

## THE TRANSITION OF THE MONK'S DANCE (SŪNGMU) FROM RITUAL DANCE TO FOLK ART IN MODERN KOREA TO 1945\*

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### I. Introduction

Traditionally, art was inseparable from religion. Not only art but also culture in general was nurtured and practiced in connection with, or within the context of, religion, although the degree to which religion and art were associated was not uniform. It differed depending on time and place or the culture in which they were situated. Given the long-standing association of art and religion, how was dance, the art of body movements, related to religion or religious rituals, temporally and spatially, in traditional Korea?

It is known that the monk's dance (*sūngmu* in Korean) and the *salp'uri* dance, which represented Korea's traditional dance repertoire, were closely associated with religious rituals: the monk's dance with Buddhist rituals and the *salp'uri* dance with shamanistic or folkloric rituals. It should be noted, however, that the association between dance and religious ritual was a way of thinking that evolved in modern times. The term "religion" was newly coined to refer to the sum of rituals and beliefs that always contained elements of bodily performances — those also represented by another newly coined modern term, "art." To a great extent, dance constituted an integral part of religious rituals and beliefs practiced in traditional Korea, so they were originally inseparable from each other.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of our analysis, we employ terms such as "religion" and "art" separately, but in the minds of traditional Koreans the monk's dance, now classified as a form of art, was a form of rituals and beliefs whether or not they could be characterized along with a certain individual religious tradition.

Art began to be separated from religion with the arrival of modernity, and over time both were further demarcated as the former established itself as an independent type of human activity. By drawing a line between itself and religion, art has sought to construct its own identity and tradition going back to the remote past. In this trend, the modern performers and scholars of the monk's dance have discussed its origin in an effort to establish or define it as a genre of art independent from religious influence. Not surprisingly, discussion of the origin of the monk's dance has turned to debates involving binary oppositions such as Buddhist sacredness versus artistic pleasure or sensibility, monk dancers versus professional dancers, and tradition versus modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overall review of new terms coined in modern Japan, see Jin Rikiei, *Kindaichi no honyaku to denpa: kango obaikai ni* (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 2019).

Briefly put, currently, nobody challenges the status of the monk's dance as an independent genre of Korea's traditional art that seems to have little to do with religious elements. In 1969, the Korean government officially designated the monk's dance as the twenty-seventh intangible cultural treasure of Korea. Since then, the dance has been recognized and performed as a representative folk dance of Korea. It seems that it has been cut off from the past attachment to religious tradition and enjoys the privileges as well as the autonomy of art recognized by the public. But is it so simple to characterize the monk's dance as a genre of art that stands on its own? I challenge the categorization of the monk's dance as a folk dance and, instead, suggest that it is nominally an independent genre of art in modern Korea but that it is still evolving as a genre of traditional Korean dance that carries multilayered facets of aesthetic and religious sensibility — facets shared by both performers and audiences.

With the aim to clarify the multifaceted layers of aesthetic and religious sensibility transformed from, yet still rooted in, traditional Korean culture, in this article I trace the crisscrossing trajectory of identity formation that the pioneering modern performers of the monk's dance tried to construct. First, I examine the past relationship between the monk's dance and Buddhism/folk religious practices, and then I explore the processes through which the former was established as one of Korea's representative traditional dances away from Buddhism or any other religion in modern times.

The current scholarship offers a rich pool of knowledge on the association as well as the disassociation between the monk's dance and Buddhism/religion. Nevertheless, in my view, the context in which the transition from association to disassociation is discussed is still not clear. Thus, in suggesting the multilayered facets of aesthetic and religious sensibility that the monk's dance has preserved, I will pay particular attention to the context of its refashioning by highlighting the role of modernity in the debates on both its origin and its transition, with a focus on the colonial period of modern Korea (1910-1945).

