国際社会文化研究所紀要　第９号（2007年）

Korean Dance Aesthetics:
— A Preliminary Investigation —

Judy Van Zile*

韓国舞踊の美学：準備的考察

バン・ザイル*

韓国舞踏研究の第一人者である著者によるこの論文では，韓国と日本の美学の比較研究が，まだ試験的な段階にあり，限られたものであることが指摘される。また，この種の研究で避けられない内部者によるエミックと外部者によるエティックという視点の違いが強調される。その上で，恨，動中静，神明という内部者が挙げる美の概念に加えて，外部の観察者である著者自身が見てとった連携性と非対称性という韓国舞踏における美の概念が提唱される。

This paper by a leading researcher of Korean dance identifies key issues in embarking on comparative aesthetics, including emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives, defining "aesthetics," and differentiating between aesthetic principles and techniques. Van Zile then offers three recurring principles articulated by dancers and critics —*han* (bitterness), *chông-jung-dong* (motion in stillness), and *shinmyông* (a communal release), and two she identifies— connectedness, and a-symmetry.

Before identifying several aesthetic concepts important to Korean dance, I will clarify four things: the perspective from which I come, how I use the term "aesthetics" here, what I mean here by "Korean dance," and a disclaimer.

My involvement with dance in Korea began a little over thirty years ago when I started taking Korean dance lessons in Hawai'i. I subsequently took lessons from several teachers in Korea, and began the conventional "academic" study of Korean dance. This means that my initial acquaintance with Korean dance was through the "doing" of it, and subsequent experiences were through the "intellecting" of it— that is, through reading a broad array of published materials, talking with people involved in diverse ways with Korean dance, and analyzing the information I was acquiring.

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 audience member in Korea, I am not of Korean ancestry. Furthermore, I try to understand Korean dance by employing tools often not used (especially until recently) by Korean dancers or scholars, such as movement analysis and Labanotation. At the same time, however, I adhere to key practices of dance research: My goal is to understand

* Professor of Dance, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Korean dance as Korean dance participants, that is, performers, scholars, critics, and audience members, understand it. But I acknowledge that the only way I can understand things other people know 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.

The definition of aesthetics underlying my comments draws on those of anthropologists Adrienne Kaeppler (2003) and Andree Grau (2003). For the discussion here I define aesthetics as a system of thought serving as the basis for evaluation that makes something special or unique or distinctive. Note that I do not include a notion of "beauty" or "good." Like Kaeppler and Grau, I believe these are individual value judgments, and I am less concerned with what makes Korean dance good or bad or beautiful or ugly than with what makes dance Korean, as opposed, for example, to Japanese or Chinese or Indonesian. Certainly understanding aesthetic concepts of Korean dance will contribute to understanding what Korean dance participants consider to be good or bad or beautiful or ugly, but such judgments may differ among Koreans as well as among outsiders. It is the basis for such judgments, or the criteria for formulating them, that I try to understand.

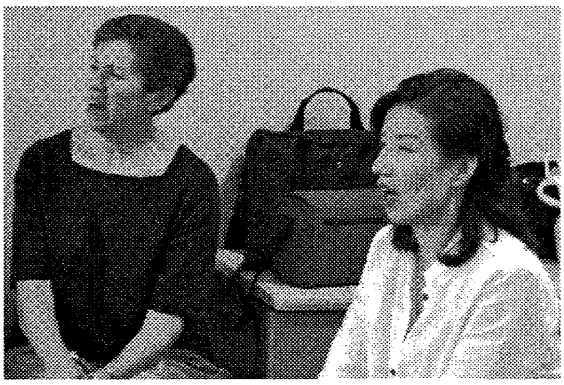
Aesthetic principles, or aesthetic concepts (which I consider synonymous), are the individual components or aspects of systems of thought that serve as the basis for judgments. I seek an emic (or insider's) view of aesthetic principles that contributes to identifying dance as being Korean[1]. While I may sometimes use an etic (or outsider's) term, concept, or explanation, it is ultimately the perspective of Koreans that I seek to understand and to explain. In order to do this I find myself occasionally using outsider concepts or explanations for two reasons. First, it may be easier for me to understand things and communicate them to people who are not Korean by "translating" them into terms and ideas more familiar to me. Second, I believe some concepts have become so innate that they are assumed to be inherent, or what is generally described as "natural." While clearly present in performance, they are seldom, if ever, verbally articulated by Koreans[2].

