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April 8, 2019

The Quest for “Koreanness” in Theater: An Examination of Traditional Forms in Three
Contemporary Korean Plays

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Abstract

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Unlike China and Japan, the history of Korea’s dramatic literature begins in the 20th century, coinciding with the development of modern Korea. Interestingly, rather than pursuing the futuristic, hypercapitalist modern Korea as a backdrop, playwrights have incorporated traditional elements, partly as a means to defy government appropriation of Korean tradition, and partly to legitimize a Korean theatrical tradition dating from older times. Using the plays *Oh Chang-gun’s Toenail* (1974) by Pak Choyŏl, *The Dummy Bride: Ceremony of Love* (1993) Lee Yun-taek, and *The Clowns* (2000) by Kim Tae-woong, Pak observed and critiqued the playwrights’ use of traditional Korean performance forms in plays in their efforts to define “Koreanness” in plays, particularly with the elements of *han*, national pain and sadness, and *hŭng*, the joy and playfulness of the Korean *kwangdae* tradition. Pak concluded that just as the Korean peninsula remains divided and Korean society remains fractured, the playwrights were ultimately unable to find reconciliation between the past and present within their plays through theater, weighed down by the problems of society and the pain of the past. Still, hope remains as long as the art and experimentation continue with new generations and an increasingly wider variety of voices joining the theatrical world.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In less than a hundred years, Korean drama's journey progressed from an imitative, Western-style drama at its inception, to inner-directed, Korean-focused experimental dramas, and finally to a mature Korean drama exhibiting universal qualities and appeal. . . . What will be the impact of the ongoing theatrical experiments with ritual, traditional folk performances, Pan-Asian aesthetics, and electronic media, among others? The shape, tone, and promise of Korean drama and theater in the next two or three decades are difficult to discern, a script yet to be determined.

— Richard Nichols, "Introduction," *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology* (2009)

Imagine walking through the streets of Seoul in the evening. Modern skyscrapers, cars, and billboards meet Buddhist temples, palaces, and street markets. With a population of 25 million in the metro area and a population density ten times higher than that of New York City, crowds and endless traffic continue to appear in the late hours, meaning a taxi or car is useless to get around. Most pedestrians, if not all, are dressed impeccably, very likely heading to an office dinner, where they will spend hours drinking and eating with coworkers. The latest technological gear finishes off the sophisticated look for many people, as Koreans are quite the early adopters of technology. Both men and women wear makeup to hide their faults, and more than a few look eerily alike, the perfect, employable look mastered by a plastic surgeon's knife. K-pop stars and Korean actors, the paragons of the Korean wave and Korean beauty standards, fill the billboards. Gaming centers are on every street. With the country's rapid internet speed, 24-hour gaming centers are constantly filled with teenagers and young adults seeking some kind of outlet for their school-related stress and anxiety. No one and nothing

stops for anyone in this city, where accomplishment beyond responsibility is seen as average work. The city is loud, smoggy, and machine-like.

Now imagine leaving the buzzing city streets to enter a theater, to see a piece of Korean theater. It's quieter, calmer, though chatter pervades before the show begins. Eventually, the house lights darken, the stage lights up, and life pauses for at least two hours as the actors move on the simple, almost bare stage, hearkening to older traditions and simpler days.

Background

Korean drama (plays) and Korean theater (the performance) have remained a footnote in discussions of Asian drama and theater, as they did not resemble Western ideas of drama and theater until the nation's colonization by Japan. However, the theatrical development afterwards still has little presence in the international theater scene, with few plays translated into English.¹

Still, Korea did have performance forms dating from the Three Kingdoms Period (c. 57 BCE–668 CE), although it is not certain what Korea's theatrical history per se looks like.² Still, scholars have noticed the impulse of contemporary Korean playwrights to look to their national and cultural past, and past theatrical forms.³ Yet, while scholars have acknowledged the South Korean government's role in defining Koreanness in culture (through censorship),⁴ the question

¹ Richard Nichols, *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ix.

² Yun-Taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2007), 1.

