

AESTHETICS OF KOREAN DANCE: CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES⁽¹⁾

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INTRODUCTION

For many years I have been interested in just what it is that makes one kind of dance different from another—beyond such obvious things as costumes, musical accompaniment, and thematic content. If one were to strip away these kinds of things and look at the movement of dance, how would one differentiate a Balinese dance from a Javanese dance, or a traditional Hawaiian dance from a contemporary Hawaiian dance?

As a movement analyst, I was led to some fairly easily distinguishable general features. India's *bharata natyam* and *kathakali* typically include highly articulated use of the hands and fingers in positions that change frequently to contribute to story telling, or to decorate the movements of the rest of the body⁽²⁾. Classical ballet tends to use the hand as a single unit—the fingers are placed in careful alignment with each other and remain relatively fixed as an extension of the lower arm, precise placement of the fingers defining various styles within ballet. Spain's flamenco uses extremely intricate rhythmic patterns stamped out by the feet encased in shoes with solid and somewhat high heels. India's *kathak* also uses extremely intricate rhythmic patterns, but they are stamped out with bare feet, bells adorning the ankles creating the primary audible sound. The foot moves differently in each of these kinds of dance to

maximize the varied sounds created by shoes or bare feet and small bells.

As I continued observing an increasing number of kinds of dance I began to see more complexities, and began to move away from describing the dance itself and toward describing an aesthetic deeply embedded in the culture from which the dance emanated. I found that understanding such an aesthetic can help to both differentiate one kind of dance from another, but also to see what may, in fact, unify different kinds of dance.

Here I describe my current thinking about a way to approach the broad idea of dance aesthetics by using this approach to look at Korean dance. My intent, however, is not to provide a complete inventory of characteristics of Korean dance. Rather, I have selected a number of things I consider important and that can help begin a fuller exploration, but that also illustrate the nature of the method I advocate. This method can prove useful in looking at other kinds of dance as well, and thus to comparing the movement dimension of dance across cultures and across genres within cultures. It can also be used to find common threads between diverse artistic manifestations within a culture.

FRAMEWORK

I begin with a bit of background and some definitions in order to provide a framework for my comments on the aesthetics of Korean dance. My involvement with dance in Korea began a little over thirty years ago when I joined Korean dance classes while I was teaching at the University of Hawai'i. I subsequently took lessons from teachers in Korea, and began the "academic" study of Korean dance⁽³⁾. Thus, my initial acquaintance with Korean dance was through the "doing" of it, and subsequent experiences were through the "intellecting" of it— that is, through traveling to Korea to conduct research, observing performances and classes, reading a broad array of published materials, talking with people involved in various ways with Korean dance, and analyzing the information I acquired.

An Outsider's Perspective

My perspective, therefore, is that of an outsider. Although I have tried to *do* Korean dance and have tried to experience it as an indigenous performer or audience member in Korea, I am not of Korean ancestry. Furthermore, I use methods and tools, such as movement analysis, not used until recently by Korean dancers or scholars⁽⁴⁾. At the same time, however, I adhere to a key practice of ethnographic-oriented dance research: My goal is to try to understand Korean dance as Korean dance participants, that is, performers, choreographers, scholars, critics, and audience members, understand it—whether that understanding is witting or unwitting. At the same time, I acknowledge that the only way I can comprehend things other people understand and do is to translate them into things that I know and do. Thus, I continually navigate between what I know and do not know, and between the culture and training from which I come and the culture I seek to understand.

Definitions

In addressing the aesthetics of Korean dance I employ a definition that draws on those of anthropologists Adrienne Kaeppler (1971) and Andree Grau (2003). I define aesthetics as a system of thought that may be implicit or explicit, that serves as the basis for the evaluation of creative processes that manipulate movement, sound, or materials resulting in cultural forms, and that makes things unique or distinctive. Note that I avoid the term “art,” since I believe it is a complex concept that warrants a full discussion on its own, and that it generally excludes some of the kinds of dance I believe are important to consider. Likewise, I do not include a notion of “beauty” or “good”⁽⁵⁾. Like Kaeppler and Grau, I believe these concepts constitute individual value judgments, and that determining what makes Korean dance good or bad or beautiful or ugly needs to be done within the broader context of what makes dance uniquely Korean, as opposed, for example, to Japanese or Chinese or Indonesian. Certainly being aware of the aesthetics of Korean dance will contribute to understanding value judgments, but such judgments may differ among Koreans as well as among outsiders. It is the *basis* for such judgments, which are rooted in aesthetics

and which form the *criteria* for formulating judgments, that I try to understand.

In seeking an emic, or insider's, view of the aesthetic system that contributes to identifying dance as being Korean I sometimes use emic, or insider's, terms and explanations, but I also use terms and explanations that are etic, or those of an outsider⁽⁶⁾. I use outsider views for two reasons. First, it may be easier for me to sort things out and communicate them to people who are not Korean and are not familiar with Korean culture or Korean dance by "translating" them into terms and ideas more familiar to me, and perhaps to them as well.

Second, I believe some things contributing to aesthetics have become so innate to practitioners that they are assumed to be inherent—things that are typically described as "natural" but which in fact are culturally determined⁽⁷⁾. Likewise, things that one has grown up with and become used to seeing and doing may be subconsciously understood and not easily articulated or verbally theorized. Hence, audience members may be able to see that something is or is not Korean, and formulate a personal value judgement, but be unable to articulate the basis for their judgment. For dancers and teachers, what may be considered natural for Koreans may be considered completely unnatural or something other than Korean by outsiders. This makes it important to understand what is natural to Korean dancers, and hence, I see myself as a bridge between insiders and outsiders.

