



Black-Salpuri: The Innovation of a Traditional Korean Dance Form

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The South Korean government established the Cultural Heritage Administration in 1961 and passed the Cultural Heritage Protection Act in 1962. South Korea's Cultural Heritage Protection Act was initiated to preserve in their original form artificially or naturally created heritages of Korea that have high historic, artistic, academic, or scenic significance. The legislation defines four types of cultural heritages to protect: Tangible Cultural Heritage (*Yuhyeong Munhwajae*), Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Muhyeong Munhwajae*), Historic Sites or Buildings (*Sajuck*), and Natural Resources (*Chunyun Kinyeomul*).¹ The Cultural Heritage Administration specifically manages cultural properties, which are further designated according to state or city/province.

When the government set up the goal of preserving items of intangible cultural heritage in 1962, they focused on protecting the "archetypal form" (*Wonhyung* in Korean), the very first model, of traditional drama, music, dance, and craftsmanship. The newly enacted 2015 law on the Safeguarding and Promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage amended its basic principle to the protection of the "intrinsic quality"

1. Tangible Cultural Heritage (type 1) refers to historic architecture, ancient books and documents, paintings, sculptures, handicrafts, archeological materials, and armory. Intangible Cultural Heritage (type 2) includes the knowledge and skills of traditions and living expressions, such as drama, music, dance, and craftsmanship, carrying great historic, artistic, or academic values. Historic Sites or Buildings (type 3) encompass places and facilities that preserve and commemorate artifacts of significant historic and academic values, such as fortresses, ancient tombs, temple sites, and shell mounds. Natural Resources (type 4) are described as animals, plants, minerals, caves, geological features, biological products, and special natural phenomena.

(*Chunhyung* in Korean) of intangible cultural heritage. This new definition, adapted from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) convention, allowed a little more flexible interpretation of originality in that the preservation focuses on the essential quality of an intangible cultural heritage. What is considered essential, however, can be controversial. Yet the newly defined term shows that institutions involved in these policies recognize the ontology of dance as ephemeral and contingent on the body that performs it. They are well aware of the ways that intangible cultural heritage is fluid, which is different from the more “fixed” ways that tangible cultural heritage is preserved. Thus, the government tends to acknowledge the impossibility of identifying fixed and universally shared originality of a dance even as the attempt is still to preserve, however contingently. Unlike tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage cannot be transmitted without people who perform or enact them. South Korea’s law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage established a legal system for designating individuals or groups who hold outstanding skills and knowledge of the properties as Living Human Treasure. These individuals are tasked to preserve the particular items of intangible cultural heritage and train people in the next generation, at no charge, in the techniques of their art. They are obliged to organize annual public performances and keep records of them. In turn, the state compensates Living Human Treasures at a rate of approximately one million, five hundred thousand won (about 1150 US dollars as of 2022) per month, plus free medical treatment, and provision of or access to training and performance space (Yim 2014).

In this essay, I will focus on *salpurichum*, a traditional Korean folk dance designated by the state as Important Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 97 in 1990. Originally performed by a shaman to exorcize evil or negative energy, different lineages of *salpurichum* have been transmitted through embodied practice in various regions of Korea. In order to preserve *salpurichum*, the state designated Maebang Lee as the Living Human Treasure for the dance form in 1991. Lee dedicated his life to transmitting this dance form to his successors, supported by the

state's Cultural Heritage Protection Law, until he died in 2015 (Chung 1992; Lee 2015; Yang and Chumggun 2015). The state's ideal goal of preserving traditional dances in their original forms can be compared with an individual dancer's desire to innovate. I analyze contemporary South Korean dance artist YoungChul Kim's *Black-Salpuri*, comparing it with Lee's *salpurichum*. Through this analysis, I highlight the ways in which South Korea's Cultural Heritage Protection Act reinforces a binary between what is labeled as "traditional" and what is labeled as "contemporary Korean dance." I also show how such institutionalization has constructed the parameters of traditional Korean dance at home while making the innovated versions of traditional Korean dance less visible in the world. This study debunks the ontological nature of dance and body as a living archive and claims a broad spectrum between the state's goal of cultural preservation and an individual's tactics of cultural embodiment when dealing with tradition.