³ Gang-Im Lee, "Directing Koreanness: Directors and Playwrights under the National Flag, 1970-2000," (doctor's thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2008), iv.

⁴ Kyoungnye Kwon, "Shifting South Korean Theatre: Jo-Yeol Park's *A Dialogue Between Two Long-necked People* and Taesuk Oh's *Chunpung's Wife*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 23, no. 2 (2009): 48.

remains as to why these writers strongly believe that they need a traditional foundation to develop authentic Korean theater. Additionally, Korean traditional performing arts have not achieved much popularity in Korea, as opposed to Korean pop culture.⁵ One would think that the cyberpunk, futuristic society present in Seoul, and the corruption ever present within, provide ample inspiration for playwriting, but the dramatic literature suggests a different direction.

In this thesis, I will analyze selected works of three major Korean playwrights of the 20th century – Pak Choyŏl (b. 1930), Lee Yun-taek (b. 1952), and Kim Tae-woong (b. 1965) – which harken back to older traditions and respond to an oppressive government: Kim Tae-woong’s *The Clowns* (2000), Choyŏl Pak’s play *Oh Chang-gun’s Toenail* (1974); and Lee Yun-taek’s *The Dummy Bride: A Ceremony of Love* (1993). Based on the text and context of these plays, I will investigate the search for Koreanness and longing for tradition in the Western-influenced contemporary Korean theater.

Korea’s “Failed” History

While neighboring China’s dramatic literature began as early as the Tang dynasty (c. 618–907 CE)⁶ and neighboring Japan’s *Noh*, *bunraku*, and *kabuki* theatrical history dates from

⁵ Hee-sun Kim, “Performing History and Imagining the Past: Re-contextualization of Court Ensembles in Contemporary South Korea,” *The World of Music* 1, no. 1 (2012): 87.

⁶ Tang dynasty (618-907) dramas combined mime, stylized movement, and a chorus. In this form, dancer-actors enacted the chorus’s narration. Those early dance plays’ scripts are now known mainly through sources from the Tang period (618–907). Our knowledge of these forms have involved studying textual and visual representations. It is possible that some of the characteristics of later Chinese operas can be traced back to these early plays. Jukka O. Miettinen, “The Early History of Chinese Theatre,” *Asian Traditional Theatre & Dance* (Feb 23, 2018): <https://disco.teak.fi/asia/the-early-history-of-chinese-theatre/>.

the 14th century, Korea's dramatic literature starts in the 1900s. Korean drama's content is inspired by the nation's downfall and struggle in the 19th and 20th centuries, and its aesthetic and dramatic form are inspired both by existing traditional performance forms and imported Western theater.

Ancient, Medieval, and Early Modern Korean Performance Forms

Looking into traditional performance source-forms requires examination of traditional music, dance, and ritual forms. Contemporary playwrights draw their traditional inspiration out of these musical and dance elements that had more focused development over Korea's 5,000-year history.

Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE). The lack of written records makes it impossible to accurately describe dances and dance plays of the Kojosŏn (c. 2333 BCE–108 BCE) and Puyŏ (c. 2nd century BCE–494 CE) dynasties that predate the Three Kingdoms. Only in the 7th century and onward do Chinese, Japanese, and Korean accounts indicate Korean court performances in the Three Kingdoms of Koguryŏ, Paekche, and Silla.

In Koguryŏ, encompassing what is now Manchuria and northern Korea, performers performed *chisŏ* and *kajisŏ*, combining local styles of music and dance with Central Asian music and dances, with mask dances making up twelve of the 24 extant pieces.⁷ To the southwest, the strongly Buddhist state of Paekche imported the Buddhist masked-dance processional (*kiak*)

⁷ James R. Brandon, "Korean Performing Arts," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Aug 19, 2011): <https://www.britannica.com/art/Korean-performing-arts>.

⁸ from southern China, and, for missionary purposes, Paekche brought *kiak* to Japan in 612 CE, according to Japanese historical accounts. The mask tradition continues in different iterations after this period, and is arguably the most tangible evidence of traditional influence in contemporary Korean theater.