Further, I consider it important to differentiate between two inter-related but distinct facets of aesthetics: concepts and techniques. Concepts are broad, often abstract, ideas that are important to a particular cultural manifestation or individual representation of that cultural manifestation, but that may also be relevant across cultures and different manifestations. Techniques are the concrete practices or procedures through which concepts are given form, and that may differentiate dance across cultures and across genres within a culture. It is these facets of aesthetics that form the basis of my comments here.

A complete dance event includes many kinds of concepts and techniques that relate to such things as costumes, music, and the physical performance space, all of which contribute to the full aesthetic of a particular kind of dance. Here I focus on

concepts and techniques that are kinetically presented through the human body and that I believe broadly characterize Korean dance⁽⁸⁾. I do not attempt a complete inventory of such features, but rather focus on a number that I believe are important and that help to illustrate the aesthetic approach I advocate.

“Korean Dance”

In order to proceed it is necessary to define what I mean by “Korean dance.” In doing so I acknowledge that I make generalizations and construct only a working definition for the discussion that follows. The definition is based on my own observations as well as comments of Koreans, and relates broadly to the kinds of dance most typically referred to by Koreans as *Han’guk muyong*, literally “Korean dance.” This label usually embraces *ch’õnt’ong muyong* and *shin muyong*, literally “traditional dance” and “new dance”⁽⁹⁾. Many of the new dances and some of the traditional dances are further grouped together and referred to by Koreans as *minsok muyong*, literally “folk dance”⁽¹⁰⁾.

These terms become quite messy, particularly when comparing their translations to how they are used in discussions of dance from other geographic regions. When using these terms Koreans most typically refer to older dances such as those originally performed in the former royal court; those performed as part of shaman, Buddhist, and Confucian rituals; dances performed in villages, such as the many kinds of masked dance dramas and farmers’ dance and music; and the new dances created in the 20th century with the *shin muyong* or “new dance” movement that revisited older dance forms and sought to create a kind of dance that embraced a distinctive older aesthetic while simultaneously creating a more modern one. These more recently created dances were influenced by such foreign imports as ballet and contemporary dance, the latter especially through the teachings and impact of Japanese dancer Ishii Baku⁽¹¹⁾.

All of these kinds of dances, collectively, are frequently referred to by Koreans and non-Koreans as “Korean dance,” and even as “traditional dance,” despite the development of some of them in the early- to mid-twentieth century, and despite a

lack of awareness on the part of some people as to why these dances might be Korean or traditional. These are the types of dances that are emblematic of Korea for many Koreans as well as non-Koreans. They are put forward to mark a distinctive Korean identity when performers are sent abroad, they are presented in such cross-cultural events as opening ceremonies of Olympic Games, and they are used in advertising to promote Korea to tourists⁽¹²⁾. For the sake of simplicity, I refer here to all of these dances as Korean dance.

CONCEPTS THAT DESCRIBE EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS

Turning now to concepts relevant to Korean dance, I begin with several that Koreans name and that describe emotions and feelings⁽¹³⁾. These arise frequently in discussions of dance but are not necessarily specific to it.

Many published theoretical materials include comments on *môt* and *hũng*, terms invariably described as difficult to translate⁽¹⁴⁾. They are usually explained, respectively, as referring to flavor, an inner spiritual quality of charm and grace, or refined taste, and to a feeling of lively animation and enthusiasm, or ecstasy. Despite their widespread inclusion in published materials and purported importance, however, I seldom hear these concepts used by critics when they talk about specific performances, nor by dancers when they talk about what they do or how they are physically embodied in dance.

On the other hand, I more frequently hear the terms *kibun* or *maũm*. When I began attending performances in Korea in the late 1970s and early 1980s, colleagues spoke of *kibun* or *maũm*, meaning, respectively, feeling or mood, and heart. Instead of saying a dancer was good or bad, or demonstrated *môt* or *hũng*, they said such things as, “The dancer’s heart is good,” or, “The dancer has no feeling.” They were concerned with the presence or absence of *kibun* or *maũm*, and differentiated between technique and the emotional concepts of feeling or heart by saying, for example, “The technique is not so good, but the dancer has feeling.” This kind of distinction was sometimes used of older individuals who were considered superior per-

formers because of the extraordinary feeling they could exude and elicit in their viewers, despite the impact of time and age on their technical abilities. It was also used to comment on the potential of younger dancers whose feeling and heart were considered good, but who had not yet developed solid technical capabilities.

Two other quite complex affective concepts are widely discussed in relation to some Korean dances: *han* and *shinmyǒng*. I summarize the meaning of *han* as frustration, bitterness, and unsatisfied desire⁽¹⁵⁾. One writer describes *shinmyǒng* as “the spirit of life,” a feeling that is the result of one’s ability to confront the struggles of daily life by resolving resentment and pain, and giving fresh vigor to life, which can produce a sense of ecstasy (Anonymous 1988)⁽¹⁶⁾.

Mǒt, *hǔng*, *kibun*, *maǔm*, *han*, and *shinmyǒng* describe particular feelings or emotions that can be experienced by all humans: I do not think they are unique to Korea, a belief put forward by many Korean writers⁽¹⁷⁾. What is unique is that they are specifically named and talked about by Koreans, and that they are discussed in relation to Korean dance. The emphasis on these specific affects as goals of Korean dance together with how these affects are created contribute to making dance distinctively Korean dance and tell us how to dance in a Korean way.

FORMALISTIC CONCEPTS AND TECHNIQUES

I now turn to formalistic concepts, that is, ideas that relate to the structure or form of cultural manifestations, and kinetic techniques, that is, concrete ways of embodying these formalistic concepts. These are among the things that make dance what it is, and because of their strong interconnectedness I shift back and forth between them. Korean dance scholars and participants in Korean dance use some of the concepts and techniques I describe, but others are rooted in non-Korean analytical methods and my own observations. And again, while dance participants and audience members may not know these specific terms, the ideas behind them are often understood at a subconscious level. Here I focus on the use of the breath, *chǒng-jung-dong*, connectedness or sequential flow, verticality, *ogǔm ch’um*, *ǒkkae*

ch'um, doubling and rushing, and a-symmetry.

