

# Principal concepts in the aesthetics of Korean traditional dance

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## 韓国伝統舞踊の美学における主要概念

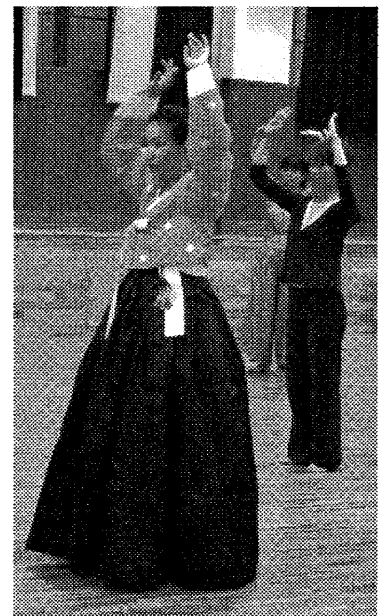
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自身舞踏家でもある韓国の舞踏研究者である著者によるこの論文では、自然性、気エネルギーの循環、力動性と即興性、維持された曲線美が、韓国舞踏の中心的な美の概念であることを指摘される。

This paper by a dancer and scholar offers four “keywords” to understanding the particular qualities of Korean dance: naturalness, circulation of *ki* energy, free dynamics and improvisation, and sustained indirection.

### 1. Naturalness (自然美)

Korean traditional dance is symbolized by the logic of *cheon-in-hab-il* (天人合一): the idea that man and heaven conceived of as united in one which is associated with the five primary elements of the universe. Every motion of Chunaengjeon (春鶯轉) and Salpuri dance is based on the structure of yin-yang (陰陽) balance. Through such motions as the arm turning over, pulling back, winding and unwinding, and the knees bending, Korean traditional dance conveys its unique cosmology which centered on the motions of yin-yang. The cosmic symbolism is manifest in rendering meanings onto the five primary elements. The act of treading in the four directions, found in the floor pattern of Chunaengjeon and Salpuri dance, feature a characteristic of earth-centered agricultural culture. It epitomizes the archetypal system of Asian ideas where a human being is conceived within the context of individual-universe relationship. In Western theories of modernity regarding self-consciousness, an individual as subject *perceives objects* while in Asia one *understands his self in his relationship with the world*



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*external to him.* The fact that Chunaengjeon represents such virtues as harmony and moderation by means of temperance of emotions is a way to represent an individual that is not swayed by the tumult of the external world. The ideal man in Confucianism is a sage, or a saint, who has reached the state of perfection, or an ideal state of being. In this theory, a man is a creature endowed with two natures: one that is literally called “heavenly nature,” resembling that of heaven, while the other “human nature” resembles that of an animal. When the “human nature” is properly regulated, the “heavenly nature” reveals itself. The idea of heaven-man union aims to shed all the human desire and illusions, find one’s pure self, and ultimately recover one’s “heavenly nature” in order to attain the state of perfection. This idea is another way of showing the determination to find a place for a man as the center of the world. This idea that the center of the world is a man and the center of a man is his mind corresponds to the belief that the course of the universe as well as of human society can be changed by redressing one’s mind, not either by objective laws or by institutional reform (Jongmin Choi, 1991:593-598).

We can see here the fundamental reason why Chunaengjeon takes balance and moderation for its absolute aesthetic. Chunaengjeon is a dance that has been enjoyed by elite upper-class audiences who possess sophisticated cognitive power. This dance is formed through the action of “contemplation”, a device to filter and mediate emotions instead of instantly relieving them. The dance implies a state of mind with unbiased symmetry and the principle of Confucian equability. The dance also pursues the state of self-forgetfulness, or annihilation of self by excluding the intervention of subjectivity in order to overcome the borderline of the external world and self and the arousal of emotions (Eunkyong Shin, 1996:117).

This leads to the disposition of Chunaengjeon, unworldly and detached from secular values and the real world. At the same time, it shows an attempt to embody “heavenly nature” through regulating “human nature.” Movements of earth are embodied in the feet movements in Chunaengjeon and Salpuri dance while movements of heaven are represented through the arm movements, invigorated by vitality of the earth and the spirit of heaven.

## 2. Circulation of *Ki* (氣, Energy) —Dance of respiration

In Korean traditional dance, all parts of human body are harmonized to shape a natural framework of movements. This is due to the fact that Korean culture, traditional music and dance in particular, are closely connected with the ways of respiration during performance. Special traits of respiration in dance can be divided into three levels of the respiration system: the top, the middle, and the lower. These three levels may be named again as *Shin* (神, spirit), *Ki* (氣, energy),



Mi-hee Yoo teaches the *Gutgery* dance.

and Jung (精, emotion). *Jung* is an outgoing impulsive energy and creates objects. The term *Jung* also can be used as another expression for sexual libido.

