a "hybrid subject", which was considered to be against the will of the colonial ruler and to break the linearity of Western narratives in global history.

Dancing bodies in colonized Korea in the early 20th century

This study examines the hybridity in dance activities and bodily movements focusing on the three Korean modernist dancers Bae Ku-ja (1905–2003), Cho Taik-won (1907–1976), and Choi Seung-hee (1911–1969). These three dancers are recognized not only as pioneers of Korean modernist dance, but also as protagonists of the political debate among Korean modernist dancers. In addition, they performed many dance pieces and actively engaged in national dance scenes during the Japanese colonial period. After liberation in 1945, however, they were evaluated as pro-Japanese or anti-national activists by the South Korean government and were restricted in their dance activities by exiling to Japan, the United States, and North Korea, respectively. Despite their reputation and achievements in the history of Korean dance, they are in an ambiguous position within the historical context of the Japanese colonial period. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the relationship between the body and artistic activities of Korean contemporary dance and the meaning of the colonial situation of these three dancers. Their dance works between 1920 and 1940 in the Japanese imperial era were hardly documented in the Korean archives including digital library materials, as well as newspapers and articles in the Korean, Japanese, or Western languages. At this stage that reveals the necessity for research of the Korean dance history between pre-modern and the Japanese colonial era until the liberation in 1945. In order to explore the research question, nevertheless, I will investigate the dancing images from digitalized Korean newspapers, which were published in the colonial era. The situation of the colony is the past of Korean history and at the same time the "state of exception" (Franko 2006: 3) that invites us to reconsider dance modernism as the space for becoming a new national identity and projecting political images.

Based on Ralf Bohnsack's documentary method, I analyze the dancing images as a "fixed and documented reality" (Bohnsack 2009: 298), which is situated in the experience of foreignness and the cultural urgency of the body. The focus of the interpretation is on the reflection of the dance images on the socio-cultural situation of Korea in the late 1920s and 1930s. Dance pictures reflect history (Jahn et al. 2016: 11) while mediating past movements and making them visible (2016: 11). An image of the dance can be viewed as a reflection of past reality, as Jahn et al. (cf. 2016: 11.) points out. According to Jahn et al., dance photography holds the movement based on spatiotemporal aspects in

the past state. In this respect, a dance picture is medial and a mediated image enables access to dance history (cf. 2016: 11–12).

The following interpretation is part of the result of analyzing the dance photographs on the intertwined relationship between colonialism, modernity, and nationalism, which can be considered to be the modernization of Korean dance, as pointed out by Van Zile (cf. Van Zile 2010: 170). Based on characteristics of Korean tradition in pre-modern cultures and Western modern dance aesthetics, as routinized dance practice and discourse, the analysis will reflect on how these images of Korean modernist dancers are intervened by the impact of Western modernity. Unlike demonstrating the Korean tradition in the pre-modern era – such as body and bodily skin completely covered with costume, creating curves rather than being direct, integrating gravity, holing the energy inside, and concealing expression as a representation of beauty, etc. –, I aim to show how the historical links are visible in the way the dancing bodies become "hybrid" in-between Occidentalizing and Orientalizing the self (Van Zile 2013: 140) in their representation.

1) Bae Ku-ja and the symbol of new women

Bae Ku-ja joined the world-famous Japanese "Revue" entertainment troupe in 1915 (Kim 2008: 215). In this group "Denkatsu", she learned show dances such as revue, musical, acrobatics, and theater rather than the dances that are considered traditional arts today at her young age. Bae had a lot of interest in outside activities other than dance, such as making movies or song recordings for the mass media (Seok 2022). On the other hand, it is known that Bae, as an artist, had a stronger love for her country than anyone else, did everything in her power for her motherland, and constantly fought an inner battle (cf. Bae 1977: 25). In the early 1920s, Bae, who had experienced various Western performance dances while watching Russian ballet, Western folk dance, and even dancing Japanese revue, began to think about the value of the Korean dance movement. From the mid-1920s, she became interested in developing Korean dance into Western-style stage dance for audiences.