Use of the Breath

Breathing and the use of the breath play important roles in many formalistic concepts and kinetic techniques used in Korean dance. Although breathing is a universal component in all human life, it is specifically addressed in relation to some kinds of dance and performing arts. For example, Japanese Kita school noh master Matsui Akira says that in noh the breath is necessary to support movement but it should be held back and not shown (Matsui 2005). American modern dance pioneer Doris Humphrey developed a dance style that emphasizes “fall and recovery,” which presents breathing kinetically. The dance style of American modern dance pioneer Martha Graham is rooted in the actions of “contraction and release,” which rely on initiating movement phrases with the breath and then releasing it. In contrast to the noh described by Matsui, however, the dances of both Humphrey and Graham make the way the breath is used visible to the audience. The choreography of Lin Hwai-min, one of Taiwan’s modern dance pioneers, is often based on *tai-chi-chuan* and other traditional Chinese physical practices, each of which uses the breath in a very specific way. Many of his dances create a mesmerizing quality much like the practices from which they are derived, and members of the audience sometimes say they breathe along with the movements they see on stage.

Despite the fact that these kinds of dance focus on the use of the breath, it is highly unlikely that dances of Doris Humphrey would be confused with those of Martha Graham, and that either would be mistaken for movements in Japanese noh or the choreography of Lin Hwai-min. The reason is that while they all consciously use the breath, each uses it in a distinctive way.

Breathing techniques are of central importance in Korean dance and they cause, or contribute to, other important techniques. When Korean dancers and researchers talk about how the breath is used in their dance they typically discuss such things as proper breathing techniques, including where, within the body, the use of the breath is initiated, and how the use of the breath relates to metaphysical phenomenon⁽¹⁸⁾.

A helpful way to understand how dancers use the breath is to look at teaching methods. A research project by Yoo Si-hyun (Yu Shi-hyun 2000), written in English, focuses on three prominent performer-teachers who studied with recognized dance master Han Yǒng-suk⁽¹⁹⁾. Yoo's research is especially revealing regarding teaching methods and the use of the breath. Despite the fact that none of the questions she asked of the people she spoke with specifically addressed the use of the breath or the teaching of breathing, all three teachers chose to comment on it. Although they do not agree on whether how the breath is used can or should be taught, nor on the way they choose to talk about it, their comments ultimately describe a similar usage⁽²⁰⁾.

According to Yoo's study, much of Lee Ae-joo's teaching involves verbal metaphor. She addresses the use of the breath when she describes the way she was taught by her own teacher: When advancing to a particular place, she was told to assume "there was a butterfly sitting on a spot" and that she should go to it "secretly, holding her breath so as not to miss seeing the butterfly" (in Yoo 2000: 124). Although Yoo's English translation refers to *holding* the breath, I do not believe she means holding in the same sense as Matsui Akira when he describes the use of the breath in Japanese noh. Instead, the context suggests Lee Ae-joo is indicating a kind of suspension, a concept I will return to shortly.

Park Jae-hee delineates four phases in the breathing technique (*hohŭp bŏp*) taught to her by Han Yǒng-suk. These involve a cycle of inhaling (*hŭp*), holding the breath, quickly inhaling again, and then exhaling (*ho*). The quick inhaling phase, she says, creates "the taste of sharp popping" (*t'okt'okt'uinŭn mat*) and contributes to "the beauty of irregularity" (*p'akyŏkŭi mi*) (ibid: 91–92). Again, however, I believe the use of the English word *holding* actually refers to a suspension rather than to a pause or stop, and to making the breathing process visible rather than to concealing it.

Chŏng Jae-man emphasizes the origin of the breath in "the center of the abdominal region (the *tanjŏn*)," and speaks of a cycle of "[*sumŏl ollida*] 'pulling up the breath, [or inhalation,]' and ... [*sumŏl naerida*] 'pulling down the breath, [or] exhalation'" (ibid: 64–65, 75).

Korean dance writer Chŏng Pyŏng-ho reiterates some of the ideas expressed by the three performer-teachers when he describes the phases of breathing in relation to emotions, a description that harkens back to the affective concepts of *han* and *shinmyŏng*. He speaks of a tensing of emotion, a pacification of emotion, and a releasing of emotion (Chung Byung Ho 1997a: 105).

My own early description of breathing in a Korean dance way combines and expands on ideas and techniques identified by Lee Ae-joo, Park Jae-hee, Chŏng Jaeman, and Chŏng Pyŏng-ho. In 2001 I wrote:

[Movement is] initiated in the chest area with what appears to be a quick inhalation of the breath that causes the spine to lengthen upward and eventually forces the shoulders to rise. This movement is then released as the shoulders and spine relax, creating a visual “sigh of relief.” (page 13)

The “sigh of relief” is sometimes intensified by a short, abrupt inhalation that just precedes it—like a small hiccup, or what Park Jae-hee described as “the taste of sharp popping.” All of these actions, together with the movement of the spine and the shoulders, point to a direct link, as in the description of Chŏng Pyŏng-ho, to the concept of *han*, as well as to that of *shinmyŏng*. The continual vertical movements, the lifting and lowering of the shoulders, and the initiation of movement with the breath followed by its release, all suggest resignation, pain, and anguish, but followed by—or interspersed with—releasing these feelings. This, then, is an example of the kinetic manifestation, or a technique, that is used to achieve an affective concept in a particular way—in this case, the Korean way.

Chŏng-jung-dong

These descriptions of the Korean way to use the breath lead into a related concept articulated by many Korean dancers and dance scholars—the concept of *chŏng-jung-dong*. The three words in this phrase literally mean calm or still (*chŏng*), middle (*chung*), and motion or movement (*dong*), with multiple ways to interpret

and translate, or gloss, their combination into a single phrase. The most frequent glosses are motion-*in*-stillness and motion-*and*-stillness⁽²¹⁾.