## II. *The Monk's Dance and Buddhist Rituals*

It is not easy to trace the origin of art no matter what type. It is particularly difficult to trace the origin of dance, neither aided nor accompanied by the medium of the written word. At the moment that it is performed, it disappears without any trace. The only way to preserve it in its entirety is to record it visually. Lee Aeju suggests that “dance is a bodily gesture of life.”<sup>2</sup> The process of transforming “body motions” into the art of “dance” also involves a process that turns action into concept, and, by resorting to concepts that remain part of the cultural tradition, we can determine the traces of dance. Thanks to some concepts that dance imprints onto culture, we can trace the meanings and implications of repeated dance performances.

Which bodily motions are considered dance in the context of Korean culture prompts a question regarding the concept of dance in relation to ways of life and experiences in the Korean environment that also gave birth to Koreans' religious beliefs and rituals. With regard to the origin of monk's dance, scholars in the field have offered a number of suggestions.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Kyosu sinmun*, January 16, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> For details, see Sim Usöng, *Minsok munhwa wa minjung üsik* (Seoul: Tongmunsöñ, 1985), p.177; Yi Aeju, “Süngmu üi wöllu e kwanhan yön'gu,” *Han'guk ch'eyuksa hakhojei*, vol.1 (1996); and Kim Suyöng, “Kiwönsöl ro pon

Learning from their insights, I offer my own findings in this section.

According to Nūnghwa, Buddhist institutions traditionally practiced four different types of dance: *para* (Buddhist-style cymbals) dance (which had eight varieties), butterfly (*nabi*) dance (which had eighteen varieties), dharma drum (*pōpko*) dance, and *t'aju* (wooden percussion instruments) dance — all together, twenty-eight varieties of Buddhist dance.<sup>4</sup> Nūnghwa suggests that these different forms of dance were all designed, more than anything else, to praise the salvific grace of the Buddha through bodily gestures performed in rituals called *chae*. In addition, Nūnghwa continues, both performers and audiences of these Buddhist dances were expected to purify their minds and vow to dedicate themselves to the Three Treasures of Buddhism (Buddha, dharma, and sangha). In this sense, Buddhist dances were regarded as a tool for disciplining Buddhists while thanking the divine grace of the Buddha extended to them.<sup>5</sup> By thanking and dedicating, Buddhists prayed for what they wished to achieve.

Where was the monk's dance located in the cultural tradition of Korean Buddhism? Was it a part of Buddhist dance? It seems that the monk's dance was not particularly featured in traditional Buddhist dance performances, judging from the documentary evidence, yet some scholars in the field have tried to associate them, suggesting that their association had already appeared in the times of three ancient kingdoms (Kokuryō, Paekche, and Silla). These scholars pinpoint Wōnhyo (617-686), an eminent monk-cum-philosopher in the Silla Kingdom, as the originator of the monk's dance.

The story goes that Wōnhyo discarded his traditional Buddhist wardrobe in favor of secular cloth and wandered around the country in search of Buddhist truth on his own. Around that time, he allegedly obtained a big goad that a street performer juggled with his hands while dancing. Based on the shape of the round goad that imaged Wōnhyo's Buddhist preaching of "a person with no hindrance whatsoever" and "birth and death sharing the same truth," the dance of the juggler was soon referred to as the "dance of no hindrance" (*muemu*). It is further known that Wōnhyo himself performed that dance on the street in order to preach Buddhist truth to people in a casual manner from the time that he defrocked and took a life path filled with freedom and ordinariness.<sup>6</sup> The dance of no hindrance somehow delivered a message of freedom, causality, and pleasure to the populace.

Interestingly, Korean Buddhist institutions did not incorporate the dance that Wōnhyo had allegedly performed into the repertoires of their Buddhist dance rituals because he was considered a monk who had ruthlessly violated Buddhist precepts and indulged himself in secular pleasures. Nonetheless, Cho Tong'il suggests that "Wōnhyo tried to proselytize the populace through dance and singing, particularly by performing what he himself called the dance of no hindrance while wandering from village to village around the country."<sup>7</sup> Wōnhyo intentionally abandoned the conventional Buddhist way and instead adopted a path of proselytization that fit well with the cultural level of the poor and uneducated people whom he encountered daily on the streets. His way of preaching was to dance and sing in a simple format that anybody could follow.

sūngmu," PhD dissertation (Hanyang University, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Nūnghwa, *Han'guk ūi Pulgyo myuyong* (Seoul: P'urūn sesang, 2006), p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Suyōng, p.39.