In discussing aesthetics, particularly cross-culturally, I consider it important to differentiate between "aesthetic principles" and "techniques." If aesthetic principles constitute a system of thought that serves as the basis for evaluation that makes something special, unique, or distinctive, then "techniques" are the concrete manifestations of these principles, the means by which these principles become apparent.

A complete dance event relies on many kinds of concrete manifestations, ranging from the visual to the olfactory and the auditory. In order to make this preliminary discussion manageable, and because of my background in movement analysis, I focus here on the visual and kinaesthetic manifestations of aesthetic principles as they are revealed in the human body[3]

As we seek resonances and dissonances between the performance aesthetics of Korea and Japan, I believe we need to consider both aesthetic principles and the techniques by which these principles become apparent. While aesthetic principles may suggest resonances, the techniques employed to make these principles manifest may ultimately reveal dissonances. Hence, in

describing selected aesthetic concepts I believe are important to Korean dance, I will also give examples of techniques used to embody these concepts.


Judy van Zile and Mi-hee Yoo practice the noh chant.

Because there is such a broad spectrum of kinds of dance in Korea today, I use the term "Korean dance" here to refer specifically to the kinds of dance originating prior to significant contact with countries other than China, that is, the dances most commonly identified by Koreans today as "traditional"[4]. While the aesthetic principles I describe are found in many kinds of traditional Korean dance, they may be more subtle in some kinds than in others, and may be absent in some kinds and present in others. Thus, I am consciously engaging in generalities.

Finally, the ideas I present here are preliminary thoughts on the subject of Korean dance aesthetics. They are exploratory in nature, and are not intended to be in any way definitive.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Most published theoretical discussions of Korean dance include comments on the Korean terms *môt* and *hûng*. After stating the difficulty of translating these terms, authors usually summarize them, respectively, as referring to an inner spiritual quality of charm and grace, or refined taste, and a feeling of lively animation and enthusiasm, or ecstasy. Despite their touted importance and widespread inclusion in published materials, it is intriguing to me that I have rarely heard these terms used by critics when talking about or commenting on specific performances, nor by dancers when talking about what they do.

When I began attending performances in Korea in the late 1970s and early 1980s (as well as at performances in more recent years), colleagues invariably resorted to discussions of *kibun* or *maûm*, meaning, respectively, feeling or mood, and heart. Instead of saying a dancer was good or bad, or demonstrated *môt* or *hûng*, 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 *maûm*, and differentiated between feeling or heart and technique by saying, for example, "The technique is not so good, but the dancer has feeling"[5]. The latter was sometimes used with regard to older individuals who were considered superior performers because of the extraordinary feeling they exuded, despite the impact of time on their technical abilities. I have also occasionally heard it used to comment on younger dancers, whose feeling and heart are considered good, but who have not yet developed solid technical capabilities.

Because of the infrequent reference to *môt* and *hûng* by Korean dance participants in practical contexts, I focus here on five other concepts: *han, chông-jung-dong, shinmyông,* connectedness, and a-symmetry. Two of these (the first and third—*han* and *shinmyông*) directly relate to feelings or emotions, and all may ultimately contribute to *môt* and *hûng* as well as to *kibun* and *maûm*.

I summarize the meaning of *han* as frustration, bitterness, and unsatisfied desire (Van Zile 2001:292), and believe the dances known as *salp'uri* exemplify the crystallization of the kinesthetic representation of *han*[6]. I have seldom engaged in a discussion of Korean dance with Koreans, whether performers, critics, or scholars, without this term being mentioned. Although many Koreans consider it a "distinctively Korean emotion," I believe it is rather "a particularly important emotion in Korean culture, often said to be the result of the country's continual involvement in war" (ibid:268 note 16)[7].