Chông Jae-man elaborates on this concept and suggests further ways to better understand it by saying:

... a still movement with the dancer holding the air after a movement done with inhalation is not the end of the movement, but a pause to be connected to the next movement with exhalation. ... 'silence' coming after ... 'action' is thus connected to, or a preparation for, another ... 'action.' ... If ... 'silence' appears literally as a momentary stop in a dance, the dance no longer has life on stage
(in Yoo 2000: 67-68)

Despite the use of the word "holding" in the first part of this translation of Chông Jae-man's comment, he points out that no real stop, or "silence," occurs but rather a special *kind* of silence that connects the phases of the breathing cycle. This is why I think the use of the word "holding" in the comments of Lee Ae-joo and Park Jae-hee do not refer to a clear "stopping" of the breath. Rather than referring to different intended meanings, I believe this is an issue of the challenges related to describing movement in words, as well as to translating across languages the complex intricacies of the way the breath should be used. I will elaborate on translation challenges of several kinds shortly.

Aesthetics Professor Kim Mun-hwan reinforces the lack of any kind of holding and brings us still closer to understanding this concept by emphasizing the dynamic nature of *chông-jung-dong*. He states: "The pause in the West is only an insertion between movements, but ... [the Korean pause] has an active value like the unfilled space in a painting" (Kim Moon-hwan 1993: 8). The concept may also relate to the idea of non-action described centuries ago by Confucius. David A. Mason points to Choi Chi-won's discussion in the *Samguk Sagi* that while the literal meaning of Confucius' non-action (*wú-wéi* in Chinese, *muǐ* in Korean) is "not doing" or "not acting," Confucius really refers to "acting in this world not with egoist intention but

rather heart-intuitively” (2015: 62). By extension, this idea could be thought of as doing while not doing, and hence motion while being still, or motion-in-stillness.

These ideas relate to my own metaphoric description of the physicalization of *chông-jung-dong* when I compare the body to a rubber band (Van Zile 2007: 85). If you gently pull a rubber band you eventually reach a point where it seems you cannot pull any further without breaking the band. It is at this point that the concept of *chông-jung-dong* is physically crystallized. You cannot actually pull further, but you must maintain an *active* energy in order to prevent the band from snapping back. I further describe this moment as a “suspension,” a quality in which the dancer initially *appears* to have stopped moving but, as Chông Jae-man indicates, is actually poised for action. This is why I believe the English-language gloss of *chông-jung-dong* is more accurately represented as motion-*in*-stillness rather than motion-*and*-stillness. Motion-*and*-stillness suggests a dichotomy between two distinctive actions that have a static moment between them. Motion-*in*-stillness suggests a dynamic of subtle motion that occurs within what might initially *appear* to be stillness but what is, in fact, a single continuing action.

The ideas of motion-*in*-stillness and suspension may relate to broad Korean philosophical ideas of naturalism, and the significance of naturalism in many aspects of Korean culture. These ideas note the importance of empty space that does not create a dualism, but focuses instead on the circulation of energy within what might appear to be empty space or two distinct entities (Kwon and Lee 2015: 167). This coincides with Kim Mun-hwan’s idea that unfilled, or empty, space in a painting has active value.

Connectedness, Sequential Flow

Use of the breath in a specific way contributes to other kinesthetic characteristics of Korean dance. For example, it leads to a connectedness or sequential flow of movement. I use the idea of connectedness literally to refer to a clear link between things—a link described previously as an absence of “emptiness,” or a pause that is not a stop, but rather a preparation for what follows. In Korean dance connectedness

is achieved by the sequential flow of movement from one body part to an adjacent body part, and it is most often initiated visibly with the breath. Even when there is a small movement in a peripheral body part, such as a subtle, almost pulsing action in the wrist, the movement does not occur in isolation. It is initiated with an inhalation originating in the torso that vertically lengthens the spine, lifts the shoulders, and propels energy and movement through the entire length of the arm before “resulting” in the wrist action. Movement begins centrally and progresses sequentially to peripheral body parts. This connectedness and sequential flow are absent when a beginning dancer simply bends and extends his knees or lifts and lowers his shoulders. Such a dancer produces two physical actions that are, indeed, typical of Korean dance, but they are not supported by the initiation in the torso and the outward flow of the breath to other body parts—the sequential passing of movement from the center of the body outward which *needs* to occur in order to perform these actions in a Korean way.

Verticality

The inhalation/exhalation phases of breathing are supported by, or contribute to, an emphasis on verticality. This is kinetically manifest in a continual bending and extending of the knees—in Korean, *ogŭm ch’um* (literally the knee dance, or dance of the knees), that lifts and then lowers the entire body, and in the lifting and lowering of the shoulders—in Korean, *ŏkkae ch’um* (literally the shoulder dance, or dance of the shoulders). While found in almost all kinds of traditional Korean dance, the size and quality of these movements varies. In court dance, for example, the movement is quite small and subtle. In masked dance dramas and farmers’ dances, these movements can become large and strong, the extending of the knees propelling the dancer into jumping, and the lowering of the shoulders becoming so dynamic that it drives the dancer downward into the ground, as in Chŏng Jae-man’s description of pulling the breath down.

Doubling and Rushing

Another kinetic manifestation of breathing occurs in what I refer to as “doubling and rushing.” This is seen, for example, in a basic walking phrase. The phrase may start with several slow steps forward followed by several quicker steps forward, and then gradually accelerate further in speed. These build to a suspension created by the cessation of further stepping while the energy continues to “collect” or “grow” just before the “rushing” and suspension resolve as the dancer takes one final step and somewhat quickly bends the knee of her supporting leg to complete the kinetic phrase. This again exemplifies the rubber band metaphor.