<sup>6</sup> Nūnghwa, p.65.

<sup>7</sup> Ch'ae Hūiwan, *Han'gukch'um ūi chōngsin ūn muōsinga* (Seoul: Myōnggyōng, 2000), p.107.

In addition to Wŏnhyo, who seems to be connected to the origin of the monk's dance, different individuals or episodes have been suggested as progenitors of the dance. Hwang Chin'i, a celebrated courtesan in the sixteenth century, is one of them. It is known that Hwang, who possessed unsurpassable beauty and artistic skill, drove, through her dance performances, Chijök, a highly respected Son master, to collapse before her and give up his Buddhist precepts that he had vigorously kept until that moment.<sup>8</sup> Yet some scholars suggest that the monk's dance originated from mocking upper-class priests who repeated certain bodily gestures when they were engaged in Buddhist teaching or disciplinary activity. According to this theory, young Buddhist neophytes who tried to follow their superiors mimicked whatever the latter did, and what they mocked was gradually transformed into the monk's dance.<sup>9</sup>

Other scholars cite an episode in the *Kuunmong* (*Nine Dreams like Clouds*), a novel by Kim Manjung (1637-1692). According to this episode, protagonist Sŏngjin, a disciple of Great Buddhist Master Yukkwan, took tonsure and embarked on Buddhist disciplinary training in a deep mountain valley, but when he accidentally encountered eight heavenly ladies he plunged into mind-boggling confusion because of their shining beauty and lived a life of decadence. Some years later, however, Sŏngjin recovered himself, concentrated on Buddhist training, eventually experienced the pleasure of Buddhist truth, and obtained enlightenment — a long, bumpy process of Buddhist awakening. Scholars of the *Nine Dreams like Clouds* suggest that Sŏngjin's Buddhist quest was projected into the monk's dance.<sup>10</sup>

There are similar stories of monks who broke Buddhist precepts but later repented and returned to Buddhist training — stories that, some suggest, were caricatured in the form of ritual dances further reformulated as the monk's dance. Others insist that the dance had its origin in the Yŏngsan hoesang, a grand Buddhist ritual expected to be held in a solemn manner of dedication, but often it featured playful deities who would turn the event into an occasion of entertainment and satire.<sup>11</sup> The monk's dance had elements of solemnity but, at the same time, those of satire.<sup>12</sup>

Among the various theories on the origin of the monk's dance, I pay attention to their shared understanding that it gained popularity from the sixteenth century, in which Buddhism was further subjected to control and suppression. After having been deprived of land properties and temple slaves, Buddhist institutions were much impoverished and, on top of that, had to endure social discrimination. For survival, Buddhist temples tried to penetrate the populace, hoping to get some financial support by offering all kinds of activities related to proselytization whenever possible. One effective way of gaining support from the populace was ritual designed to appeal to what the latter wanted: prayer and play.

In Chosŏn society, Buddhist temples were spaces of relief from mundane daily routines because of their common locations isolated from villages in addition to being places of

<sup>8</sup> Cho Hana, "Sŏngmu ūi hyŏndaehwa kwajŏng ūro salp'yŏbon chŏnt'ong ūi chaech'angjo," *Taehan muyong hakhoe*, vol. 52 (2007), p.346.

<sup>9</sup> Yi Miyŏng, "Yi Maebang 'sŏngmu' ch'um tongjak e na'an an chŏngsŏ wa miŭisik," *Taehan muyong hakhoe*, vol. 49 (2006), pp.263-264.

<sup>10</sup> O Sŏngji, "Yŏksajök kwanchŏm e ūihan sŏngmu ūi pyŏnhyŏngchök suyong," *Han'guk ch'eyuk hakhoeji*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2002), p.7.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Kim Hwami, "Pulgyo ūisik muyong kwa Yŏngsanjae: kyŏnjŏn e poinŭn chakpŏpmu wa Yŏngsanjae chakpŏpmu punryu chungsim ūro," *Tong-Asia Pulgyo munhwa*, vol. 31 (2017), pp.401-407.