> A Korean theologian notes some of the complexities involved in *han* by describing it as
> a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of total abandonment . . . , a feeling of acute pain and sorrow in one's guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wriggle, and an obstinate urge to take "revenge" and to right the wrong all these constitute. (Hyun Young Hak in Chung Hyun-kyung 1990:42)

Another Korean writer emphasizes a less pessimistic interpretation of the concept, focusing on "the anguished feeling of being far from what you wanted, a longing that never went away, but ate and slept with you every day of your life . . . [but] by no means a hopeless feeling" (Elaine H. Kim 1989:82-83). Many say it is the very pain and suffering of *han* that provide the motivation for rebounding, hence creating a strong resilience in Koreans.

I see *han*, when related to dance, as an overriding aesthetic concept that embraces both specific techniques and several other aesthetic principles. Among the techniques contributing to *han* are the basic stance found in many Korean dances: a slightly concave upper-chest area (emphasized by the cut of the traditional Korean blouse, the *chôgori*), a downward tilt of the head, an inwardly-rotated arm, and a relaxed wrist that allows the fingertips to drop downward. The antithesis of the norm in ballet, this stance contributes to an inwardly- and downwardly-focused posture that I believe is a kinaesthetic and visual representation of the concept of *han*.

Also contributing to the physicalization of *han* is the way in which the arms are used. Typically in Korean dance if an arm gesture opens in an outwardly-rotated configuration so that it travels to the side, for example, with the palm facing up, it does not stop in this position. Rather, the gestural phrase is only completed when the arm turns inward and the wrist relaxes (causing the fingertips to point downward). Thus, even if a gesture begins upwardly focused, in what might be construed as an "uplifted attitude," it does not conclude until the focus returns to an inward and downward configuration which contributes to the visualization, and feeling, of *han*.

Further contributing to the danced embodiment of *han* is the use of the breath and its relation to resulting actions. 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." (Van Zile 2001:13)

The lifting and lowering of the shoulders is what Koreans describe as *ôkkae ch'um,* or the "shoulder dance." *Ôkkae ch'um* is a technique considered an identifying feature of Korean dance, and one that contributes to an emphasis on verticality, or rising and sinking, which serves as a kind of undercurrent to much Korean dance. The rising and sinking is also created by a continual bending and extending of the knees, movements in which one arm or both arms gently "float" up and down, and often by a suspension followed by a slight lift before a release. (I elaborate on the technique of suspension below.)

The phrase "sigh of relief" in my description of the use of the breath, the spine, and the shoulders points to a direct link to the concept of *han.* 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) a sense of "pulling out" of these negative feelings.

Chông-jung-dong.

A second aesthetic principle is *chông-jung-dong.* The standard translation of this phrase is "motion-in-stillness"[8]. Seoul National University Professor of Aesthetics Kim Moon-hwan emphasizes the dynamic nature of this concept by suggesting that the stillness is not a pause: "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" (Moon-hwan Kim 1993:18).

Korean dance writer Chông Pyông-ho describes the physical manifestation of *chông-jung-dong* as movement that demonstrates three phases: a tensing of emotion, a pacification of emotion, and a release of emotion (Byung Ho Chung 1997:105). I elaborate on this by indicating

> the fluid, ongoing movements that appear to stop are, in reality, simply collecting energy that ultimately gently explodes, or runs over, into the next series of fluid actions. Korean dancers move *through* positions rather than arriving at them, creating curvilinear shapes as well as a rounded, ongoing quality of energy use [emphasis in original]. (Van Zile 2001:14)

I liken this concept to stretching a rubber-band. 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 where I believe the concept of *chông-jung-dong* is physically crystallized. You cannot actually pull further, but you must maintain an active sense of pulling in order to prevent the band from snapping back. This movement progression can be described as "suspension," a quality in which the dancer initially appears to have stopped moving, but actually is simply poised for action—almost like a cat attentively watching a bird, waiting for the precise moment to move.