A-Symmetry

Beyond the concepts and techniques related to breathing, several techniques contribute to the kinetic manifestation of the concept of a-symmetry, the lack of similarity or correspondence on either side of a dividing line. Although I have not heard many Koreans talk about this concept in relation to dance nor to the techniques that physicalize it, art historian and aesthetician Koh Yu-Sup identifies a-symmetry as a key characteristic of Korean art (in Kwon and Lee 2015: 156), and researchers Kwon Yoo Jin and Lee Hye-Young describe its importance in both traditional and contemporary clothing design (ibid). In Korean dance a-symmetry is manifest in several techniques that contribute to it being a prominent feature. Two of these techniques are associated with rhythmic phrasing, and one with overall positions of the body during moments of suspension.

One technique associated with rhythmic phrasing is an emphasis on triple meter that is driven by an initiation with the breath and the inclusion of verticality and suspension. Although the underlying musical pulse may be an even, duple meter, the movement sub-divides one of the two beats into three parts. For example, a simple walking pattern may appear to involve stepping forward on the right foot on count one, and closing the left foot alongside the right on count two while bending both knees—essentially a two-part, or duple, phrase. On closer examination, however, the first beat is sub-divided into three counts, beginning with an inhalation that length-

ens the spine and lifts the shoulders on the connected first and second sub-beats, and is then followed by a slight quickening of the inhalation, described previously as a small hiccup or a sharp popping, on the third sub-beat. This hiccup, or popping, occurs just prior to the exhalation and closing and sinking actions on the second count, contributing to a-symmetry in the kinetic metrical phrasing of the walking pattern. While the viewer may hear a duple, or symmetrical and even, phrasing in the music, the dancer visually cuts up this auditory symmetry with visual a-symmetry.

A second technique relating to rhythmic phrasing that physicalizes a-symmetry is the doubling and rushing described previously. Instead of advancing the speed of walking by beginning slowly and then simply doubling the tempo and doubling it again, the pattern begins slowly, doubles the tempo, and then rushes at an accelerating pace before the suspension and the downward resolution into the bending of the knees. The result is a kinetic phrase that progresses unevenly, or in a visually a-symmetrical fashion that “rides on top of” what may be heard as a musical phrase that is symmetrical.

A third technique that physicalizes a-symmetry occurs in positions of the body during many moments of suspension. For example, a frequently seen position involves the dancer standing on one leg while lifting the other leg in front of the body with the knee bent and the ankle flexed. At the same time, if it is the left leg that lifts, the right arm extends diagonally upward and the left arm extends sideward at shoulder height. The torso and head tilt slightly forward and turn toward the lifted leg. This combination of actions causes a dynamically a-symmetrical position throughout the entire body.

These techniques that create a-symmetry exemplify art historian and aesthetician Koh Yu-Sup’s belief that a-symmetry is a prominent feature of all Korean art forms, in this case revealed in dance. They also contribute to “the beauty of irregularity,” a combination of both an aesthetic concept and a value judgment identified by Park Jae-hee when she described the way she teaches a breathing technique.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Issues of Translation

I began my discussion by defining aesthetics. I then moved on to a working definition of Korean dance, to differentiating between concepts and techniques, articulating broad ideas that can be thought of as affects or emotional qualities, and identifying some of the specific kinetic ways in which these concepts and affects, as well as others, are manifest in techniques for moving the body in ways that result in Korean dance⁽²²⁾.

In describing some of these concepts and kinetic manifestations my comments vacillated between those that were somewhat easily verbalized and those that were more complicated and required more technical explanations. There are reasons for this. Dance is about the literally moving and highly complex body. Its many joints and muscles are capable of doing certain kinds of movements. But specialized training can take these movements beyond the ways most people move in daily life. Thus, the ways in which the body can move are almost endless, and performers of each kind of dance choose, wittingly or unwittingly, to draw from a vast inventory when determining the movements that will constitute a particular dance. Any attempt to describe movement in words, therefore, is a translation from an originally-intended kinetic medium of presentation to a verbal medium of presentation, a challenging task—as we saw in attempts to describe the breathing process.

American dancers Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis summarize what are likely the most significant reasons for the difficulties of describing dance and movement in words. Duncan wrote: “If I could say it, I would not have to dance it”⁽²³⁾; St. Denis said: “I see dance being used as the communication between body and soul, to express what is too deep to find words for”⁽²⁴⁾. These ideas are echoed in the Korean concept of *shinmyŏng*, which embraces the deeply emotional resolution of resentment and pain that gives fresh vigor to life and can lead to spontaneous improvisational dancing on the part of members of the audience. They are further reinforced in a recent study by Kim Su In, who posits that the detailed records of Korean court

dance are not limited to describing the visual appearance of dance; they also strive to crystallize an impression of the overall movement as well as knowledge and feelings that are embedded in the performance of individual dancers and that are perceived by the viewer (2016).

Reasons Why Dance Is Done

Beyond these factors, however, underlying the techniques and concepts that define the aesthetics of Korean dance are the reasons for which dances are done and the fact that movement choices made are culturally, temporally, and individually embedded⁽²⁵⁾. Hence the motivations for these choices may be deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that persist or change over time, and may differ from one individual to another. The aesthetic systems that lead to these choices may persist or change as well. Any of these factors may explain why many young Koreans do not understand or appreciate, for example, reconstructions of older court dances. How revealing would it be to see if any of the aesthetics of traditional Korean dance have filtered into the way young Koreans dance as they perform hip-hop: Is there a unique Korean style of hip-hop as opposed, for example, to an American style of hip-hop⁽²⁶⁾?