<sup>12</sup> Yi Miyŏng, pp.266-268.

spirituality. Buddhist ritual dance, often referred to as “dharma dance” (*pōmmu*), contained elements of entertainment and satire, and thus it was poised to cater to the populace in the rigid social status system. Buddhist temples offered rituals that contained dance pieces, and the populace tried to enjoy them whenever possible. In a society ruled by the principles of strict class distinctions, commoners and slaves were easily exploited by the ruling class and public officials. Buddhist rituals that embraced dance and song and were held on streets, at temple grounds, or in halls could comfort the populace to some extent.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhists in Chosŏn Korea strove to find ways of self-sufficiency, and thus they approached the populace by offering rituals designed to help people be blessed with this-worldly benefits — a trend often represented by the characterization “fortune-seeking” (*kibok*) Buddhism. Amid this trend, rituals that featured “chanting the Buddha’s name” (*yōmbul*) or “musical performances” (*pōmp’ae*) were frequently hosted by Buddhist temples whenever opportunities arose, and the populace reacted to them with enthusiasm.<sup>14</sup> As time passed, Buddhist monks were more and more involved in musical performances, which became more and more integrated into rituals of prayer.

The monk’s dance was hardly separable from Buddhist cultural tradition even though it is not easy to pinpoint how they were linked. It is likely that the linkage was more and more prominent from the sixteenth century, in which Buddhist rituals began to be popularized. The term “monk’s dance” itself implies that it had to do with Buddhist monks in one way or another, and its dance motions shared commonalities with Buddhist rituals that attracted keen interest from the populace in Chosŏn society. For instance, the notion of “motion in tranquility” (*chōng-jung-dong*), which constituted the key characteristics of the monk’s dance, was also featured in Buddhist ritual dances, and holding the hands together at the beginning of a monk’s dance performance was akin to the key features of butterfly dance — a major category of Buddhist ritual dances.

Key steps in the monk’s dance (known as the steps of the 丁 and 八 shapes) are also similar to those employed in the drum dance, heavily incorporated into Buddhist rituals popular in Korean Buddhism. The monk’s dance starts with simple and monotonic motions and slowly increases their speed and scale and then returns to the original tranquil motions. The sequence of bodily motions in the monk’s dance is thus often likened to the cycle of realizing Buddhist karma — one also featured in most of the Buddhist ritual dances.<sup>15</sup> If the monk’s dance originated from traditional Buddhist rituals, one could suggest, as a form of art it strayed away from Buddhist halls to secular streets on which it communicated with the populace in a casual manner. Indeed, the monk’s dance served as a useful means of meeting the needs of people while contributing to the economic well-being of Buddhist institutions, directly or indirectly.

No matter how the monk’s dance was related to Buddhist dance rituals, the former was an art form of the secular world that prospered outside the Buddhist institution, whereas the latter were confined to the sanctuary of Buddhist temples. The former catered to popular aesthetics, and the latter strove to pursue spiritual goals guided by Buddhist teachings and couched in the

<sup>13</sup> Kim Sung Soon, “Priests, Entertainers, or Prostitutes: The Three Roles of the Female Performers (*Sadang*) in Chosŏn Korea,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*, vol.27, no.1 (June 2014), pp.45-47.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, see Kim Yongtae, “The Establishment of the Approach of Chanting Amitābha’s Name (*yōmbul*) and the Proliferation of Pure Land Buddhism in Late Chosŏn,” *Journal of Korean Religions*, vol.6, no.1 (April 2015), pp.146-151.

<sup>15</sup> Nūnghwa, p.201.

quest of prayer. Over time, each followed its own trajectory of evolution without interfering in the other.

### III. *The Monk's Dance Apart from Buddhist Institutions*

Those who try to trace the origin of the monk's dance outside Buddhist temples tend to pay attention to the common criticism that Buddhist institutions and their clergy were corrupted in premodern times. As we have seen above, theorists who link the monk's dance to Hwang Chin'i or to the episode in the *Nine Dreams like Clouds* are reluctant to relate the monk's dance to the authentic path of Buddhism. Rather than relating it directly to Buddhist teachings or quests, they even try to find some traces of its origin in Taoism, suggesting that performers of the mask dance, known as "sandae kamyöngük," which contains some Taoist elements, were involved in developing the monk's dance.<sup>16</sup> But these suggestions lack specific evidence and do not answer the question of the origin of the monk's dance.