Unified Silla Period (668 CE–935 CE). In the 7th century, the third kingdom, Silla, absorbed Koguryŏ and Paekche, ushering in the Unified Silla period (668–935). In this period, the folk and court performing arts of the former kingdoms intermingled, developing into “The Five Displays”, which included acrobatics, ball juggling, farcical pantomime, shamanistic masked dances, and the lion dance.⁹ Like Paekche, Silla’s national religion was Buddhism, leading to the preservation of Buddhist masked-dance rituals.

Koryŏ Dynasty (918 CE–1392 CE). In 935, Unified Silla fell into decline due to the collapse of their hierarchical system, leading the remaining nobles to found the Koryŏ dynasty, maintaining the Buddhist status quo. Koryŏ performers carefully preserved dances and masked plays from Silla and performed them along with new masked dance plays during the Buddhist Feast of Lanterns and the midwinter ceremony celebrating the gods.¹⁰ Knowledge of these plays arise from historical record, as no performance text was preserved.

In the Koryŏ period, professional troupes became a new part of urban life. With knowledge of court performing arts spreading through court performers holding civil-service jobs across the nation, low-class clowns got together into troupes and began secularizing religious masked dances. The clowns, called *kwangdae*, performed acrobatics and shows of

⁸ Called *gigaku* in Japan. No Korean historical record of *kiak* survives, and our knowledge of it arises from Japanese historical records.

⁹ James R. Brandon, “Korean Performing Arts,” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Aug 19, 2011): <https://www.britannica.com/art/Korean-performing-arts>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

skill, and, at least by the 12th century, they started staging satiric dialogue plays ridiculing officials.

Chosŏn Dynasty (1392 CE–1910 CE). The Mongol Yuan invasion of the Koryŏ dynasty eventually led to its demise in 1392, and an influential general and his sons founded the Neo-Confucian Chosŏn dynasty. While previous dynasties regularly held court performances based on Buddhist holidays and traditions, the national preference for Confucianism meant that court entertainments were held at any time they were required. Buddhist performances, no longer officially sanctioned by Chosŏn royalty, maintained some presence among the regular people, joining the folk religion dances of shamans from earlier times. A 1488 account by a Chinese envoy to the Chosŏn court described a dragon-god dance play, children's dancing, acrobats, rope-walking, and displays of animal puppets. The flourishing theatrical development ended; following invasions by the Japanese (1592) and by the Manchu (1636), court support declined.

During the flourishing and decline of court performances, conditions of Chosŏn society heavily separated the orthodox culture and the popular culture. The higher culture based its institutions on Chinese models and shunned the popular culture; Chinese Neo-Confucianism determined the philosophy and aesthetics of the former, while indigenous shamanism influenced the latter; the literature of the former was written, while the content of the latter was oral; and the literary language of the former was Chinese characters, while that of the latter was Korean.¹¹ So, folk art came to be preserved by rote learning.

¹¹ Marshall R. Pihl, "P'ansori: The Korean Oral Narrative," *Korean Studies* 5, no. 1 (1981): 43-44. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.1981.0012>.

Folk performance continued in the *kwangdae* troupe system, with *kwangdae* performing *sandae togam gug*, satires of depraved Buddhist monks and corrupt officials, and also included *p'ansori*, *tal'ch'um* (mask dances), and puppet plays. The *kwangdae* spirit of treating serious, dark situations with the humor of obscene antics, bitter jokes, and coarse language is a very real presence in the plays discussed here.

P'ansori involved a solo performer telling a story, accompanied by a percussionist. While written down between the 1860s and 1884 by the scholar Sin Chaehyo, the originally oral tradition of *p'ansori* comprised at least twelve major works, of which only five remain: the *Ch'unhyangga*, the *Simch'ŏngga*, the *Hŭngbuga*, the *Sugungga*, and the *Chŏkpyŏkka*.¹² Combining verse, music, and drama, *p'ansori* took several hours to perform and years of training¹³ to master and memorize. The *kwangdae* performer emphasized timing, gesture, and mood. And other dramatic considerations over the loose plot developed from myths, legends, and folktales of Korea and elsewhere in Asia.¹⁴ Although not written down, *p'ansori* had precise form:

