



International Christian Dance Fellowship

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## *The Two Characteristics of Korean Dance* \_\_\_\_\_

BY Young-Ae Park

**I**t is necessary for Christians to develop diverse ways of their own for worshipping God. Every country has its own culture from which Christian culture can be developed. Since the culture of each country appeals more deeply to its own people, it can provide great possibilities for more effective Christian ministry as well as for developing various ways to worship God. In this sense, Christians in Korea also should try to utilise the culture in Christian ways, and dancers need to explore the useful Christian elements c Korean dance and develop them.

The importance of Korean dance lies in the spirit and soul of a dancer. The spirit of the Ch dancer is expressed through breathing - that is the essence of Korean dance. The relationship between breath and spirit is also significant in the Bible - 'spirit' in the Bib literally means wind or breath.

Korean dance can be generally divided into two genres - court dance and folk dance. T: court dance, on the whole, is characteristically celebratory. It is danced with joy a: happiness, mostly to praise and bless the king's existence and achievements. Among fc dances, *Seung-mu*, which is considered the acme of Korean dance, is characteristically healing as it helps release the deep agonies, sorrows, and conflicts of everyday living

The two characteristics of celebration and healing in Korean dance have significant that can be applied in Christian dance. Since Korean dance has not been fully developed • terms of its Christian meaning, these two characteristics could be a great basis upon which the Christian dance of Korea can be founded. This study was designed to present these two characteristics of Korean dance to illuminate and indicate their potential to enable the development and establishment of Christian dance in Korea.

# The Characteristics of Korean Dance

## (1) The Court Dance

The court dance, which originally took place to entertain nobles and royalty in the palace, is also called *Jeongjae*. *Jeongjae* is dance and music performed at the royal court ceremony and feast (Hung-Gu Lee, p.29). A document with a historical record of the court dancers ceremonial process is called a *Holgi*. *Jeongjae-Holgi*, which describes the different aspect\* of the dance movements of *Jeongjae*, is a record of dances referred to as *Mubo*, whk\* means dance notation.

The origins of the court dance have been preserved and were transmitted and modified for the Song dynasty of China. Dance flourished during the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910). Following the establishment of the new dynasty, government ideals changed. **While** the ideals were based on Confucianism, culture and art, customs also played an important role in their development. The court dance contributed to developing the national ceremonial order (Mi-Young Lee, p.221).

During the 14th and 15th centuries, many court dances were created. During the eras of King Taejo and King Sungjong, the court dance prospered tremendously. King Sejong also accomplished a great deal in establishing court music as well as court dance. He systemised the two kinds of *Hyangak Jeongjae* and *Dangak Jeongjae* in Korea. *Hyangak Jeongjae* was created using Korean traditional music, while the latter originated in China.



Court dance was always accompanied by songs and background music. The song included in court dance is called *Chang-sa*. It narrates the content and meaning of the dance between the parts of the dance. *Chang-sa* in the *Dangak Jeongjae* is written in Chinese, while in *Hyangak Jeongjae*, song is written in both Korean and Chinese.

The graceful rhythm and refined movements of court dance exude a mysterious charm which, together with the flow of the profound rhythmic beat of the music, as if the dance were expressing a world transcending reality. Since the dance was choreographed for celebrating joyful occasions and the major events of the nation, the costumes are very bright and colorful. Their colors and the basic composition of the dance are based on the principles of the Eastern philosophy of yin and yang and the five directions, east, west, south, north, and the center.

There are many kinds of court dance. However, the movements and the atmosphere of the dances are very similar, with a slow and rather simple quality in appearance. The movements are static as the music is very slow and magnificent - the emotion of the dancer should also be kept under control.

Some examples of court dance are as follows: •

### *Hyangak Jeongjae*

*Mansumu*: This dance was originated during the period of King Sungjong of the Chosun dynasty. The dance represented a prayer for the longevity of the king.

*Bongrae-eui*: This dance was created by King Sejong to praise King Taejo for his establishment of the Chosun dynasty.

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*Mundungok*: This dance was created by Do-Joon Jung to commemorate the achievements of King Taejo.



### *Dangak Jeongjae*

*Geunchunjeong*: This dance was created to celebrate the enthronement of King Taejo.

*Seongtaek*: This dance was created to thank King Sejong for his divine favor and grace, and also entertain the court ministers

*Hasungmyung*: This dance was created during the first year of King Sejong in order to bless the king's divine rule.

*Suyeonjang*: This dance originated during the period of King Seongjong of the Koryu dynasty. It was danced to bless the longevity of the king.