Aesthetic Concepts across Time and Art Forms

The potential for aesthetic principles to cross both the real or imagined boundaries of time as well as of diverse cultural manifestations is discussed in the recent study by Kwon Yoo Jin and Lee Hye-Young of traditional Korean aesthetic characteristics and their presence in contemporary South Korean fashion (2015). Kwon and Lee begin their research by articulating a number of aesthetic principles identified by previous scholars which are rooted in traditional Korean fine arts, such as naturalistic simplicity. A concept that may date to the 9th century, poet-philosopher Ch'oe Chi-wŏn integrated ideas emanating from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism that led to his concept of *pungryu*, or “flowing like the wind,” to describe the serenity of nature that results in elegance and dignity (in Mason 2015: 61–63). Kwon and Lee note the way these principles are manifest in traditional Korean clothing (*han-*

bok), and in different ways in contemporary fashion design—accommodating not only the past and the present, but also influences from Korean and Western styles as well. They further point to the source of these aesthetic principles in deeply embedded cultural values that “are determined by how people appreciate and create their own meanings from their lived experiences” (Arnould and Thompson in Kwon and Lee 2015: 164). They further describe how the very same aesthetic principles can be found in diverse cultural manifestations (*op cit*). In the case of fashion design, they conclude, these elements persist at a conceptual level but change, over time, in relation to formal techniques⁽²⁷⁾.

If we look closely at the techniques used in Korean hip-hop, and then step back to identify the aesthetic concepts these techniques represent, will we find some of the same aesthetic concepts that characterize Korean court dance? Concepts that cut across time and dance genres, and thus create a unity between two seemingly different kinds of dance in Korea, contributing, in the end, to a distinctively Korean dance identity.

Why Bother?

But why bother to engage in such theoretical discussions of dance and creative manifestations of culture? At a very practical level, two South Korean government initiatives are rooted in identifying “Korean culture.” Korea’s Law on the Protection of Cultural Properties (Munhwajae Pohopöp), established in the mid-twentieth century, was created to identify and preserve important aspects of Korea’s cultural heritage. The law emphasizes identifying things considered to be distinctively Korean, and to providing support for these things⁽²⁸⁾. Similar identification and recognition of “Korean traditional culture” was fostered by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2005 when it put forward its HanStyle program to create a national brand image that could be commercialized and globalized, and that would create job opportunities centering on a clearly identifiable Korean culture (Kwon and Lee 2015: 164–165 and Korea Culture Information Service, n.d.). In both instances the identity of Korean culture and economic benefit are at stake, and ultimately aesthetic

concepts, implicitly or explicitly, underlie many of the decisions made.

Economic benefit is also at stake when a dance company chooses to hire one dancer instead of another, when a funding organization selects one dancer or company to receive support and not another, when newspaper critics assess one dancer or company as better than another, which can ultimately affect company or funder choices, and when individuals choose to purchase tickets for one performance but not another. All of these choices are based, at least in part, on assessments of what constitutes good dance, choices that are grounded in aesthetic judgments.

In the case of dance, intangible things are at stake as well. Regardless of choices made in what movements to perform, dancers sometimes want to literally engage people in doing movement. This happens when audience members join performers in improvised dancing at the culmination of a Korean masked dance performance if *shinmyǒng* has been achieved. In other instances, as when conveying a sense of *kibun* or *maim* or *han*, dancers want to emotionally move people. The ways in which these goals are achieved relate to the experiences in individual people's lives, which connect with underlying shared aesthetic concepts and techniques in ways that enable even an unwitting understanding that leads to participation, in various ways, with dance.

The concepts and techniques of the system described here are examples of components that contribute to an aesthetic of dance that makes it distinctively Korean. Because of the potential for variation *within* these concepts and techniques, as well as the beliefs and values that unify a particular culture, the system can be valid across diverse kinds of Korean dance. Even as the aesthetic system allows for variety across court dance, Buddhist, Confucian, and shaman ritual dance, and village masked dance dramas, it provides for a distinctive appearance that unifies all these kinds of dance, perhaps as well as hip-hop found in Korea, making them all uniquely Korean. And this approach to considering dance and notions of aesthetics can be applied to dance that emanates from other geographic areas as well as other cultural manifestations.

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- (2) The positions are referred to as *mudras* or *hasta mudras*. For a brief summary of the ways in which hand positions are used in *bharata natyam* see, for example, Van Zile 1982.
- (3) I began my studies in Hawai'i with Chung-won (Chung-wŏn—Wonnie) Meyer, the daughter of well-known former court dancer Kim Ch'ŏn-hŭng. I then studied with Halla Huhm (Pae Ha-la), who was born in Korea but immigrated to Hawai'i, where she established what might be the first and longest-running Korean dance studio in the United States. During periods of research I studied in Hawai'i or Korea formally or informally with Kim Ch'ŏn-hŭng; Chŏng P'il-sun, a successor (*isuja*) to National Living Treasures for Chinju Kŏmmu; Yi Yun-sŏk, a National Living Treasure for

Kosŏng Ogwangdae; dancers associated with Kungnip Kugagwŏn; and numerous performers, dancers, choreographers, critics, and scholars.

Portions of the discussion here are based on Van Zile 2001, 2007, and 2008.