In 1968, Kim Ch'önhong and Hong Yunsik published an investigatory report on the origin of the monk's dance. Their conclusion was stark: the dance has nothing to do with Buddhist temples. Instead of a Buddhist connection, they proposed a new term, "folk art" (*minsok yesul*), to refer to the art tradition that had little to do with religious institutions. The term "*minsok yesul*," circulated since 1958, has exerted a powerful impact on how traditional performing arts are understood and recognized. Their suggestion has had good rapport with the ongoing trend to construct the cultural identity of Korean people.<sup>17</sup> By focusing on the life experiences of ordinary people, proponents of folklore have identified a range of cultural traditions, practiced and preserved by the populace in traditional Korea, and established them as ethnic cultural assets of Korea.

With the rise of the argument that the monk's dance has entertained commoners and played a role in mitigating their suffering as an art of satire and wit, folklore scholars further insist that the monk's dance had nothing to do with Buddhist rituals or prayer activities. For them, it was simply a dance that represented the folk culture of traditional Korea that boasted its own history and development. Han Söngjun (1875-1941), a renowned and representative dancer active in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, was touted as someone who had played a decisive role in transforming the monk's dance into a *minsok yesul* that stood on its own.

Han also tried to elevate a variety of commoners' dances — which circus players (*kwangdae*), courtesans, and *p'ansori* singers had previously performed on the street or at the village plaza in Chosön society to make a living — to the status of cherished folk art. In terms of format and style, these dances used to be casual, impromptu, and locally varied, and audiences were known to have reacted with their own dancing and singing while enjoying the performances by professionals. In 1934, Han established an institute, called Chosön ūmak muyong yön'guso, for the study of Korean traditional music and dance and launched a project for surveying and modernizing local folk music and dance.<sup>18</sup> Thanks to his effort, the monk's

<sup>16</sup> See the entry of "sandae nori" in *Han'guk minsok taebaekwa sajön* (Kuknip minsok pakmulgwan).

<sup>17</sup> Yi Tuhyön, "Han'guk minsok yesul ūi ponjil kwa kü sahoejök kinüng: t'ükhüi mingan yönhoe rül chumsim ūro," in *Han'guk ūi minsok yesul*, ed. Im Chae-hae (Seoul: Munhak kwa chisöngsa, 1988), p.7.



dance was refashioned as a stage art, and it was performed at a modern art hall in 1936. The dance, which used to be a street art, was now hailed as a stage art that targeted fee-paying patrons.

Han's effort to separate the monk's dance from Buddhism encountered resistance from Buddhists. When Han held his institute's second public performance, Buddhist groups tried to block the event from being staged and petitioned the colonial government to cancel the permit, but to no avail.<sup>19</sup> Buddhists were far short of being able to claim that the monk's dance belonged to the tradition of Buddhist ritual dance and that, therefore, it could not be held for money without the permission of Buddhist institutions. All of a sudden, Buddhists claimed that the monk's dance was their cultural property, but amid the fervor of modernization in the 1930s the public increasingly demanded that the monk's dance discard its religious character, confined to whatever particular religious traditions, and embrace modern elements of entertainment for everyone. The monk's dance was forced to embrace a new age of modernity.

Not surprisingly, once it discarded elements of street performance, the monk's dance was further systematically choreographed, and its performers were required to go through formal training according to a set of curricula. Its casual and impromptu elements gradually reduced, and in their place a new set of dance techniques and music elements was introduced within the overarching guidelines of traditional dance. The monk's dance was refashioned as a dance grounded in the cultural inheritance of traditional Korea yet in alliance with a new mode of cultural power guided by principles of modernity. This new power had nothing to do with street performers of traditional art; rather, it belonged to a new generation of artists equipped with a sense of modernity — artists who nevertheless tried to rediscover Korean aesthetics.