Although each court dance has its own theme, most of the court dances present common themes of praising, celebrating, praying, and blessing in terms of king's accomplishments: longevity, happiness, divine rule, favor and grace. Based upon these themes, the majority of court dances demonstrate celebration.

## (2) *The Seung-mu*

The folk dance, developed by the common people, varies according to region and performer. The dance reflects ordinary people's reality expressing joy, frustration, sorrow, and even humor and satire. The movements are derived from the living customs, values and moral sense of the Korean people (Kyung-Ja Han, p.21).

Among the folk dances, *Seung-mu*, *Salpuri*, and *Taepyung-mu* are the most artistic and skillful dances. These three folk dances are considered the most theatrical dances of all Korean dances today. *Salpuri* originated from Shamanistic ritual, with the intent to console and comfort the soul of the person who had encountered misfortune or misery. In the early years, the dancers used a sword or something made of



dancers used a sword

paper that symbolized the soul and spirit. Today it has been transformed - the dancers use a long silk scarf instead. The costume of *Taepyung-mu* is the same as the court dance costume - similar to the Queen's. Allegedly, by putting on the Queen's costume, the ordinary person is being consoled. The intent of the dance is to celebrate and bless the abundant harvest as well as the well-being and peace of the nation.

In Korean folk dance, certain natures exist in themselves: *hung*, *han*, and *shinmyung*. *Hung* is an expression of inner metaphysical joy; *han* is a feeling of deep sorrow or regret. *shinmyung* is a kind of ecstasy. These qualities are particularly evident in Korean drum dances that derive their spiritual and aesthetic power from the everyday lives of Korean people. They are not simple expressions or movements - they are but passion-driver : -

are expressed through natural and free-form movement in space as the whole being is absorbed totally and completely (Sang-Mi Shin, p.237).

Most ordinary Korean people have *han* within themselves - reflected in their depressed feelings and restrained expressions. Generally, there are two reasons for that. One is that the innate nature of Korean people is quite reserved, so they rarely express their feelings and emotions. The other is related to the dissatisfaction of the common people who were rebellious because of the prejudice of the privileged classes and their own poor living conditions.

*Han* and *shinmyung* are closely interrelated. *Shinmyung* occurs when one overcomes and conquers *han* (a deep sorrow or regret) and sublimates it into supernatural ecstasy, or *shinmyung*. Ordinary people who had *han* tried to alleviate their stress, conflicts, and agonies through the folk dance and transform it into *shinmyung*. In other words, *shinmyung* refers to the release of restrained emotion through the opposed, contrasting expression of happiness. Thus, Korean people vent their frustrations in order to enliven their lives with ecstasy and gain the strength to sustain their lives.

## Seung-mu

The representative dance form of *shinmyung* is *Seung-mu*. *Seung-mu* is one of the most artistic and skillful dances, compiled by Seong-Jun Han. He arranged the religious drum ceremony from which *Seung-mu* was artistically established while he devoted himself to establishing the direction and development of folk dances as theatrical and artistic dances.

The origin of this dance has not been confirmed. However, it certainly has a relationship with Buddhism, which was once Korea's national religion. The costume, with a very long sleeved gown called *Jang-sam*, was influenced by the Buddhist monk's clothing. The long sleeves enhance the smooth and flowing quality of movements through the extension of the line.



the body (Won-sun

In *Seung-mu*, breathing controls the foundation of the movements. Controlling the abdomen becomes the motive power to bring harmony among all the separate parts of

the movements of the dance and the breathing pattern create real power and harmony.

Holding sticks in both hands the dancer plays a drum in the latter part of the dance - this requires great skill. Drum playing is the most dramatic and heightened part of *Seung-mu*, as it expresses the emotions and feelings through tone, intensity and rhythm. It was designed to lead to *shinmyung* from *han*. Therefore, the dancer is to release all the restrained emotions so that he/she is comforted and healed from within.

Korean dance, either court dance or folk dance, has a definite rhythmic pattern in its accompaniment. The rhythmic pattern is basically structured by the *Changgo*, a large hourglass-

shaped percussion instrument - the most fundamental and essential of all Korean instruments. *Changgo* provides the structure of the music in terms of meter, tempo, and beat - the whole atmosphere and characteristics of Korean dance are determined by its pattern.