- (4) My analytical methods are rooted primarily in Labanotation, a symbolic system for recording movement in written form that is roughly analogous to common Western systems for music notation. Originated by Rudolf Laban in the early 20th century, the system has been further developed by practitioners over the years. In a very slightly modified form it is known in Europe as Kinetography Laban. Despite the inclusion of “notation” in the system’s name, underlying the notational aspect is a framework for analyzing movement that is useful for movement description independent of the symbolic documentation. For details of the system see Hutchinson Guest 2005, the Resources section of the website of the International Council of Kinetography Laban (<http://ickl.org/ickl/ickl/>), and the Notation Basics section of the website of the Dance Notation Bureau (<http://www.dancenotation.org>).
- (5) Although intended to be humorous, the satire in Korean *ʻalchʻum*, or masked dance dramas, can be biting, and I find it difficult to consider some of its presentation “beautiful.” Likewise, I do not find beauty in the depiction of individuals with physical challenges in the type of dance known as *pyŏngshin chʻum*, and for which Kong Ok-jin (1931–2012) was particularly noted. See <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120709000844> and especially http://english.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201207101607477&code=710100 for a brief explanation of why she felt it was appropriate to do these kinds of dances. I do, however, include this category as part of “Korean dance.”
- (6) For a discussion of the concepts of emic and etic see Pelto 1970: 54 and Alvarez-Pereyre and Arom 1993. In describing these terms as insider as opposed to outsider views I am aware of my simplification of the concepts. I am also aware that distinguishing between etic and emic approaches is somewhat out of fashion these days. I find these ideas helpful, however, in attempting cross-cultural understanding. I see them existing on a kind of continuum between which *both* insiders and outsiders move back and forth. For example, a performer born and raised in Korea might be assumed to have an emic perspective. But when that same dancer steps out of the role of performer and tries to explain in words what he or she does, or studies methodologies and concepts derived in relation to other geographic locales and then applies

them to Korean dance, his or her thinking shifts to an etic, or outsider, perspective.

- (7) For related discussions see Giurchescu 2003 and Van Zile 2014a. I believe that what is considered “natural” in dance and movements of the body is culturally determined.
- (8) The specific ideas discussed here represent only some of those relevant to the main topic. They were selected because they are among those most frequently described by Korean dancers, scholars, and authors with whom I have observed, learned, and discussed dance, and because of my own observations and background in movement analysis. A thorough discussion of the aesthetics of Korean dance would consider the interaction between all communicative modes in a performance. A brief anecdote illustrates the ultimate importance of such inclusiveness.

In an undergraduate survey course I taught dealing with dance forms from diverse places across the globe, I began each unit by showing a film of a dance and asking students for their “gut” reaction to what they saw. When introducing Korean dance, responses were often very negative. Students did not like what they saw; they found it “irritating” and “boring.” After hearing these types of responses over a period of years and becoming troubled because of my own engagement with Korean dance, I tried a different approach. I began the unit on Korea by showing a film with the sound turned off. Student responses were almost consistently more positive. As I puzzled over why, and discussed this with students, I discovered a dissonance perceived by my North American students: a contrast between the music and the movement. To ears accustomed to hearing quite different kinds of sounds, Korean music sounded strident and tension-filled. To the eyes of these same students, although the movements seemed quite slow, they “felt” comfortable. As I thought further about these reactions I began to wonder if it was not the coexistence of the very different nature of the movement and music that contributed to the dynamic of Korean dance, and to the aesthetics of what constitutes Korean dance.

- (9) The concept of “traditional dance” is used inconsistently to differentiate such things as “our dance” from “their dance,” and “old” dances from “new” dances. *The International Journal of Traditional Arts* defines traditional arts “as artistic and creative practices that function as a marker of identity for a particular cultural group and that have grown out of their oral tradition or that have been newly created using characteristics derived from oral tradition” (<http://tradartsjournal.org/index.php/ijta>). While this definition reiterates some of the ideas presented here regarding art, creative practices,

and distinctiveness or uniqueness, it also adds the element of oral tradition as a source for things considered traditional. In the context of Korea, this seems inappropriate. Some of the oldest dances known about are documented in both pictorial and verbal form in quite old documents. For a discussion of the inclusion of dance characteristics found in some old “non-oral” forms, see Sparti, et al 2011, which includes my own chapter on this topic as related to Korean dance.

For a discussion of the use of the term “traditional dance” in relation to Korean dance see Part One of Van Zile 2001. I use the term here in reference to what are generally considered older, indigenous dances of Korea, despite the fact that some of these dances are believed to be more than four centuries old and others less than a century old. In the case of the latter I refer to such things as *salpuri*, which was created in the early 20th century but is often said to crystallize the characteristics of “traditional” Korean dance (see, for example, Injoo Hwang 1993).

- (10) For issues broadly relating to the concept of folk dance see Buckland 1983. For particular issues relating to the concept of folk dance in Korea see Van Zile 2001: chapter 2.
- (11) For a discussion of how ballet and contemporary dance came to Korea see, for example, Van Zile 2013 and Chŏng Byŏng-ho (Chung Byung Ho 1997b).
- (12) For a discussion of images of dance used for promoting tourism see, for example, Van Zile 2014b and Kim Young-hoon 2003. In recent times hip-hop and B-boying have increasingly become emblematic of Korea, and have even been supported for “export” by the Korean government. This topic is beyond the scope of the presentation here, but will be briefly commented on later.
- (13) Some Korean scholars, critics, dancers and teachers use this terminology; some dancers, teachers, and audience members may only be subconsciously aware of the physical embodiment of the ideas and techniques underlying these terms.

Sue In Kim’s analysis of terminology used to describe court dances in old court records suggests that descriptions reflect both literal movements (what she describes as “the visual/physical realm of movement”) and emotions. She delineates four categories of description that include physically directive terms, emotionally directive terms, imaginatively directive terms, and intellectually directive terms in her study that seeks to analyze “semantic components of individual terms.” She argues “that the terminology might seem to diminish understanding of physical clarity because the

terminology's naming system crystallizes characteristic views about the body, movement knowledge, and language.... [and] that the characteristics speak to culturally specific understandings about clarity. In the terminology, the body appears to be freed from visual or physical design, movement knowledge unfettered by the laws of nature, and language released from the objectivity of meaning" (2016: 12, 15).