On April 21, 1928, Bae was performing *Arirang*[1], which is the first "Joseon folk dance" at Janggokcheonjeong Public Hall. As if eagerly waiting and sear-

1 It is known that in her creative new dance *Arirang*, that embodies the Korean folk song, she was showing her Korean sentiment and delicate expression by well digesting the role of her beautiful mountain girl living in a small village.

ching for someone, the body in that *Arirang* is in a state of longing for something. The lips are slightly open, and her chest and clavicle are eagerly moving forward. The solar plexus is pressed towards her back as if she is desperate and has given up any hope by taking one step back. Hesitation. But at the same time, she expresses her emotions by sending the energy out. Her eyes are urgent, but barely in focus. Her sleeves are slightly rolled up, revealing her bare skin, otherwise, the other body parts are completely covered by her long and loose costume. She stands still. But at the same time, she creates different directions by holding, pulling, and stepping forward with the right foot. She pulls on what flows down and refuses the natural being. Pulling it strongly to the left, she tries to create other directions, but stays there and stands still grounded. Her inner movements radiate great energy. Although the movement of her legs is hidden under the long skirt, a concave bow curve is drawn from her jaw to her chin, which went through her neck, and chest to the toes of her right foot through her whole frontal body. That allows, however, her right leg steps forward out of the long skirt.

Bae established the "Bae Ku-ja's Dance Research Institute" in 1929 during the Japanese colonial era (cf. Seong 2006: 113) and taught students not only Korean traditional dance, but also ballet, Indian dance, Japanese dance, acrobatics, and tap dance (cf. Bae 1977: 73).

On November 4, 1930, the members of the Bae's dance institution presented a revue performance, which is recorded in the Chosun newspaper digital archive under the title of *The Bae Ku-ja's dance troupe performance*.[2] Being on the stage, which is not yet common, the dance group is dancing in the dark space. The arms are drawing lines, which indicate a kind of curvy and indirect lines above their head. They are wearing a long skirt in form of the one piece that has irregular cutting, which reveals the form of legs and their skin in-between the fabric of the skirt which slip down beside their legs and hang down to their ankles as feeling the gravity. The costume has no sleeves. The dancers have short-cut hair, which can be read as a symbol of a new type of woman. Standing on one leg, dancers bent the moving leg and pointed their toes to the floor. Standing quite straight but the bodies include curves in their hips, lower back, and shoulder lines. The dancer's gaze focuses on their own mirror reflecting on the opposite side, not the front. It is a mixture of acrobatic and balletic movements which are composed in both front corners looking upside and down,

2 Corresponding newspaper articles and images are available in the digital library on the Internet.

that opens the half circle and at the same time makes the border between body and space. The facial expression is not recognizable but the whole energy demonstrates strong and at the same time grotesque with the movement of their limbs, which are directed without regularity yet. But it has the tendency to pull up and direct toward the ceiling, which is the opposite way of using the energy of Korean traditional dance. Tilting the head diagonally directing to the left corner, bodies are facing the diagonal front right corner, and their right legs are stretched out with the pointed feet to the diagonal front as the pelvis is facing. It reminds a military form how they are posing clearly, and leaning parallel at the same angle. The waists are twisted as upper bodies and the right arms open to the right shoulder, and the torso out to the left corner. The legs and arms create respectively different straight lines diagonally and a form of triangle collectively. Their limbs are revealed and expose their skin. The upper body with the arm movement has the tendency to open the energy outwards while gazing directly at the front of the camera. On the other hand, the legs are, closing sharp towards the center of the body and present discipline. The facial expression of the dancers demonstrates excitement, confidence, playfulness, and at the same time shyness and humbleness in the dark surrounding. The sorrowfulness is hidden behind the exciting movement of the sharp limbs while actively smiling.

2) Cho Taik-won and the philosophical spirit in his dance

Cho Taik-won was born in South Hamgyong Province in 1907. After watching a dance performance by Ishii Baku, who is known as a pioneer of Japanese modern dance, at the age of nineteen in 1927, he was fascinated by dance. It made him travel to Japan to study dance.

> I met art then. At that time, among the many works of Ishii Baku, the one that captivated me the most was the dance titled *Person in Prison*. It was the same as the feelings of Koreans at that time. The dance seemed to express our injustice under the situation where the Japanese arbitrarily captured and imprisoned Koreans. Art is just that. (Cho 1976: no pagination)

In 1927, Cho practiced a new dance in a Japanese dance studio with the famous Japanese dancer, Ishii Baku. Two years later he was able to participate in several performances at that time. Cho wrote that his dance teacher, Ishii Baku, suggested that he should return to Korea to learn the dance of his origin (cf. Cho 1976: no pagination).