## **The Principles of Korean Dance**

Korean dance possesses an inner beauty expressed through the soul, mind and spirit of a dancer rather than outer appearance alone. The dancers do not simply move their bodies. When they move, they concentrate on every movement of their body from the top of the head to the tip of their toes with their mind and soul. Technique is important-however, it is not like ballet or modern dance. Technique such as high jumps, quick turns, and lifting legs high are not the major focus of Korean dance. Instead, it is more concerned with the flow of movement coupled with both long-term training and spiritual depth.

It is extremely important in Korean dance that the dancers devote themselves to moving their bodies to portray their emotional and spiritual depths. They are to move every body part seriously, concentrating on continuity and fluidity throughout the body, inspired from within. For this reason, movements are often described in ways that reflect the state of mind and soul, not simply the manner of moving the body. For example, when a dancer moves the arm slowly and lightly, it is often described as moving 'heavily' instead of 'lightly' because the dancer devotes himself/herself to that movement and concentrates on it with all their mind. Although the movement looks light in appearance, the state of the dancer's mind is to be careful and bound. Thus, the qualities of the movement are frequently described depending on how they feel and how they are driven from within.

The basic principles of Korean dance are as follows:

- 1) When inhaling the body expands, rising, moving out or up, with arms and legs being lifted and stretched. When exhaling the body contracts, sinking, moving in or down, with arms and legs being lowered or bent.
- 2) The back is usually slightly curved as the shoulders are pulled into the body. This is the characteristic basic posture of Korean dancers.
- 3) The knees are usually kept slightly bent when stepping.
- 4) The heels always lead in taking a step, including turns.
- 5) When completing a step with closure, the heel of the closing foot is always lifted.
- 6) The arm, when about to be lifted upward, should always be rotated with palm facing up.

## **The Essence of Korean Dance**

In terms of the essence of Korean dance, two aspects of breathing and the line of movement should be discussed. Out of the two, breathing is the very essence that distinguishes Korean dance.

Breath has a significant meaning in the Bible, too. For example, Genesis 2:7 says "Our Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." According to John 20:22, after Jesus rose from the dead and before he was received up into heaven, he breathed on the disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Ghost". Therefore, breath is very important in Christianity, directly implying "spirit."

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Likewise, breath is an important element of Korean dance, as the relationship between breathing and movement expresses the spirit of a dancer. Furthermore, breathing in Korean dance is foundational to initiating the movement of body parts and plays a major role in determining the dynamics of the dance (Won-Sun Choi, p. 97). Therefore, length and adjustment of breath is connected to the movements of every part of the body.

Fluctuations of movement occur in association with the process of breathing in and out. When breathing deeply, the up and down movement of the chest is to be felt from the upper body. The arms are to fluctuate up and down a little according to the breathing pattern, although they are in the same position. As a result, the whole body is to fluctuate, rising and sinking to some extent according to the dancer's breathing.

Another essential element of Korean dance is the line of movement. Since costumes do not reveal parts of the body, which is covered with a long and wide skirt, the movements appear to be very simple. However, Korean dance movements go through very precise and delicate changes that are expressed in very restrained forms through the line of the dance. This is the beauty of Korean dance. Whether the movements are small or big, slow or quick, and light or strong, the line of movement is delivered with grace and restrained by the costume covering the whole body. Thus, the nature of Korean dance, just like the Korean people's nature, appears quite reserved and implicit, reflecting their value, thought, and characteristics.

## Conclusion

This study focused on the two characteristics of Korean dance to suggest them as significant elements for Christian dance in Korea. One is the celebration immanent in the court dance, and the other is the healing implicit in *Seung-mu*, one of the most artistic and representative folk dances. These two characteristics have great Christian meaning

Celebration is directly related to Christian dance since most worship dances throughout history have sought to praise and celebrate God's existence and greatness, in thankfulness for His grace and love. Healing is also important in Christianity since Christians can be purified and consoled through healing in God so that they can get closer to God without emotional and spiritual obstacles.

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Young-Ae Park graduated from Ewha University in Seoul, Korea. She also took a Masters degree from the same university, and another M.A and Ph.D in dance education from New York University. Originally majoring in Korean Dance, she is now focusing on theoretical studies in dance as well as the relationship between dance and music as a result of her time in New York. She is currently teaching subjects within the Dance Department of Hansung University in Seoul including Western dance history, movement analysis and music as examples. As National Coordinator of the Christian Dance Fellowship of Korea, she is concentrating on the development of Christian dance ministry in Korea. She translated the book titled "God's People on the Move", written by Mary Jones and members of the Christian Dance Fellowship of Australia, and published it in Korea.