The metrical basis of traditional Korean poetry is a foot three or four syllables in length. Two such feet comprise the smallest freestanding prosodic unit, that is, the unit that precedes or follows a caesura. This unit serves as a hemistich in *p'ansori* verse. It typically is balanced by another such hemistich, together with which it forms a full line . . . the *p'ansori* song is made up of basic structural units [called themes] . . . While creating lines of verse by the formulaic method, the traditional *kwangdae* was also mindful of the themes his verse constituted and the episodes into which those themes were grouped. Moreover, he was aware of the final shape of the whole song that a sequence of episodes would ultimately produce.¹⁵

¹² *P'ansori*: the one-man opera genre comparable to the Chinese chantefable (*chu-kung-tiao*), Japanese puppet libretti (*jōruri*), and the Yugoslav oral epic.

¹³ The Korean professional tradition was characterized by master-disciple relationships.

¹⁴ Marshall R. Pihl, "P'ansori: The Korean Oral Narrative," *Korean Studies* 5, no. 1 (1981): 46-7. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.1981.0012>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 53-4.

These whole songs told stories in which virtue is rewarded well. The *Ch'unhyangga*, the most popular *p'ansori*, highlights the chastity and resistance of a lowly courtesan who marries above her station. The most tragic *p'ansori*, *Simch'ŏngga*, features the extreme filial piety of a daughter who sacrifices her life to restore sight for her blind father. The *Hŭngbuga* emphasizes virtue rewarded by wealth and forgiveness between brothers. The most difficult *p'ansori*, the *Chŏkpyŏkka* recounts the Chinese historical legend of the Battle of the Red Cliffs. And lastly, the *Sugungga's* story tells a message of the relationship of subject to king using anthropomorphic animal characters. While *p'ansori* is predominantly an entertainment form of the lower classes, the upper scholarly class acknowledged this form for its themes, leading to the first written record in 1754 by a scholar viewing the *p'ansori Ch'unhyangga*. *P'ansori* was the closest Korea got to developing dramatic literature, but its evolution was halted by imperial Japan and the Korean War, picking back up after the 1960s as *ch'angguk* opera.

These non-written theatrical elements find their way into developing contemporary Korean theater. The puzzle of the lack of Korean investment in developing institutional theater with a dramatic literature prior to modern times remains a question, especially with Korea squarely between China and Japan and Korea's history of importing cultural elements from China. Several answers of the question have arisen, such as the lack of a wealthy middle class, the illiteracy of the low-class popular entertainers, the harsher censorship of written text over oral performance, and the investment of the scholarly class in *sijo* poetry and other solitary art forms not requiring an audience. Regardless, written drama came into Korea not through China, but through the Japanese.

Foreign Influence

Japanese Imperialism. The story of Japanese rule over Korea starts with the 1853 arrival of American warships in Japan, causing Japan to realize it was behind technologically. The resulting Meiji Restoration created a Japan wishing to follow the European imperialist example, and this Japan negotiated the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1876. With this treaty, a complex coalition of the Meiji government, military, and business officials sought to integrate Korea both politically and economically into the Empire of Japan. In 1905, the then-Korean Empire was declared a protectorate of Japan. Finally, in 1910, the Japan-Korea treaty finalized the annexation of Korea by Japan, even though the treaty was never actually signed by the Korean Emperor, Gojong.

With the new occupation came increased censorship and oppression of Korean traditions, including *p'ansori* and *t'alch'um*. Japanese performances, *kabuki*, *shinpa* (an amalgam of Japanese kabuki and the Japanese perception of Western realism), and *shingeki* (a Japanese new drama form committed to realism). Certain art forms were devalued as opposed to censored, a chief example being the devaluation of the Korean *p'ansori* classic *Chunhyangga* (c. 1661–1720, written in 1754). Murayama Tomoyoshi and his Shinkyō Theater Troupe put on a 1938 Japanese-language *kabuki* adaptation of this epitome of Korean tradition. Korea being a colony of Japan at the time, the production meant to transform and exoticize cherished elements of Korean culture into mass-produced objects for indiscriminate imperial consumption.¹⁶ With this form of cultural appropriation, opening to rave reviews in major cities

¹⁶ Nayoung Aimee Kwon, “Conflicting Nostalgia: Performing ‘The Tale of Ch'unhyang’ (春香傳) in the Japanese Empire,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2014): 114-5. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43553397>.

throughout Japan, imperial Japan satisfied a present colonizing desire to subsume a past prior to colonization: simultaneously assimilating colonized subjects onto shared Asian traditions and differentiating them to justify subjugation.