The Preservation of *Salpurichum* through Body

Among many performances of *salpurichum* that Maebang Lee performed, I analyze his 1994 performance showcased at Korean House as a part of an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage presentation. In the video, Lee danced with traditional Korean instruments such as *gayagum*, a long 12-stringed zither; *piri*, a bamboo oboe; *ajaeng*, a long bowed zither; *janggo*, an hourglass drum; and *jing*, a large gong with *sinawi jangdan*, a shamanic rhythm played in the background. Lee wore layers of white traditional Korean clothes including *baji*, loose pants for men; *jeogori*, a jacket; and *beoseon*, socks; and he put on a light blue and pale pink-colored *durumagi*, an outer robe for men. He wore a black headdress called *jokduri* and used a long white silk scarf. He started the dance facing his right side to the audience, on the upper right corner of the stage. He walked down to the center of the stage in a circular and curved pathway, expressing in his movement *jung-joong-dong*, which means stillness in motion. The dance

progressed in three stages: slow and controlled relaxation of tension at the beginning, accelerated motion while snapping the scarf and creating a circular illusion in space, and finally the slow resolution of tension again at the end.

Some of the lineages of *salpurichum* include a Gyeonggi province-based *salpurichum*, which uses about a 120 inch long, thin white scarf, and Gyeonggi province-style shamanic rhythm, called *dosalpuri jangdan*. A Jeolla province-based *salpurichum* uses about a 60 inch long white scarf and Jeolla province-style shamanic rhythm called *sinawi jangdan*. Maebang Lee, the Living Human Treasure, was born in Mokpo in Southern Jeolla province in 1927. He started to learn dance at the age of 7 from his grandfather who worked at *Kwonbun*, a government-level professional performing arts training institution during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897). He continued to learn several Korean traditional dance repertoires from other dance teachers in Korea and Japan during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). The Jeolla-lineage *salpurichum* that Lee embodied had been transformed as it had been practiced by different people in different historical contexts. Written archives show that a shaman ritual dance was transformed into a *Gibang*-style scarf dance² during the Joseon dynasty (Kim 1990, 64–67). This scarf dance was performed by low-class female artists for male patrons for entertainment purposes. The dance was then refined by Sungjoon Han into a theatrical dance to fit a proscenium stage in the 1930s.

Ramsay Burt points out that different training techniques or various resources available to contemporary dancers would cause changes in a reconstructed work to a certain degree. He states, “there is no original, only re-presentations of re-presentations of re-presentations” (Burt 1998, 33). Burt’s statement echoes the impossibility of preserving and

2. *Gibang* dance was a dance professionally performed by *gisaeng*, low-caste women who were good at arts—singing, dancing, painting, and writing. They belonged to the governing offices in each province. They were trained at the *gisaeng* training institutes and required to perform various functions for the royal court, regional offices, and wealthy patrons as government’s legal entertainers.

transmitting traditional Korean dance in its original form. It is questionable if Lee's version of *salpurichum* adapted from Han's restructured *salpurichum* could be considered the authentic original form.