Shinmyông

Another aesthetic concept related to that of *han* is *shinmyông.* A Korean writer describes *shinmyông* as "the spirit of life." When one understands how to struggle with life and resolve life's problems, there is a release of power resulting in an experience known as *shinmyông.* This

experience is said to reflect an understanding that "man is with Heaven," an integration of the sacred and secular. It is the result of the descent of a spirit into the individual, is characterized by ecstasy and spontaneous song and dance, and causes the person "to fly with the wind." When one individual experiences *shinmyông,* it is possible for that person to then "ignite" the *shinmyông* that is deeply hidden in others. The entire process is the result of the fighting spirit necessary to confront the struggles of daily life. If successful, which means communally shared, *shinmyông* "resolves the resentment and pain accumulated in the course of life, and gives fresh vigor to it." *Shinmyông* creates "a bond of community spirit by resolving the conflicting forces in life and society" (Anonymous 1988). I believe the ideas of community and *shinmyông* are inextricably intertwined, and that *shinmyông* is the ultimate resolution of *han.*

While I see *han* as a kind of overriding cathartic emotional response that is manifest in individual movements in Korean dance as well as, sometimes, in an entire dance, I believe *shinmyông* is a culminating feeling toward which a dance builds. When successful, the performer leads the audience to a parallel experience. Ultimately all techniques and aesthetic principles contribute to *shinmyông,* and in masked dance-drama (*t'alch'um*) this results in members of the audience spontaneously joining the performers at the climactic culmination of the performance[9].

Han, chông-jung-dong, and *shinmyông* are aesthetic concepts articulated both verbally and kinaesthetically by Koreans. I now briefly turn to two aesthetic concepts important in Korean dance that I have not heard Koreans verbally address, but which are kinaesthetically articulated in performance. These are connectedness and a-symmetry.

Connectedness and a-symmetry

I use the term "connectedness" to refer to a clear link between things. In Korean dance connectedness is achieved by movement that flows *sequentially* from one body part to an adjacent body part, and that is initiated, visibly, with the breath. Even when there is a very small movement in a peripheral body part, such as a small, almost pulsing, action in the wrist, the movement does not occur in isolation: It is initiated with an inhalation 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 to peripheral body parts.

A series of steps also demonstrates connectedness: The initial pulse comes from the breath, which again lengthens the spine and lifts the shoulders, but in this instance also "pulls" one foot off the ground so that it is free to take a step.

Thus, the aesthetic principle of connectedness is achieved through the technique of initiating movement with the breath, which also contributes to the aesthetic principle of *han*, and to the technique of allowing movement to flow sequentially through the body.

The second aesthetic concept which I have not heard Koreans verbally articulate but which is commonly expressed kinaesthetically is a-symmetry. A-symmetry refers to a lack of similarity on

either side of a dividing line, a lack of correspondence.

Two techniques contributing to a-symmetry relate to rhythmic phrasing. The first is an emphasis on triple meter. Even if the underlying musical pulse is in duple meter, the movement sub-divides each beat into triple meter. 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—a duple phrase. On closer examination, however, the first beat is sub-divided into three counts, beginning with an inhalation that lengthens the spine and lifts the shoulders on the first and second sub-beats, and is then followed by a slight quickening of the inhalation, like a small hiccup, on the third sub-beat, just prior to the exhaling, closing, and sinking actions on the second count. This contributes to a-symmetry in the phrasing of this basic walking pattern. This a-symmetric inhalation and exhalation also contribute to the embodiment of the aesthetic concept of *han* by making visible the sigh of relief described earlier.

A second technique contributing to a-symmetry is what I describe as "doubling" followed by "rushing." This can also be seen, for example, in basic walking patterns. A phrase will start, as described above, with a step forward and sink on the first two counts (each of which is divided into an a-symmetrical triplet) followed by a step forward and sink on the opposite foot on the second two counts (again, each divided into an a-symmetrical triplet), taking a total of four counts to execute. This is followed by two forward steps on just two counts, constituting a doubling of the movement tempo. The phrase then concludes with a series of steps that become increasingly quicker on the seventh count, followed by a suspension and sinking on the eighth count, a "rushing" that resolves, in this case, with a suspension.

* * * * * * *

There are many other aesthetic concepts important to Korean dance. But perhaps the concepts of *han, chông-jung-dong, shinmyông,* connectedness, and a-symmetry, and related techniques that physicalize these concepts, can serve as starting points for a comparison of Korean and Japanese performance aesthetics.