Aside from the dual continuation and non-continuation of Korean performing arts, Japan introduced Western theater, including Shakespeare, Chekhov, Strindberg, and Ibsen, among others. While the Japanese sought to use Shakespeare to ensure their superiority and indoctrinate their colony, Koreans came to see Shakespeare as a moralist or social thinker, with the popularity of *Julius Caesar* based on its principle of nationalism related to anti-colonial struggle against Japanese rule, asserting, paradoxically, that exclusively learning from Western culture was the only path to become independent from Japan.¹⁷ And this elevation of Western culture, especially in theater and drama, pervades the anxiety surrounding authentic and valuable Koreanness in contemporary Korean theater.¹⁸

In the same vein, Christianity started to become an additional element in Korean identity. This development was less traumatic, given that the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism on Korean society was also imported. Christian resistance against the Japanese pressure for the Koreans to follow Shinto rites strengthened the religion in the nation, in a nation that had originally reviled it, as Catholics had frequently been martyred throughout the dynastic periods, and late 19th century Christian evangelism arrived in an extremely isolated

¹⁷ Young-lim Han, "Cultural Translation and Theatrical Openness; Shakespeare's Reception in Korea," *Proceedings The First International Conference*, ed. The Korean Society of Feminist Studies in English Literature (Seoul, 2004), 121-2.

¹⁸ Moran Kim, "The Stages 'Occupied by Shakespeare': Intercultural Performances and the Search for 'Korean-ness' in Postcolonial Korea" in *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 201-2.

and xenophobic Chosŏn. Therefore, yet another Western ideology became a step for the nation to resist the Japanese occupation, and found itself ingrained with Korean nationalism.

USSR, USA, & The Korean War. The overwhelming power of Western nations created another disruption in Korean national development, as post-World War II, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America divided the innocent ex-colony of Japan across an arbitrary line. Though the Korean resistance worked behind the scenes for years to win Korean independence, ultimately liberation came at the hands of outsiders who decided on leaders most beneficial to their interests rather than the interests of the Korean people.

Additionally, the Korean War, a theater of the Cold War struggle between the two Western world powers, further accentuated the sentiment of reluctance to adopt Western culture as a path to increase the respect and dignity of the downtrodden nation, and it did not help that the Soviets and the Americans dictated theatrical activity for a period:

From Korea's liberation through (and after) the partitioning of the peninsula, nationalist and Communist groups fervently used the theater as propaganda in their struggle for political hegemony. On the left, the Yŏngŭk Kŏnsŏl Ponbu (Theater Rehabilitation Headquarters) produced historical or political plays, but its activities were limited by a U.S. military command directive. On the right was the Kŭgyesul Hyŏphoe (Theater Arts Association), for which Yu Ch'ijin wrote antileftist works. . . The ideological conflict, chaotic political environment, and subsequent Korean War brought theater production to a standstill, except for a few performances of Shakespearean plays staged in Pusan. Playwriting as an art was moribund.¹⁹

While theater development more or less halted during the division and devastation of the Korean War, the resulting national trauma pervaded the political turmoil and the dramatic literature that would yet arise, with the anxiety of authentic Koreanness persisting in both North and South Korea.

¹⁹ Richard Nichols, "Introduction," *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 6.

