

Cultural Heritage Preservation Methodology: Korean Mask Dance Drama

Sang Woo Ha

Department of Performing Arts, Faculty of Music and Performing Arts
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

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Abstract

This article discusses the preservation methodology of South Korean intangible cultural heritage through the case of the 'Cultural Heritage Protection System' launched in 1962. Through this system, fifty-seven kinds of intangible cultural properties have been officially preserved. This research examines the reconstructing methodologies of five traditional mask dance dramas, *t'alch'ums*, through literature review and interviews with performers from the Cultural Heritage Protection System. This article will benefit scholars and students in the performing arts seeking the effective methodologies in recovering original versions of ephemeral dance and theatre.

Keywords: Preservation Methodology, Cultural Heritage Protection System, Korean Mask Dance Drama, T'alch'um, Ephemeral Performance

Introduction

The South Korean government passed the Cultural Properties Protection Law in December 1961 and then promulgated it in January 1962. The system classified properties, based on whether or not they are tangible or intangible. Tong-Gwŏn Lim, Korean folklorist, specifies the classification of the properties, concentrating on the process used to form each property and groups of property to perform and transmit (Lim 1996). According to this logic, tangible properties can be historical sites, castles, buildings, and art works. They include symbols of power associated with the monarchy or the upper classes. Intangible properties involve the performing arts, such as *t'alch'um* and *nongak* (traditional music). This latter category includes cultural practices performed by the lower classes (Lim 1996). Lim verifies that since the government inaugurated the protection system, common culture began to be acknowledged as part of Korean cultural heritage.

The governmental publication shows that cultural properties could be considered the state's economic wealth, yet what the government seems to emphasize was properties' historical status and connection to tradition (Minister of Culture and Public Information 1970). The properties become historical creations and valuable parts of the Korean community because, according to the government at this time, they are representatives of national tradition. As the definition of cultural properties in the official government publication suggests, the state sees itself as being devoted to serving the purpose of protecting Korean traditional culture. For such a reason, the Cultural Heritage Protection System under the

government has revived the original forms of the intangible cultural properties like *t'alch'um* by focusing on reconstructing processes that were guided by the government-affiliated research scholars and performers in the preservation societies.

The crucial point to notice here is how the Cultural Heritage Protection System reconstructed live (or called intangible and ephemeral) performances by naming the authorized piece *Wonhyeong* [原形: original form]. The system used reconstructing procedures much like those that dance historians like Millicent Hodson utilized in the 1970s and 1980s. These processes emphasize duplication of past sequences of movement, music rhythms, and garment designs that re-imagine performance's past. The following discuss section will analyze similarities between the cultural system's standardization methods and Hodson's reconstructing procedures. The Korean cultural system did not simply endeavor to duplicate pre-existing premieres of *t'alch'um*. Rather, it created the standardized the mask dance dramas that would have boundless potentials for change and omission depending on whenever new sources discover and add.

Background: The Cultural Heirtage Protection System of South Korea

Strengthening the cultural administrative agency, the government not only appointed Korean scholars as the system's research committees in March of 1962, but also assigned some folklorists as cultural properties specialists for each field – theater, music, dance, handicraft, folk amusement, folk religion, folk rite, and so on – in May of the same year (Jung 2008). The most of the selected committees and specialists came from the Korean Society for Cultural Anthropology established in 1958. In October 1962, they began conducting research on current conditions of the properties, which could be seen as the intangible heritage, and designated the studied properties in February 1964. *T'alch'um* was classified as the folk theater field in the protection system. Du-Hyeon Lee and Seok-Jae Im was the main researchers and identified thirteen *t'alch'ums* at that time (Jung 2008). These research scholars' discoveries became fundamental sources to register the mask dance dramas as intangible cultural properties. That is, the research scholars were involved in and significantly influenced the system of intangible cultural properties by administratively and academically selecting and managing the properties.

Along with the research scholars, performers in *t'alch'um* preservation societies, no doubt, were significant players in the Cultural Heritage Protection System. In the initial stage of the system, today's preservation societies did not exist. While starting the investigation project in 1968, *Hanguk Minsok Jonghap Josa* (Korean National Total Investigation), the scholars discovered some folklore groups who continued to perform the mask dance dramas as village activities. Based on the investigation from 1968 to 1980, the scholars decided whether or not the village folklore groups were performing intangible properties. The system-headed project also decided whether or not professional performers were still active in the groups (Korean Cultural Heritage Research Laboratory in Chungang University 2011). The preservation society system for intangible performances was launched on December 31, 1982. In 1986, the village folklore groups were eventually appointed as cultural gatekeepers and were officially named the preservation societies as the affiliated groups of the preservation system. Since then,

members in those societies have been fully responsible to annually performing and continuously transmitting the mask dance dramas with financial support of the system.