To summarize, the normal state of being is where *Shin*, a dormant, high-dimensional creative activity, is inactive because it is suppressed by the strong energy of *Jung*, energy of desire and instinct towards external objects. The respiration system described by the three levels prevents our spirit from relapsing into the aforementioned normal state and focuses thoughts: it collects the energy of *Jung* instead of squandering it and gradually purifies the power of *Ki* through dancing. Through this process, *Ki* is transformed into *Shin*. At the same time, the direction of *Ki*, which exist in subconscious body and mind, is switched from more material qualities which lean towards external things to internal qualities. Being regulated, the action of *Ki* can be sublimated and modified into a more spiritual state of purification, which is the energy of *Shin*. Through this process, the dancer can realize the creative and outstanding potential that reside in his/her unconscious and finally reach the transformed state of human perfection.

The motions in Salpuri dance mostly use upper parts of body, but the source of energy comes up from the lower parts of the body and their sustaining power. The energy delivered through the earth and accumulated in the abdomen goes up to the shoulder and travels through the fingertips into the air. The whole body symbolizes the tragic side of life by a paradoxical relationship of tranquility and movements through its undulating curved movements. This movement should be seen as an attempt to recover a transcendental conscious, or universal conscious, that can lead to an ecstatic state void of humanness.

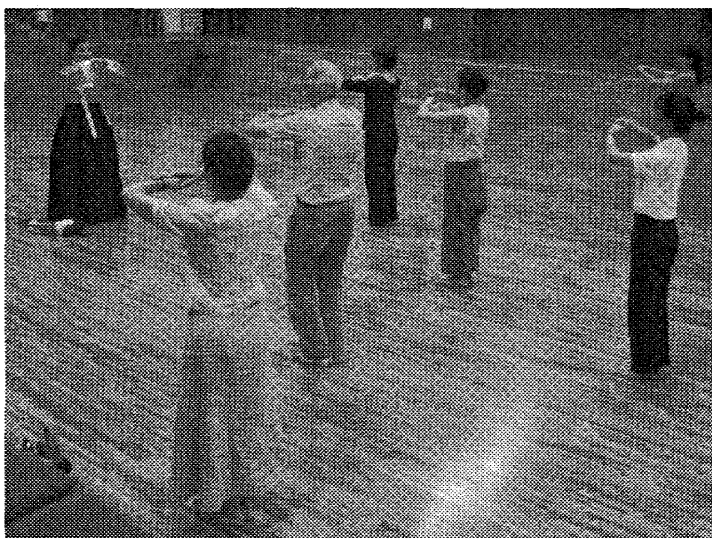
### 3. Free dynamics and improvisation (力動性と即興性)

Shoulder movement commonly displayed in Gyobang dance and folk dance is performed by the act of twisting the chest. There is no rule to regulate the numbers and time for this motion, so changes can be made freely according to the dancer's improvised expression. Moving shoulders up and down is a signal that *Shin* is being emitted. Considering that Korean traditional dance aims to transcend the ordinary, Gyobanggutgery Dance employing these shoulder movement basically pursues the positive, or the optimistic side of life.

In Sogo (small hand-drum) Dance performed at Jajinmori Jangdan (rhythm), especially in Yeonpungdae which is performed in a circle of performers of various forms of Sogo performances, the determination and hope for a better world is displayed through the formation of a circling, a symbolic circle of divine life. In addition, by improvising *chuimsae* (encouraging remarks, motions added during the performance) such as "holding for two beats" between regular motions, the whole dance becomes more energetic. *Chuimsae* encourages the audience to actively participate and creates dynamics of liberty and freedom. Such dynamics are well displayed in Kim Su-ak's Gu-um (oral sound) Salpuri. By imitating the sounds of musical instruments like a Jutdae (a kind of flute), Kayakeum (similar to Japanese koto), and Geomungo (similar to large Japanese koto), *Chuimsae* in Gu-um can add a more realistic expression, bringing about delight and excitement.

#### 4. Sustained Indirection (曲線の美)

It is commonly said that Korean traditional dance is calm, rhythmic, and containing many curves. Salpuri dance, based on the principle of Great Absolute (太極), ends where it begins after alternating circling movements advancing and retreating. Principle movements of the dance are based on the Great Absolute, expressed in the motions of sprinkling, spreading, arranging, turning over, and pulling back, all of which must be harmonized accord-



Mi-hee Yoo teaches the *Gutgery* dance.

ing to this principle instead of taking place as individual movements. Shoulder movement in particular, by shifting the body left and right, allows the formation that looks like the number eight (8). As a consequence, the line of Great Absolute can be completed where heaven and earth meet in the movement. This trait is also shared by such floor patterns as front oblique lines, curved lines, circles, and spirals in *Gutgery* Dance.

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