André Lepecki considers the body a living archive, "a system or zone where works do not rest but are formed and transformed, endlessly—like ghostly matters" (2010, 44). Through the analysis of the contemporary works of Julie Tolentino's *The Sky Remains the Same*, Martin Nachbar's *Urheben Aufheben*, and Richard Move's *Martha@Mother*, Lepecki argues that the dancer's body actualizes the re-enactment of the dances' past, which cannot be fixed and represented in their singular "original" form. Lepecki views re-enactment as "a privileged mode to effectuate or actualize a work's immanent field of inventiveness and creativity" (45). My view aligns with Lepecki's in that I am not pessimistic about the bodily archiving that neither fixes the past nor delivers singular original works. As Lepecki proposes, I argue that bodily archiving offers possibilities to "unlock, release, and actualize" (42) a dance of the past. Lepecki's concept of re-enactment actualizes a possibility to expand our notion of tradition as what is *becoming*, transformative, ever-changing, and fluid in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Thus, his theory highlights bodily archiving as a possibility to embrace changes rather than a failure to reconstruct an original. From an ontological perspective, preserving and transmitting the originality of *salpurichum*, in an archetypal sense, are flawed because it is impossible to trace and confirm the very "original" version of the dance generated from former times. Lee's 1994 dance was a modified version of re-presentations of *salpurichum*. It is also impossible to reach an agreement about what the intrinsic quality of the form is because the measurement for the intrinsic aspect of the form cannot be standardized. I argue that the state's legal system that promotes the preservation of the original forms of traditional dances (whether as "archetypal form" or "intrinsic quality") represents a symbolic action rather than a concrete expectation. The key aspect of South Korea's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Act is to enable the sharing of a particular

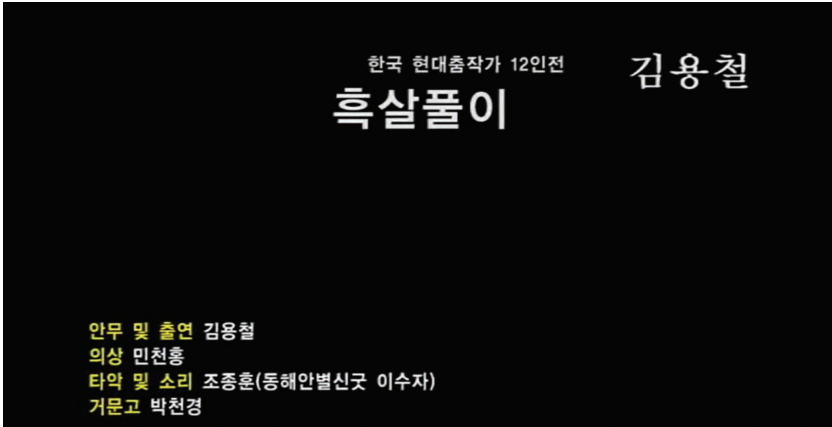
art, craft, or technique with the next generation through successor training³ in order to keep the tradition alive. The value of embodied tradition lies in what is molded by people who keep practicing it rather than keeping it sealed in a crystalized box. The beauty of transmitting embodied traditions is reflected in the continuation of practice, even allowing transformations, modifications, innovations, and deconstructions to be (re-)enacted by people taking part in these traditions.

Toward a New Perception of Tradition(al Dances)

Michel de Certeau (1984) follows the lead of, but re-examines, Pierre Bourdieu's logics of practice and subjectivity. Bourdieu views subjectivity as a reflection of broader structural processes. However, de Certeau grasps subjectivity in its fragmented forms and the action of everyday resistance as relatively independent of socially derived subjectivity (Napolitano and Pratten 2007, 6). He focuses on the consumer or user rather than the producer and provides concepts of "strategies and tactics" to frame the ways in which the user tactically re-appropriates, subverts, and maneuvers around institutions and structures of power. His notion of "tactics" is useful in considering the ways in which individual artists' tactical use of traditional Korean dance resists

3. There are several steps regarding the successor training for the transmission of traditions. Living Human Treasures provide beginners with the initial training. Among beginners, a Living Human Treasure or a Living Human Treasure group selects the best trainees. The selected trainees, called *Chunsuja*, receive government scholarships to continue their training. *Chunsuja* are then examined by the Living Human Treasures in the designated field; those who attain a higher level of skill are selected as advanced trainees, called *Isuja*. The advanced trainees with the highest level of skill earn the title of Assistant Instructors, called *Chunschogyo*; this is the highest level in the training chain superseded only by the Living Human Treasure designation. *Chunschogyo* receive a fixed stipend from the South Korean government to assist the Living Human Treasure with training beginners (*Chunsujas*) and other advanced students (*Isujas*). A government committee, called Intangible Cultural Property Committee, selects candidates from the pool of *Chunschogyo* to succeed each Living Human Treasure. When the current Living Human Treasures can no longer train successors due to illness or old age, they resign and are given the title of Honorary Living Human Treasure by the state to recognize their lifelong dedication to transmitting Korean cultural traditions.