Notes

1) For a discussion of the concepts of emic and etic see Pelto 1970:54, and Alvarez-Pereyre and Arom 1993.

2) For a related discussion see Giurchescu 2003. I have come to the conclusion that what is considered "natural" in dance and movements of the body is culturally determined.

3) In an undergraduate survey course I teach dealing with dance forms from diverse places across the globe, I usually begin each unit by showing a film of the dance and asking students for their "gut" reaction to what they see. When introducing Korean dance, I frequently get very negative responses. Students do not like what they see; they find it "irritating" and "boring." After hearing these types of responses over a period of years (and being quite offended, since this kind of dance has become very important to me), I tried an experiment. I began the unit on Korea by showing the 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 the movements simply felt slow and comfortable. As I thought further about these reactions I also began to wonder if it was not the very different nature of the movement and music that contributed to the dynamic of Korean dance. In short, of relevance to the discussion here is the eventual need to consider the interaction between all communicative modes in a performance. My focus here on the movement component is the result of the ideas most frequently described by the Korean dancers, scholars, and literature with which I am familiar, of my own background, and of time constraints for this presentation.

4) I exclude China because important political interactions from long ago contributed to important interactions in the performing arts. These led to incorporating aspects of Chinese performing arts into what was done in Korea, and many of these things came to be considered important aspects of "Korean" culture. For a related discussion see Van Zile 2001:chapter 2.

5) In addition, I have often heard it said that *môt* and *hûng* are associated only with dances categorized as "folk dance." 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.

6) For a general explanation of salp'uri see Van Zile 2001:16-17, and 155-162.

7) For a discussion of the universality of the concept of *han*, as well as of *môt* and *hûng*, see O'Rourke 1998.

8) Literally "*chông*" means calm or still, "*chung*" middle, and "*dong*" moving, hence "calmness/stillness in the midst of moving."

9) Most references to *shinmyông* associate this concept with folk dance (see note 5), especially masked dance-drama (*t'alch'um*), and shaman ritual (kut). I believe a subtle form of *shinmyông* can be experienced in many kinds of Korean dance. For example, the movement known as *chôkto* in the court dance Ch'unaengjôn breaks from the refinement of the first part of the dance into what could be described as a subtly ecstatic mood.

REFERENCES CITED

Alvarez-Pereyre, Frank and Simha Arom.
1993 "Ethnomusicology and the Emic/Etic Issue," *World of Music* (Vol. 35, No. 1), pp. 71-31.

Anonymous
1988 "Shinmyông. The Performer and the Spirit of Life," *Koreana* (Vol. 2, No. 4), pp. 42-43.

Buckland, Theresa
1983 "Definitions of Folk Dance: Some Explorations," *Folk Music Journal.* Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 315-332.

Chung, Byung Ho (Chông Pyông-ho)
1997 "The Characteristics of Korean Traditional Dance," *Korea Journal* (Vol. 37, no. 3—Autumn), pp. 93-109.

Chung, Hyun-kyung
1990 *Struggle to be the Sun Again. Introducing Asian Women's Theology.* New York: Orbis Books.

Giurchescu, Anca
2003 "Dance Aesthetics in Traditional Romanian Communities," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Vol. 35), pp. 163-171.

Grau, Andree
2003 "Tiwi Dance Aesthetics," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Vol. 35), pp. 173-178.

Kaeppler, Adrienne
2003 "An Introduction to Dance Aesthetics," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* (Vol. 35), pp. 153- 162.

Kim, Elaine H.
1989 "War Story," in Asian Women United of California, editor. *Making Waves. An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women.* Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 80-92.

Kim, Moon-hwan (Kim Mun-hwan)
1993 "The Essence of Traditional Korean Performing Arts," *Koreana* (Vol. 7, no. 4— Winter), pp. 14-24.

O'Rourke, Kevin
1998 "Demythologizing Mot," *Koreana* (Vol. 12, No. 3), pp. 34-41.
Pelto, Pertti
1970 *Anthropological Research: The Structure of Inquiry.* New York: Harper & Row.
Van Zile, Judy
2001 *Perspectives on Korean Dance.* Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.