- (14) I have sometimes heard it said that *môt* and *hũng* are associated only with dances categorized as folk dance. For a discussion of *môt* in relation to music, and its broader application to other art forms and things in life (as in the recent work of Kwon and Lee referred to here), see Byong-ki Hwang 1978.
- (15) For discussions of *han* see, for example, Hyun Young Hak in Chung Hyun-kyung 1990: 42 and Elaine H. Kim 1989: 82–83. For a discussion of the universality of the concept of *han*, which many Koreans consider a distinctively Korean emotion, as well as of *môt* and *hũng*, see O'Rourke 1998.
- (16) In the context of *t'alch'um*, or masked dance drama, *han* leads to "igniting" a sense of community spirit that results in audience members spontaneously joining performers in improvised dancing at the climactic culmination of the performance. For discussions of *shinmyŏng* see, for example, Anonymous 1988, Palwak, editor 2009, Rynarzewska 2009, and Van Zile 2008 and 2012. For a brief comment on the relationship of *shinmyŏng* to *han* see Pawlak 2009: 12, and for fuller comments on this topic see Rynarzewska 2009.
- (17) For a discussion of cultural naming of emotions see the essays in Pawlak, editor 2009, and notes 13 and 15 here.
- (18) Descriptions of where in the body the breath is initiated range from high in the chest to low in the abdomen. For a discussion of metaphysical principles relating to breathing in Korean dance see, for example, Yoo Mi-hee 2007.
- (19) Yoo Si-hyun sought to compare the "interpretations of the practice of a traditional Korean dance," *Salp'uri Ch'um*, by three contemporary teachers, Lee Ae-joo, Chŏng Chae-man, and Park Jae-hee. All three of these teachers were, according to Yoo, considered to be the best students of Han Yŏng-suk. Yoo's methodology involved interviewing the three teachers in sessions that began with a series of open-ended questions (2000: 41). It is intriguing that despite their common training lineage, the nature of the comments of the three teachers differed. It is important, in light of my discussion here relating to challenges of translation, to note that Yoo's works refer-

enced here were written in English. Her descriptions of what people said are her translations from the original Korean-language comments. I point this out not to suggest a negative assessment of her translation, but to lay the groundwork for my later discussion here of some of the challenges involved in translation.

- (20) According to their web sites, at least two Korean university performing arts programs incorporate the teaching of breathing techniques. The School of Traditional Korean Arts of Korea National University of the Arts offers an entire course, Breathing Practice for Chi, described as “Training for chi ... regulating body, mind, and breath (Chi/vital energy) ...” (http://www.knua.ac.kr/new2005/eng/school_traditional/5_course.asp, accessed January 10, 2007). The description of the beginning course in Korean dance in the dance program at Ewha Woman’s University states: “Study and practice in Korean dance with focus on the [*sic*] breath control and basic limb movements” (http://www.ewha.ac.kr/eng/academics/college/human_movement_03.jsp, accessed January 25, 2007). At the upper level, there is an entire course titled Korea Breathing Method, which focuses on the “proper arrangement, and regulation of respiration (breath) which is consistent with the feelings (spirits) of the Korean traditional dance” (*ibid*).

It is worth noting in relation to comments of the three teachers described here that Chŏng is male, while Park and Lee are female, and to perhaps question, in the future, if gender has any impact on issues relating to the use and teaching of breathing in Korean dance.

- (21) Both of these translations are found in English-language publications, as well as when Koreans refer to the concept in English. I suspect that the use of the English-language word “holding” in translating some of the comments of Lee Ae-joo, Chŏng Chae-man, and Park Jae-hee when they are said to speak of inhaling, then *holding* the breath, and then exhaling relates to the subtle differences in interpreting and translating the literal meaning of this combination of three words rather than to an actual intended meaning of stopping of the breath.
- (22) For a visual example that summarizes many of the concepts and techniques described here see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubRo6V4aUc8>. This is an abbreviated version of what is usually performed in a concert setting, but encapsulates some typical sections performed.
- (23) See, for example, http://www.azquotes.com/author/4197-Isadora_Duncan.

- (24) See <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/dance-quotes.html> (accessed 1/20/17). Expressing a similar sentiment, dancer Beth Jones writes (in news@danceparade.org, cited in a June 13, 2016 email message):

To dance is to reach for a word that doesn't exist,
To sing the heartsong of a thousand generations,
To feel the meaning of a moment in time.

- (25) Lee Yeounsuk (2016) provides an intriguing exploration of the cultural and temporal embeddedness of aesthetics in discussing the appeal of the dancing of Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi to both Korean and Japanese audiences during the time of the Japanese occupation of Korea.
- (26) I use the term hip-hop to embrace the many sub-categories it includes, such as B-boying, breaking, popping, and locking, all of which are referred to in Korea as K-pop. In the same way the approach described here can be applied to many kinds of “Korean” or “traditional Korean” dance, they could be applied to the broad category of hip-hop and its many varieties in order to seek over-riding features as well as differentiating features.

The blending of quite disparate forms involves significant challenges. This becomes clear in a study of two productions by the Korean National Ballet that specifically sought to create “Korean ballet” by bringing together aesthetic features of classical European ballet with identifiable features of “Korean-ness.” This study by Hyungjung Lee foregrounded these challenges in one instance that produced what I would describe as a patchwork quilt of co-existing aesthetic systems rather than the creation of something new. The pieces of the quilt included a Korean story, the martial art of *taekwondo*, and movements and a choreographic structure taken from classical European ballet. According to Lee's description, these pieces each remained distinctive rather than merging to form a new kind of ballet. Lee also notes the impact of the structure of the physical body in contributing to aesthetic features (2015, chapter 6).

- (27) In her discussion of dance, music, and tapa cloth designs of the Pacific island of Tonga, anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler makes a similar case for the presence of core aesthetic principles across not just various kinds of dance within Tonga, but across other creative forms as well (1978).
- (28) For discussions of Korea's system for perpetuating intangible cultural assets see, for example, Howard 2006; Howard, editor 2016; Van Zile 2001, Chapter 3; and Yang 2003.

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