Both legs and arms are wide apart. The toes are completely turned-out, and his feet are treading on the wrinkled fabric expressing alertness and tension. The shape of the widely spread legs seems to demonstrate the stable force, like the second position of the Western ballet but with force. His knees point slightly diagonally away from the toes as if he just reacts spontaneously rather than having a clear decision. In addition, his right leg and right arm are depending on the movement of the other dancer whose left thigh and left arm are in contact by supporting and holding, embracing it respectively. His overall body movements are intensified by the large movements of his left body part: the fist pulls to his left upwards. It expresses the inner strength and energy of the will, which goes outside and fulfills the active and strong atmosphere of the space. On the other hand, his right flank is hit by the elbow of the other and deviated as far to his left as possible, causing a curvature of the torso, as if he would protect himself. Contrary to the shape of his legs which seems to be strong, his buttocks stumble backward and his appearance looks clumsy. Nevertheless, the movement of pulling out and folding gives the energy being actively internalizing his presence, which is impressive. It is an ambiguous shape that opens out and falters inward at the same time.

Cho earnestly prayed for the development of the dance world of "Joseon" (the name of Korea before liberation in 1945) and the support of the social structure for it (cf. Kim 2014: 432). And he felt considerable regret and resentment at the situation of Joseon dance research without development. He also emphasized the need for dance suitable for the emotions of Joseon and its visibility in the world.

On September 8, 1937, along with an editorial about Cho's dance performance and a dance picture of his pose was published in the Dong-a newspaper[3]. As if to support his aspirations for the development of Joseon dance, Cho danced *An impression of Buddhist dance* (*Seung-mu*; *Gasahojeop*)[4], which he choreographed in 1935, wearing a traditional Korean men's monk costume with white pants and a dark wide jacket with long sleeves (Jangsam), and a cowl on

3 Corresponding newspaper articles and images are available in the digital library on the Internet.

4 It is known that the music is composed by the duet of piano and violin, which are the western music instrument but playing the Korean rhythm of *Gutgeori* (which represents one of the slow rhythm of Korean tradition) and *Jajinmori* (representing one of the fast rhythm of the Korean folk music).

his head (cf. Lee 2014: no pagination). There is no break in the bow-shaped curves of both arms spread wide on both sides. His chest is open wider and he stands still and confident, although his facial expression is invisible by being hidden behind the conical-shaped hat. His Buddhist figure suggests the reverential quality of being in dance movement as his straight, but curvy-rounded pose demonstrates heaviness, devotion, and embracement. His solar plexus and whole stomach are more forward than his chest, which goes towards his inner world to hold his energy than showing it out, while he takes one step forward. It is again a mixture of openness and closure simultaneously, which represents somehow his agony and soft resistance, protection, and also imprisonment. His extended arm shows heaviness by embodying and integrating the gravity of nature, which is out of his control but expresses his hope and imagination of being free. It creates its weight and volume while standing steady calm and still. Both ends of the two large smooth curves extend and support his energy and enable him to carry the distressed and deep-spirited energy in his body. His movement poses and at the same time is ongoing with his extension of its energy, weight, and volume. It seems to represent his inner pride to keep calm and keep virtue rather than revealing his expression.

3) Choi Seung-hee and her exotic taste

Choi was born into a wealthy upper-class family in Seoul in 1911, and she was encouraged by her older brother to meet with Ishii Baku. To study dance she followed Ishii to Japan and performed overseas during the colonization time (cf. Van Zile 2013: 124). Since her carrier began, she opened a dance studio to teach her students as well as created many dance pieces performed within different Asian countries as well as in North and South America and Europe (cf. Van Zile 2010: 172).

On January 30, 1930, Choi Seung-hee performed her creative dance *The Sorrows of an Indian* (cf. Kim 2014: 297). Stretching out behind the hip pushing its way through the loose skirts, she exposes her right leg smooth and soft. It looks radical enough to draw attention to this ambiguity being a slightly broken branch or a downcast snake alike, with which she shows her bare skin obviously and makes it stretched out. Her head is slightly tilted as putting her right ear on her right shoulder. The eyes are open halfway and it creates an erotic and sensual atmosphere. The huge circle around and behind her whole body seems to imprison her emotion. Her face is ambivalent, as it does evoke neither sadness, anger, nor laughter at all. Her passive expression of emotion

seems to be enveloped surrounding her. Enclosed. On the other hand, her movements of the limbs accentuate the inner energy and send them out. Her inner emotion is extended outwards. On stage, she showed off her physical beauty and her artistic talent for dance (cf. 2014: 297) while her emotion disappears in the air through her bare skin and the energy of the three limbs. The arms are sent to the front across both breasts and to the side over the shoulder respectively each of the elbows points up and down to each corner drawing diagonal lines. Bending her elbows and wrists with force, at the same time, she creates a distant space between her arms and the tilted head as the energy pushes her head and both arms to the outside. It creates tension. This tension is sent to the back and while gazing front obliquely, it enrages the powerfully affective quality of the body. The contrast between her bare skin and the costume as well as the emotion and the movement emphasize the expressive, soft, and energetic moment of the pursuit of the light in the darkness. She tried to express her will and emotion through the rhythm of her body[5]. Choi suggested that the emotions felt by humans can be shared by mankind all over the world by being expressed through dance (cf. Cho 2021: no pagination).