The Contemporary Korean Theater System

When theater finally began developing after the Korean War, it became commonplace for playwrights to direct productions of their own work (the playwrights discussed here have directed all known productions of the plays, with the exception of Pak Choyŏl, who passed away in 2016), with a few of them leading their own theater companies.²⁰ In its early days, Koreans easily founded theater companies, moving into basements around universities, which created an “unexpected liberating catalyst in the search for subject matter, aesthetics, and dramatic form that were at once modern . . . and Korean.”²¹

With government censorship the main obstacle, playwrights also had to resort to creative methods to circumvent the censors, and with the government’s efforts to preserve and highlight traditional Korean performance forms, theater practitioners persevering in the oppressed industry sought a productive and beneficial way to integrate the modern and the traditional.

Defining Han and Hŭng

Two elements unique to Korean art are *hŭng* and *han*,²² which together shape the national ethos, playing more explicit roles in the theater that develops in the 1960s and

²⁰ Lee Yun-taek was the artistic director of the Yeonhuidan Georipae before he was arrested for sexual assault and rape charges.

²¹ Richard Nichols, “Introduction,” *Modern Korean Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.

²² *Hŭng* (흥, 興) and *han* (한, 恨) has associated Chinese characters, but like other words, it has evolved its own unique Korean meanings.

onward. *Hŭng* has less literature dedicated to it, but the word encompasses immense joy. The Chinese character for *hŭng* includes the radical for woman and the radical for flourishing or rising up. *Hŭng* is more associated with the escapist, comedic, joyful folk art of clowning and the music of Korean rural harvest festivals. This signifies a hope of a better future, or at least the fact that even in the darkest moments, the Korean people can find enjoyment with each other, and use that joy to propel revolution, social change, or simply survival.

Han is a “multi-layered and multifaceted mix of emotions, and is not easily understood from any single perspective,”²³ the collective Korean feeling of oppression and isolation in the face of insurmountable odds, the overcoming of which is beyond the nation’s own capabilities. Analyzing *Han* as a Chinese character, the character includes the radical for heart, the radical for vocal sound, and the radical for shadow, signifying an overwhelming emotion in the shadows that can only come out in wailing. Therefore, the Korean word includes aspects of lament and unavenged injustice, dating at least back to Silla’s inability to unify the peninsula without foreign Tang dynasty help, resurfacing in the Yuan dynasty oppression of the Koryŏ, and in the 15th century Japanese invasions, the 20th century Japanese annexation, and the Korean War. Additionally, in peaceful times, *han* even included the oppression of the lower classes by corrupt officials and unjust kings. The continual and exacerbated pain of a people losing its sovereignty and agency to the Japanese, the Soviets, and the Americans accentuated the *han* ethos and left the national psyche shattered, setting the stage for a tense and violent political development, with theater becoming a conduit of colliding opinions.

²³ Jung-Soon Shim, “The Shaman and the Epic Theatre: the Nature of Han in the Korean Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2004): 216.

Politics of Korean Theater

New Village Theater Movement

The Korean government did not begin dictating the national theater until the *Yushin* (rejuvenation or restoration) reforms of the 3rd president (albeit dictator) Park Chung-hee in the 1970s, developing the New Village Theater movement:

The KCAF [the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation] perceived that sponsoring cultural events created crucial venues where state propaganda could be delivered to people. Participants in KCAF-promoted activities were said to contribute to the strength of the nation only when they worked for social 'harmony' (hwahap) under the guidance of cultural leaders.²⁴

The New Village Theater movement sought to sponsor new theater based on traditional forms to mold the people as government leaders saw fit, effectively drowning out criticism of the administration's disregard for the basic freedoms it claimed to uphold.

South Korean cultural leaders of the New Village Theater movement urged Korean citizens to participate in state-sponsored amateur theater in villages, schools, and factories to give back to their country, with approved scripts illustrating the ideal of "let's try living well." For example, aging Individual Saving Accounts, a significant financial resource for the state, became a focus of New Village propaganda²⁵. Theater productions idealized model Korean citizens who worked hard, lived simply, and saved money, with promises that savings would make the village rich, with some scripts going so far as to claim that saving money cannot be a

²⁴ Sang Mi Park, "The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 15, no. 1 (2010): 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490258>.