Literature Review and Research Objective

Since the 1960s, performing arts fields, including dance and theatre, have heated up the debates about whether or not live but intangible performances from ephemerality are saved. Rebecca Schneider is one of the important scholars focusing on this topic.

Schneider in "Theatre Criticism" mentions that "every other art has its original and its copies"; however, "the peculiar burden and problem of the theater is that there is no original artwork at all." She goes on to say that "unless one maintains that the text is the art work which repudiates the entire history of the theater, there seems no way of avoiding this difficult fact" (Schneider 1965). In another book "Between theatre and Anthropology," she also points out "performance originals disappear as fast as they are made. [...] One of the chief jobs challenging performance scholars is the making of a vocabulary and methodology that deal with performance in its immediacy and evanescence" (Schneider 1985). Schneider's arguments are able to be supported by the statements of two scholars, Herbert Blau and Marcia Siegel as follows respectively: "In theater, the subject is disappearance" and "Dance exists as a perpetual vanishing point" (Balu, 1982; Siegel, 1968)

The wordings of these three dance and theatre scholars demonstrate that academic discussion about the disappearance of live performance has existed in performing arts studies while researchers followed the conventional way to document. Such a discussion enables scholars to seek for a new methodology of saving intangible performances. Even though books and articles about the Korean Cultural Heritage Protection System have been published, they do no more than the introduction of the whole system. That is, even though the methodology in the protection system can be seen as the main vehicle of catching up ephemeral movements like mask dance dramas, no one has mentioned it. In 1984, Korean scholar Gyeong-Uk Jeon published his writing about how mask dance dramas are preserved under the protection system. His book contained several scripts of the mask dance dramas, but it still missed the specific explanation about what methods Korean researchers created those scripts through.

Diana Taylor, expert on performance studies, responds to the discussion about safeguarding live performances in a similar vein, which is what the writer wants to address. Taylor argues that intangible performances cannot be fixed only in textual descriptions because they often involve corporeal nature and meanings that are coming from the context in which performers' actions take place. That is, if researchers focus on dancing bodies, considering them as important subjective transmitters of intangible cultural properties, they would minimize the possibility to lose the ephemeral performances.

As Taylor insists, the writer wants to argue here that the methodologies in the Cultural Heritage Protection System can be viewed as the ways in which performers' corporeal presence and memories can effectively co-exist with textual documents, so-called conventional methods.

Research Methodology

In the beginning stage of the research, it is realized that accumulating oral testimonies from performers in the preservation society as important as analyzing the collected archival sources. The writer (call myself the writer) conducted two methodologies for this anthropological performing arts research: 1) Literature Review; and 2) interviews.

While visiting to Korea, the writer investigated the related archives about the mask dance drama, *t'alch'um*, in *Gukhoe Doseogwan* (National Assembly Library), *Gukrip Munhwajae Yeonguso* (National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage), *Munhwajaecheong Doseogwan* (Cultural Heritage Administration Library) and Ewha Women's University Library. The writer discovered textual materials relating to *t'alch'um* from diverse fields such as history, literature, sociology, ethnography, folklore, dance and theatrical studies.

The writer conducted interviews with seven professional dancers who belong to five mask dance preservation societies as follows: Sang-Woon Park in *Bongsan*, Sang-Ho Lee in *Hahoe*, Sun-Ok Kim and Sun-Hong Kim in *Yangju Byulsandae*, Hong-Jong Kim in *Tongyeong Ogwangdae*, and Gun-Hwa-Seon and Seon-Yun Gang in *Bukcheong Saja*. The writer led an informal atmosphere and asked open-ended questions during the interviews. In the case of the *Bukcheong Saja*, the writer first participated in regular dance practices for society members over three months with permission from Gun-Hwa-Seon Lee, the oldest performer. After understanding dance practice environments, the writer could hold an interview with Lee. The seven interviewees' ages ranged from forties and to seventies. The writer had opportunities to understand how professional dancers' perspectives about *t'alch'um* may have changed over time. The experience of the direct interviews allowed the writer to gather own data and to use and suggest these data as support for research arguments.

Preservation Methodologies

1. Direct Observation for Folklore Groups' Performances

In 1962, the Cultural Heritage Protection System began hosting *Jeonguk Minsok Yesul Gyeongyeon Daehoe* (the National Folk Arts Contest). The competition held every October for three days. The folklorists who worked as administrative committees or specialists served on the main panels of judges in the contest. The panels' commentary on each performance not only set the standard to select qualified intangible cultural properties, but also prescribed the range of what Korean traditional culture is. In other words, the panels played important roles of gate-keeper in the Cultural Heritage Protection System (Jung, 2008, p. 203).