and complicates the state's goal of protecting traditional dances designated as intangible cultural heritage in their "original" fixed forms. Among various works created by contemporary South Korean dance artists, Yongchul Kim's *Black-Salpuri*⁴ performed in 2015 at Dongsoong Art Center is a useful example of a DeCerteauian tactic.



KIM, Yongchul SEOP Dancecompany Korean Contemporary Dance Black-Salpuri 김용철 섯무용단 '흑살풀이'. <https://youtu.be/UKARx1J-n0w>

Under a dim blue spotlight, a sole dancer stands in the upper left corner of the stage. The dancer's entire body is covered by a long black fabric, which creates an image of a demon. The fabric trembles as the dancer hits it with his hands from the inside. The light reflected from the trembling, distorted surface of the fabric fills the stage with a mood of foreboding. After a long trembling moment, the dancer, still covered by the long fabric, walks slowly in a circle around the edge of the entire stage. The dancer keeps walking in circles, and a sorrowful male voice breaks the silence. The dancer finally finds a spot, stands firmly with open legs, and steadily raises his right arm to the

4. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKARx1J-n0w> (accessed April 21, 2022). Youngchul Kim's *Black-Salpuri* performance (costume designed by Chundhong Min; percussion and oral sound by Jonghoon Cho, an *isuja* of Shaman Ritual; Geomungo played by Chunjung Park) at Dongsoong Art Center in 2015.

side. To the beat of the Korean percussion instrument, *jangu*, the dancer abruptly bends his knees with legs wide apart and starts opening and closing his arms in different directions with minimal use of upper-body motion. The shapes of the fabric created by the dancer's motion evoke the image of something monstrous. From time to time, a bare foot, hand, fingers, or forearm burst out of the fabric, while quick percussion pours ecstatic energy out into the space. The dancer travels across the floor with only his hands sticking out of the fabric, as if he is trying to grab something. He stops at the lower right corner of the stage and rubs his palms together and then puts them back inside the fabric. The figure of fabric becomes wilder and bigger. After this moment of struggle, the dancer unveils his body gradually from the heels to head and emerges out of the fabric entirely. The uncovered dancer, dressed in a white linen button-down shirt and black pants, then grasps two corners of the rectangular fabric and walks backward across the floor. The fabric is blown by the wind in front of his body creating an image of a balloon floating in the air. The dancer carefully travels backward until he pulls the whole fabric into his chest without dropping it on the floor. The relationship between the dancer and the fabric makes me wonder if he was a shaman trying to calm down an angry devil or exorcize negative energy.

After a long pause, the dancer spreads the fabric on the floor and walks around outside of the edge of the rectangular fabric. A Korean string instrument, *geomungo*, plays in the background, and the dancer finds a spot at center stage facing the audience. He steps forward with knees bent by curling his foot from heel to toes. He breathes from the navel with the upper body hollowed and slightly tipped forward. He raises his arms to create a curved shape. As his dance progresses, the *geomungo* sound becomes combined with the *jangu* sound. The dancer shifts his head side to side, isolating his shoulders, turning from a ballet fourth position, thrusting his hips into a jump, sliding into the ground, and rolling on the floor, all while interacting with the fabric in various ways. The dancer's fast motion gradually fades out until he gets into the center of the stage where the folded fabric is located.

The dancer hunkers down looking at the fabric and the sad male voice begins again. The dancer carefully picks up the fabric, holds it tight to his chest, and turns away from the audience. His shoulders shake as if he is sobbing. He turns his head to the right and the left quickly several times, as if he is haunted by an evil spirit. He walks backward to the front side of the stage, his back to the audience. He turns around, his sweaty, emotional face to the audience. He covers his head with the fabric, holds it around his neck with one hand, and moves his body side to side while reaching out his right arm as if he is trying to release himself from a trap. He pauses and falls abruptly on his knee. He drops his head and shoulders down as if he finally realizes that he was the person who created the trap. The sound ceases. The light fades out leaving a feeling of acceptance.