On June 25, 1930, the Chosun newspaper reported that Choi Seung-hee's creative dance was completed with great success. On this day, she suggested that *The dance of rural girls* performed in Pyongyang was greatly welcomed by the audience.[6] Wearing a wide-brimmed hat on their head, their facial expressions are hidden. The long-braided hair, which is hanging down to hip level decorates and extends the length of the body. Standing perpendicular to the floor, they create big curves with their entire body, as if the chest and the solar plexus are pushed to the back. The hidden facial expression is almost coming out through the movement of each finger sharpening each joint energetically, as through the grotesque power is coming out from the inside of the body. This monstrous energy is hugged by the arms, which are placed both above the head and down in front of the pelvis. The grotesque form is growing collectively and the energy is pushed to the back rather than going forward. Curved and reduced by bending their knees, they send the energy deep into the floor and hug the air as if swallowing a giant object in front of them. There is no eye contact. Despite

5 Corresponding newspaper articles and images are available in the digital library on the Internet.

6 Corresponding newspaper articles and images are available in the digital library on the Internet.

the strong and grotesque atmosphere, the bodies bow forward and hide in the rounded bodies. Only the fingers are immersed in emotion, which influences and colors the whole image dark. The bodies of the image shown are a mixture of darkness, grotesque, and heaviness in a cautious way that has the potential to be growing constantly. Despite of distance between the bodies, they present their collective energy and spiritual connectivity, which they were longing for, but without expressing it. The image remains the vulnerability, which is hidden inside the body through the exaggerated bodily form. Her dance shows the situatedness of conflict between being modernized and remembering pre-modern Korea of the past, which is not only ascribed as Oriental but also repressed by ideological power (cf. Franko 2006: 6).

Conclusion: Korean modern dance and colonial modernity

Being indirect, withholding the expression and integrating gravity are qualities and characteristics of Korean dance as their own traditional dance routine, which has represented the quality of Korean dancing bodies. When hesitating but breathing still in and out inside of the body, it needs a different rhythm and different ways of moving in order to let it flow naturally without forcing so much, without revealing its bare skin.

Exposing the bare arms and legs in the images of performing openness and breaking with the Korean traditions (cf. Burt 2010: 2–3), and expressing strong personal emotion through bodily movement (cf. Van Zile 2010: 174) were unfamiliar to Koreans, while the Koreans should have held and taken their expression back in their routines. Through the Western style, and modern dance translated by imperial Japan, Koreans experienced different forms, aesthetics, and new ways of expressing emotions in the use of bodily movement. Noticed as an "exotic Korean from the Orient" in U.S. media, as Schneider introduced the biography of the dancer Choi and underlined the ambivalence between the position of her identity and her artistic reputation as a hybrid being between Korea, Japan, and the modern West in her article (cf. Schneider 2022: 197–198, 202), they had accepted "exotic experiences of the West as others" in the colonial modern era in their dance practice and work. Korean dance tradition had been challenged to break the routinized form of "Koreanness".

On the other hand, the representation of Korea demonstrated multiple national identities in the way dance accepted a new ideology and interacted with the modernist canon between colonialism, imperialism, and modernity

(Van Zile 2013; Wilcox 2018). The Korean modernist bodies established a new aesthetic identity (cf. Franko 2006: 5), which was remarked as a "newness" to Korean society as well. Changing the moods, and thoughts in dance stopped continuing their routines for colonizers to civilize the colonized being, and for Koreans and Korean dance to survive with new bodies being hybrid. Modernization of Korean dance is considered as the authorization process of national beings to find their new daily routines, with which they could position themselves under the condition of capitulating to Japan's policies (cf. Van Zile 2010: 176), rather than rejecting their own tradition of the past. The expression of the individuals of Korean modernist dancing bodies was for "social" expression of appealing to the oppression and the socio-political milieu of Korea's colonial status (cf. Van Zile 2013: 142) while performing their works internationally and sharing the emotion. At the same time, it could be understood as a "strategical interweaving" crossing creative dance, transmitted tradition, and transnational Western dance by breaking the routines and combining the social changes to aim at an alternative for the future-oriented liberation of the nation. Korean modernity as the state of ambivalence had the potential to become new for the global modern stage. Not being as pure but being "hybrid" was the only way of surviving as a colonial subject.

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