The first contest in 1958 was held to celebrate the tenth anniversary of establishing the South Korean government. Three years later, the government changed this event to be an annual competition for intangible cultural properties, such as traditional theater, dance, and music. The government hosted this event from 1961 to 1973 and designated more than fifty kinds of intangible cultural properties, including thirteen *t'alch'ums*. Some mask dance folklore groups participated in this national folklore competition. Korean folklorist Gi-Tae Lee suggests that the government aimed not only to protect folklore, but also increase the public's concern for the properties through the contest. In addition to participating in the contest, local

residents and groups focused on discovering and promoting their endemic folklores (Lee, G.-T., n.d., p. 35).

Interviewee Geun-Hwa-Seon Lee stated, “a folklore group for *Bukcheong Saja* mask dance drama was made by *Leebuk 5 Docheong* [the Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces] in South Korea [in 1960] [...] Our group competed in the National Folk Arts Contest in every October with the support of *Leebuk 5 Docheong*” (Interview Transcript, 2012, n.p.). Although the *Bukcheong Saja* originated from North Korea, Lee’s group participation in the competition served as a momentum to keep the North Korean mask dance alive in South Korea. Korean folklorist Du-Hyeon Lee gives another example of group participation. He indicates that *Bongsan* mask dance drama was transmitted among dancers who came from Hwanghae-do in North Korea during their participation in the National Folk Arts Contest in 1958 (Lee, D.-H., 2001, p. 183). According to the playbook unofficially published by the *Hahoe Byulsingut* preservation society, folklorists recorded the mask dance when the *Hahoe Byulsingut* folklore group joined in the National Folk Arts Contest in 1978 (Hahoe Byulsingut Preservation Society, 2007, p. 9).

As these examples above show, regional participation in the National Folk Arts Contest lasted from the late 1950s to the 1970s helped folklorists gather data about choreography, dialogues, stage directions, musical rhythms, props, and costumes. This participation also helped folklorists to better understand both who performed *t’alch’ums* and where these performers came from. The folklore groups’ participation in the contest allowed the folklorists to observe and gather information about *t’alch’ums* in a short amount of time.

2. Seeking and Collecting Vestiges and memories from Performers in Folklore Groups

Headed by the government-affiliated research scholars, *Hanguk Minsok Jonghap Josa* (Korean National Total Investigation) was conducted in 1968. Folklorist Ju-Geun Jang describes his leadership and experience in the investigation in his 2011 article “Plan and Process for National Folk Arts Contest.” Jang began designing plans for the investigation in 1966 (Jang, 2011, p. 10). And then, he launched it in 1968 with other researcher scholars, including folklorists Du-Hyun Lee, Seok-Jae Im, Jeong-Hak Kim, and Dong-Uk Kim.

The project methodology used on on-the-spot regional investigation to explore both where and how many vestiges of intangible cultural properties remained in each area. The government required the researchers to make films and photographs, conduct questionnaire-based surveys, and interview related people if needed. After the fieldwork, the scholars submitted their investigation reports to *Munhwajae Gwanriguk* (Cultural Property Preservation Bureau). The scholars’ investigations were influential sources for the officially-published Korean Folklore Investigation Reports from 1969 to 1981. In the case of *t’alch’um*, a form of theatre including dialogue, dance and music, the research scholars also started publishing playbooks that are quite similar to theatre scripts.

3. Outcomes from the Preservation Methodologies

In sum, in order to create and archive the official playbooks about the five mask dance dramas, the research scholars in the Cultural Heritage Protection System observed the mask dance

dramas by various regional folklore groups in the contest. They simultaneously gathered verbal accounts from a couple of performers, who participated in the contest or shared their memories with researchers doing field work at the time.

Yangju Byulsandae Mask Dance Drama. This mask dance drama was published as an official government document in 1964 (Cho, 1979, p. 489). The preservation society's dancers in the 2010s still use the 1964 playbook because of its status as a formally designated book.

Tongyeong Ogwangdae Mask Dance Drama. According to the official playbook re-published in the 2000s by the *Tongyeong Ogwangdae* preservation society, the mask dance drama began around 1900 and was revived again after the government invited a folklore group to the National Folk Arts Contest in 1960 (Tongyeong Ogwangdae Preservation Society, n.d., p. 8)

Hahoe Byulsingut Mask Dance Drama. A playbook circulated prior to December 24, 1964, when the mask dance drama received a title of intangible cultural property. Based on the research scholars' collective data, a folklore group performed it from 1976 to 1977 (Hahoe Byulsingut Preservation Society, 2007, p. 85). When the mask dance drama was designated as an intangible cultural property in 1980, Du-Hyun Lee collected data and documented the official playbook with Woo-Seong Sim, a specialist in the cultural system, under the auspices of the Park regime.