The “original” content of *salpurichum* is generally about expelling negative energy. In Kim’s intense, powerful dance piece, the vivid movements and sounds particularly represent the negative emotions and desires that one might experience, and hope to release, in the space between life and death, as Kim explains in the program notes. In this sense, Kim’s *Black-Salpuri* contains *salpurichum*’s thematic idea of exorcizing negative energy. However, Kim’s dance work is clearly distinguished from Maebang Lee’s *salpurichum*. In Kim’s *Black-Salpuri*, Korean traditional dance is deconstructed and mixed with American/European modern and jazz dance styles and expressive pantomimic gestures.

In South Korea, traditional Korean dance is distinguished from contemporary Korean dance. While traditional Korean dance refers to dances that are generated from the Joseon dynasty or earlier, contemporary Korean dances are described as dances created by contemporary individual artists who modify traditional Korean dance through their own artistic expression. The “new” creation results from combining traditional Korean dance movement with Western modern dance or other dance styles. Or, it could be done by making changes in set designs, props, costumes, and/or music depending on an individual artist’s innovative choice, as shown in the case of Kim’s *Black-Salpuri*.

Ever since the South Korean government established the law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage in 1962, traditional dances and artists selected by the state and local governments have become more visible in public than in the past. The prevalence and visibility of their practice has contributed to familiarizing the general public with what traditional Korean dance is supposed to be, which creates the illusion of authenticity. The state's preservation system resulted in specific dances being selected as the repositories of Korean dance tradition and signals of Korean culture. Consequently, these selected dances have contributed to constructing South Korea's national and cultural identity. In addition, they have become a national symbol through which Korean people feel a sense of belonging to the nation both at home and in the world.

However, the conventions of selecting traditional Korean dances by the state's preservation system have also brought controversial outcomes. It has created a hierarchy between chosen traditional dances and not-chosen traditional dances. As a result, the chosen dances have become a top priority to be performed or taught in South Korea's higher education system, performing arts concerts, and tourist industry. The state-governed institutional practice to protect these traditional dances has also intensified the distinction between traditional Korean dance and contemporary Korean dance. This has led to the public's common perception of tradition as old, authentic, original, unchanging, and Korean, while positioning contemporary as new, innovative, changing, current, and Western. Such perceptions tend to reinforce the image of tradition as a fixed singular form generated from the past. Is the image of tradition that is created conceptually the same as how tradition is practiced and interpreted by individual dancers?

Let me revisit the example of Maebang Lee's *salpurichum* and Yongchul Kim's *Black-Salpuri*. Lee's *salpurichum* has been labeled as "traditional Korean dance" while Kim's *Black-Salpuri* has been marked as "contemporary Korean dance." It can be fair to say that Kim modified traditional Korean dance steps by mixing Western modern dance with Korean dance vocabulary. Lee wears traditional Korean clothing, *hanbok*, whereas Kim puts on a Western-style white shirt with black

pants. Kim's dance incorporates Western modern styles, whereas Lee's dance keeps Korean styles supposedly generated from the Joseon dynasty. In this sense, the term "contemporary" used to label Kim's dance seems to make more stylistic sense rather than temporal sense because, for one thing, Western modern dance, not to mention the clothes that Kim adopted in his dance, also emerged at least 100 years ago in the West. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the definition of "contemporary" is described as (1) living or occurring at the same time and (2) belonging to or occurring in the present. When Korean dance is divided into traditional and contemporary, the term "contemporary" seems to refer to something that is occurring in the present while "tradition" is something that belonged to the past. I wonder if there is anything contemporary about tradition.