The monk's dance that Han Sŏngjun established as a *minsok yesul* was inherited by his granddaughter, Han Yŏngsuk (1920-1998), who excelled at traditional dance. In 1969, the monk's dance that Han Yŏngsuk further refashioned was designated by the government as the twenty-seventh intangible treasure of Korean culture — a tremendous honor granted to folk art that had previously been ignored in Chosŏn Korea. After that, Pak Kŭmsul developed a Kyŏnggi style of the monk's dance (Kyŏnggi *sŭngmu*), a style also widely recognized as a cultural asset of Korea.

Conversely, Yi Maebang (1927-2015), who initially learned traditional dance at the salon of courtesans (kwonbon), was engaged in refashioning a Chŏlla style of the monk's dance (Honam *sŭngmu*), an effort that garnered public recognition. The government designated Yi's monk's dance as another intangible treasure of Korean culture.<sup>20</sup> It is interesting that Yi further removed almost all Buddhist/religious characters from his monk's dance, at least on the surface, and instead added "coquettish elements," as some scholars characterize them. The new styles of the monk's dance that Han Yŏngsuk, Pak Kŭmsul, and Yi Maebang developed and refashioned in the 1860s to the 1990s were all blessed with wide popularity and public support. Their new styles of the monk's dance have curtailed its previous aspects of free spirit, street satire, and wit to a great extent — elements hardly in rapport with stage art.

<sup>18</sup> Song Munsuk, "Han Sŏngjun-ryu chŏnt'ong ch'um e kwanhan yŏn'gu: sŭngmu, salp'uri, t'aep'yŏngmu," *Taehan muyong hakhoe*, vol.18 (1995), pp.127-128.

<sup>19</sup> Kim Ch'ŏnhong, *Simso Kim Ch'ŏnhong sŏnsaengnim ūi uri ch'um iyagi* (Seoul: Minsokwŏn, 2005), pp.54-55.

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed comparative analysis of the dance styles of *sŭngmu* between Han Yŏngsuk and Yi Maebang, see Chŏng Sŏngsuk, "Han Yŏngsuk-ryu wa Yi Maebang-ryu sŭngmu ūi kyet'ongjŏk sŏnghyang yŏn'gu," *Kongyŏn munhwa yŏn'gu*, vol.23 (2011), pp.197-204.

#### IV. *The Monk's Dance as a Modern Folk Art*

The monk's dance was transformed in the twentieth century amid debates on its origin and character, debates that unfolded in terms of which elements should be cherished or emphasized more: religious ritual or folkloric art. It was a process in which the monk's dance was refashioned in a variety of ways as a treasured art of traditional Korea. The decisive momentum of this process came with the collapse of the Chosŏn Kingdom (1392-1910) as it was colonized by Imperial Japan.

Ishii Baku (1886-1962), who showed a great deal of affection for Korea's traditional dance and was actively involved in teaching Western modern dance to Korean dancers, praised Han Sŏngjun's dance performances that he watched in Tokyo. Ishii urged his new disciple, Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi (1911-1969), probably the most celebrated modern dancer of Korea in the colonial years, to learn Korean traditional dance from Han. Ch'oe, proud to be a Korean pioneer of modern dance and deep into Western modern dance more than anyone else, initially resisted the suggestion, but not long after she became one of Han's favorite students. From 1938, Ch'oe incorporated the monk's dance into her regular repertoire whenever she performed on stage in Seoul, Tokyo, Europe, and America. Cho T'aekwŏn (1907-1976), another disciple of Ishii Baku, also learned the monk's dance from Han Sŏngjun and Kim Paekok. In particular, Cho tried to choreograph the monk's dance in his own style with the aim to "Westernize Korean dance" so that he could dance to the rhythm of Romantic music. Later he staged it as "impressionism of the monk's dance" in 1933.<sup>21</sup> It was a great success.<sup>22</sup>

Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi and Cho T'aekwŏn, trained in Western modern dance in Imperial Japan and thus regarded as elite modern Korean dancers, were different from native Korean dancers who had no option but to learn traditional dance at *kwŏnbŏn* (courtesans' salons) over the shoulders of courtesan dancers. Traditional ways of learning were hardly systematic. Unlike the salon-style performers, modern dancers such as Ch'oe and Cho performed before audiences on an elevated stage inside a modern theater. Because they were some distance from the audience, they needed to adopt larger bodily motions than usual in place of traditional delicate motions and subtle facial expressions. It was not easy for them to deliver effectively subtle motions often employed in traditional dance to an audience sitting away from the stage.