Bongsan Mask Dance Drama. Prior to designating *Bongsan* mask dance drama in 1967, the South Korean government supported Du-Hyun Lee to create the official playbook for Hwanghae province, a part of North Korea. Lee recorded a playbook in August of 1965 by observing the competition performance and interviewing dancers who had defected from North Korea, such as Jin-Ok Kim and Geun-Seong Lee.

Bukcheong Saja Mask Dance Drama. Du-Hyun Lee included a brief playbook he created for the mask dance drama in the *Korean Mask Dance Drama*, which was officially published in 1969. However, his playbook was not complete, and it differed from the playbook the preservation society is currently using as a standard textbook. The current textbook – unofficially printed by the preservation society – still uses the 1979 playbook version of the dance as the original record.

Discussion Based on Dance Embodiment Theories

The writer finds parallels between folklorists' methodologies for reconstructing *t'alch'ums* and Millicent Hodson's methodology for reconstructing scores of the original choreography for Vaslav Nijinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1996). Several revisions of Nijinsky's *Sacre*, as well as new choreographies for *Sacre*, were invented from the end of the 1980s to the 1990s. Hodson especially discussed the Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction premiere in 1987. According to Hodson, the human body was an important instrument for discovery for Nijinsky. However, newly reconstructed versions of Nijinsky's *Sacre* failed to take into account for Nijinsky's radical choreographic style and method. Hodson gathered the surviving fragments from Nijinsky's *Sacre*.

Her purpose in reconstructing the Nijinsky's original choreography was to end the further dissolution of the masterpiece of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. To reconstruct choreographic

sequences and musical scores from the premiere, Hodson patched together the recovered original pieces according to musical scores and pictorial evidences left by Igor Stravinsky and Valentine Gross-Hugo. Hodson's method prioritized making links or connections between the remaining fragments. Through this strategy, she attempted to reduce the gap between the premiere and the reconstruction. Thus, Hodson studied the original performance as if it was completely removed from the past. She is an agent who endeavors to enable the changed and faded premiere to re-appear in the present. Dance scholar Mark Franko argues in "Epilogue" of *Dance As Text* (1993) that the reconstruction of historical dance current at that time tended to be achieved by inscribing dance's past as fixed and unchangeable while repeatedly replicating choreographic patterns, feet steps, arms movements, music scores, and garment designs of an original dance (Franko, 1993). Hodson fits the model Franko describes when she re-figures the whole of Nijinsky's masterpiece by putting each lost picture and musical score together. Her reconstruction eventually rejuvenates the entire masterpiece from one point of view.

Much like Hodson's procedure for reconstitution of Nijinsky's *Sacre*, the Korean research scholars gathered sources through remembrances of villagers' experience about *t'alch'ums*. Then, they collected pre-inspected sources and fragments sought by a non-scholar for the scholarly reports. These procedures helped folklorists repair damaged parts and reconstructed many parts of the mask dance dramas, such as dialogues, stage directions, bodily movements, music scores, costume styles, and mask appearances: some of these are "parts" that can be sequenced, but not all. The Korean research scholars from the 1960s to the 1970s emulated past works, sought to minimize changes, and filled in omissions using their own reconstruction standards. They attempted to maintain traditional versions of *t'alch'ums* and, in so doing, revived them.

Conclusion

The Korean Cultural Heritage Protection System acknowledged that a single observation of the competition and oral testimonies from a couple of performers were not sufficient for creating the official playbooks. The performance observation for several folklore groups and the memory collection from many performers became principal methods to shape the specimen of *t'alch'um*, as called *Wonhyeong* [原形] (the original form) and to show how *t'alch'um*, live performance, is effectively passed down to the next generation.

The researchers under the Cultural Heritage Protection System, in the writer's view, made an endeavor to seek new methodologies as the safeguarding ways for intangible performances, such as collecting performers' oral testimony and conducting direct observations for performances, along with creating textual documents. What the writer discovers here is that dancing bodies in the main methodology of the Cultural Heritage Protection System function as important subjective transmitters of intangible cultural properties as well as textual documents.

The finding of this study can help educators in performance fields increase knowledge about ways how to preserve ephemeral movements that are close to their original versions. It can let the educators strongly build up the teaching strategies in terms of safeguarding cultural performing forms.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Sangwoo Ha
Department of Performing Arts
Faculty of Music and Performing Arts
Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
Perak Malaysia
Email: sha00353@gmail.com

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