Returning to the comparison between Lee's *salpurichum*, a traditional Korean folk dance form, and Kim's innovative dance piece again, how can we understand the relationship between the two dances? Can Kim's dance, labeled as "contemporary Korean dance," be considered within the spectrum of traditional *salpurichum*? Or are these dances positioned at the opposite extremes of tradition and contemporary because Kim challenges the "convention" of traditional *salpurichum*? If Kim's dance piece is perceived as a historiography of traditional *salpurichum* inscribed by an individual dancer along the road of transmitting tradition, could we call his dance a contemporary version of traditional Korean dance? Or, would tradition in Kim's piece become extinct once it is incorporated into his innovative dance? Obviously, Kim's dance would not be called contemporary Korean dance a hundred years from now. An analysis of Lee's *salpurichum* and Kim's *Black-Salpuri* in relationship to issues of originality, the ephemeral nature of dance, and the differences across the bodies shows that embodied tradition constantly evolves and thus carries contemporaneity with it. I argue that the concepts of "traditional" and "contemporary" overlap and that they should be understood as relational.

SanSan Kwan argues that (East) Asian dance is conventionally presumed to be historical rather than contemporary. Referring to Ananya

Chatterjea, she states, “when placed in front of ‘world dance,’ ‘contemporary’ loses its broad temporal meaning and becomes a dominant set of Euro-American aesthetics that serves to subsume and/or exclude even as it claims to welcome” (Kwan 2017, 46). She points out that the title “world dance” or region-based labels, such as Asian dance or African dance, fixes the image of a particular dance as atemporal. In “Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World,” Marta Savigliano wrote, “World Dance is a representation, a relatively new way of putting together, conceptualizing, and validating [the West’s] ‘other’ dances, rather than a plain discovery of their presence in the world” (2009, 164). Savigliano acutely points out that the term “World Dance” is a discursive concept. It is not a term based on corporeal enactment. I argue that the institutionalization of traditional Korean dance through the Cultural Heritage Protection Law has romanticized the image of authentic traditional Korean dance, which helps the West imagine others like Disney World’s “It’s a Small World” while putting the West’s others into one category—World Dance. The problem may not lie in the distinction between the two labels of traditional Korean dance and contemporary Korean dance. The problem, I point out, is the notion of tradition as a fixed, authentic, and original passed down for thousands of years while creating a dichotomy between East and West, between old and new, between unchanging and changing and between pure and impure. I argue that the state’s preservation system, even if it recognizes the fluid quality of embodied tradition, reinforces, as Kwan and Savigliano mention, an atemporal image of Asian dance (or World Dance) as viewed by the West. Yet, as discussed with the examples of Lee’s *salpurichum* and Kim’s dance piece, an individual dancer’s embodiment complicates the state’s goal of fetishizing tradition as a fixed entity linearly generated from the past.

Traditional Korean dance has constantly evolved and changed with “new” meanings and forms through various individual artists’ innovative practices in every era. I claim that tradition, as a whole, should be understood as what is becoming and, as such, should be open to

multiple interpretations of individual artists who practice on the route of transmitting tradition from one generation to the next generation.

Conclusion

I presented a comparison of Lee's *salpurichum* and Youngchul Kim's *Black-Salpuri* as an example to show how individual bodies enact tradition differently. While the state's system has focused on protecting the originality of traditional Korean dance, Kim's innovative dance piece reveals the fusion of traditional Korean dance and modern Western forms. Moreover, the comparison between Lee's *salpurichum*, which is labeled as "traditional Korean dance," and Kim's *Black-Salpuri*, which is marked as "contemporary Korean dance," shows that the binary labels of traditional and contemporary dances are false owing to the fact that even Lee's *salpurichum*, designated as the intangible cultural heritage aimed at protecting this traditional dance form in its original form, was, in fact, a modified and reinterpreted version of the *salpurichum* passed down from the Joseon dynasty and beforehand. This reminds us that there is always something contemporary about tradition and that these two concepts inevitably overlap. Embodied tradition is a living being. It is not an inanimate object to be fossilized and put in a glass box in a museum. A tradition dies when there is no way forward through the present.

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