In addition, what was dubbed the "shadow" was a key aesthetic element in Korean traditional dance. This technique can be individualized but hardly mastered without long and vigorous training in association with an effort to develop the dancer's personal taste in traditional aesthetics.<sup>23</sup> It is a technique designed to deliver the performer's individual artistic character to the audience. The element of the shadow with which performers could deliver, in their own manner, Korea's traditional artistic sensibilities and aesthetic values was regarded as key to the artistic sensibility of the monk's dance. As Sim Usŏng puts it, it is an aesthetic sense grounded in the mastery of dance skills featuring the sequence of "motion in tranquility" and "tranquility in motion" while breathing with the central spot of the belly below the navel

<sup>21</sup> Kim Yŏnghŭi, "Sŭngmu ū mirae wa sŭngmu ū kwagŏ," *Kongyŏn kwa Ribyu*, vol.85 (2014), p.106.

<sup>22</sup> Song Pangsong, Cho Kyuik, and Sŏng Kisuk, *Han'guk ch'um ū chŏngae yangsang: chŏnt'ong sahoe esŏ kŭndae sahoe roŭi ihaenggŭ* (Seoul: Pogosa, 2013), pp.500-501.

<sup>23</sup> Sim Usŏng, p.170.



(*tanjŏn hohŭp*) — a special breathing technique that also requires long training.<sup>24</sup>

Han Sŏngjun was renowned for his masterful performance of shadow techniques that he had sharpened from early on through the transitional period to later years. Originally, Han was an acrobat trained by his grandfather, a member of a street circus troupe known as *namsadang* in the late nineteenth century. Han learned all kinds of acrobatic skills, including walking on a rope and tumbling on the ground. He joined his grandfather as a drum player for the circus troupe and traveled around the country until 1894. Han also had musical talent and, not long after, proved that he was a talented dancer.

In 1894, the government abolished the system of official courtesans that had been in place for more than 500 years, and as a result the courtesans belonging to Chang'akwŏn were forced to seek livelihoods on their own. They began to sell their musical talent to whoever could pay for it, and over time their dance performances, previously confined to the royal court and government institutions, were widely enjoyed by the public. Some years later the courtesans formed locally based labor associations with the aim to protect and promote their interests. The Hansŏng courtesan association, established in 1909 and actively involved in refashioning traditional court music and dance, staged its performances of the monk's dance, sword dance, and idle man (*hallyang*) dance at Hyŏpyulsa, a modern theater established in the capital. In 1914, the courtesan associations were transformed into new types of organizations called *kwŏnbŏn* under the guidance of the colonial government. The *kwŏnbŏn* organizations were responsible for educating newly recruited courtesans. But this did not mean that opportunities for learning traditional music and dance at *kwŏnbŏn* were limited to courtesans.

Han Sŏngjun, who had already been trained in acrobatics and music while traveling as a member of the street circus troupe, sought opportunities to learn traditional dance. He approached courtesan associations and, later, *kwŏnbŏn* organizations.<sup>25</sup> For Han, who keenly sensed a fast-changing environment, it was an effort to adjust to a new age that pushed him forward — an effort that helped to transform him into a pioneering modern dancer of traditional Korean dance. He was an artist able to digest two competing, yet often contradictory, elements of dance techniques and artistic sensibilities unfolding at the transitional juncture of tradition and modernity. Grounded firmly in Korea's traditional bodily sensibility, Han expressed himself in traditional dance according to the rhythmic sounds of traditional drums. At the same time, he was able to deliver the traditional bodily sensibility in a modernized style of folk dance that he tried to refashion. In his effort to modernize traditional dance, the monk's dance was particularly important.

Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi and Cho Taekwŏn, who represented a new generation of Korean dancers and were trained by Han Sŏngjun, further endeavored to modernize the monk's dance and established it as a regular part of their repertoires of stage art whenever they performed in the theater. Responding to modern patrons interested more in things new and modern than in things past, both dancers incorporated elements of modern aesthetics into their dance performances in their own ways, although it was nevertheless tricky to preserve the basic traditional elements of the monk's dance. What modern patrons sought in the monk's dance was not an experience of prayer in a Buddhist sense. More than anything else, they sought a new form of entertainment

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Sim Usŏng, *Han'guk ūi chŏnt'ong yesul* (Seoul: Han'guk munhwajae poho chaedan, 1997), pp.76-79.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Yŏnghŭi, *Kaehwagi taejung yesul ūi kkok, kisaeng* (Seoul: Minsokwŏn, 2006), p.62.

that fit the age of modernity.

However, for some Korean audiences in distress in their daily lives under colonial rule that deprived them of ethnic pride and humiliated them, the monk's dance was a form of entertainment different from what, say, Japanese audiences would understand and enjoy. The Japanese colonizers could enjoy the traditional art of the colonized country from a gaze of pride and superiority. For Japanese patrons, Korea's traditional art as reorganized under imperial influence was an index of modernity or advancement, which they tried to promote to the Korean people. In other words, Japanese audiences enjoyed the monk's dance performed by artists from the country that they had colonized as a form of dance modernized under their guidance.

Korean audiences who could afford to enjoy their country's modernized traditional dance performed at a modern theater were, of course, privileged, but the elements of modernity that they could retrieve from the modernized monk's dance remained inseparable from the legacies of traditional aesthetics and sensibilities steeped in feelings of nostalgia and sorrow. Similarly, Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi and Cho Taekwŏn, who performed the modernized monk's dance on the stage for modern audiences, could not free themselves entirely from the legacies of traditional aesthetic sensibilities no matter how much they tried to modernize or refashion them. The connection between tradition and modernity was the lifeline of the monk's dance that Han Sŏngjun cherished and that Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi and Cho Taekwŏn inherited as one of Korea's representative traditional dances. It was a dance that delivered multilayered facets of sensibility interconnected through the crisscrossing channels of tradition, modernity, and colonialism.

## V. Conclusion

Respected performers of the monk's dance in modern times were able to grasp both aspects of its aesthetic values: traditional ones grounded in the spirit of religious rituals and modern ones that evolved in the context of folk art yet were connected to modernity. The monk's dance somehow stood out as a traditional art of Korea that successfully underwent a smooth transition to a new age while preserving its native aesthetic values thanks primarily to the efforts made by Han Sŏngjun, Ch'oe Sŭnghŭi, Cho Taekwŏn, and talented dancers who emerged in the 1950s.

It would therefore be erroneous to trace the evolution of the monk's dance along a linear trajectory from an archaic format to changes during the periods of courtesan associations and *kwŏnbŏn* organizations to modernizing efforts made by dancers active in the 1930s and the post-liberation period. The monk's dance was transformed in a process of multifaceted layers that piled up over time. It did not follow a process in which old elements were discarded and new ones were added. It was a crisscrossing process that required accommodation of modern elements while refashioning old ones.

Thus, the modernized monk's dance featured elements of entertainment refashioned according to new types of bodily motions, stage settings, and accompanying music, but it still preserved elements of prayer rooted in the emotions of traditional Koreans. The elements of prayer did not have to be Buddhist or from any other religious tradition. It was good enough if the dance could reflect tinges of the deep-rooted religious psyches of Koreans — something that is hard to pinpoint but ripples around their daily lives.

The trajectory that the monk's dance followed in modern Korea hints at the deep structure of emotion or affect that the Korean people have shared through history even in more modern times of tumultuous experiences. The traditional structure of emotions remained, as can be seen in the popularity of the monk's dance in modern times. In this sense, the modernity that dancers of the monk's dance tried to deliver was grounded, to a great extent, in the aesthetic sensibility of traditional Korea as intertwined with modernity associated with colonialism, imperialism, and Westernism.

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