²⁵ Sang Mi Park, "The Paradox of Postcolonial Korean Nationalism: State-Sponsored Cultural Policy in South Korea, 1965-Present," *The Journal of Korean Studies* 15, no. 1 (2010): 81-2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490258>.

personal choice, but was a duty to the state. With theater entertainment urging Koreans to become useful members of society, this laid the foundation for the ensuing regimes' use of entertainment to garner support for political objectives.

Minjung and Madangguk

Almost in response to the New Village Theater movement, *madangguk* (i.e. *madang* performances) in 20th-century Korea, inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), involved progressive theater practitioners who rehearsed mass demonstrations with the community and provided a space to creatively discuss political issues in some degree of safety:

In the '70s, it was considerably easier to organize Madang performances in the villages—not because Korea was any freer or more democratic but because the government was not as aware of the political power of culture. The Kwangju Uprising of 1980, which resulted in the massacre of 3,000 citizens by South Korean soldiers, changed all that. Between 1976 and 1980, many grassroots cultural groups were organized in the Kwangju slums and in the countryside. Painters, musicians, and actors ran night classes for workers and peasants who later organized themselves into Madang groups. With their performances, they spread the news about the preparations for the uprising. Community-based cultural groups were instrumental in the actual mobilization of the Kwangju population during the rebellion itself and Madang plays were performed throughout the city encouraging the people to persevere in their struggle. Other groups presented 'living newspapers' as alternative news coverage or 'situational plays,' while painters were painting revolutionary murals and posters.²⁶

It was here the national ethos of *han* and *hŭng* came to play, and where the playwrights Pak Choyŏl, Lee Yun-taek, and Kim Tae-woong got their inspiration to write plays. While essentially *madangguk* is another example of Western influence, between Boal and the Living Newspaper tradition, this movement was taken toward the empowering of indigenous experience.

²⁶ Eugène Van Erven, "Resistance Theatre in South Korea: Above and Underground," *TDR* (1988-) 32, no. 3 (1988): 165. doi:10.2307/1145913.

Of course, just as the New Village Theater movement arose out of the larger *Yushin* reforms by President Park Chung-hee, the *madangguk* genre arose out of the 1970s-1980s *minjung* (meaning “common people”) movement that defended the politically oppressed, economically exploited, sociologically marginalized, culturally despised, and religiously condemned. *Minjung* encompassed labor rights protests, student protests for democracy, and the work of artists, filmmakers, poets, novelists, and dramatists. The plays discussed in the thesis do not classify as *madangguk*, but develop out of the context of the *minjung* spirit that motivated people at the grassroots level to, in their view, correctly apply Korean traditional art forms in their work.

For example, Pak Choyŏl wrote *Oh Chang-gun’s Toenail* in 1974 during the height of the *Yushin* reforms and the beginnings of *minjung*. President Park effectively took control of the legislature, extending his presidential term and ensuring that public school education would indoctrinate a new generation of Koreans loyal to his regime. The economy may have flourished with his pushes for industrialization and modernization, at the gain of the wealthy and at the expense of democracy.²⁷ President Park’s utter neglect of the farmers and laborers in the 1970s add meaning to the plight of Oh Chang-gun and his family in Pak’s play. Pak also responds aversely to the *Yushin* reforms’ incessant drive forward. Pak’s longing for the simpler time contrasts sharply with the building of a cold, modern Korea.

In 1993, when Lee Yun-taek writes *The Dummy Bride*, the height of *minjung* has already passed. The election of Kim Young-sam, the first civilian to hold the office in over 30 years, and President Kim’s anti-corruption campaign, created a new domestic peace.²⁸ But guilt,

²⁷ Hyun-hee Lee, *New History of Korea* (Paju-si, Gyeonggi-do : Jimoondang, 2005), 600-604.

²⁸ Young Whan Kihl, *Transforming Korean Politics: Democracy, Reform, and Culture* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 102–142.

resentment, and pain from the 1970s and 1980s era remained, most notably the Gwangju Uprising and massacre in May of 1980. In *The Dummy Bride*, Lee considers Korea's future defined by its past, and whether reconciliation is even possible.

By the time Kim Tae-woong writes *The Clowns* in 2000, *minjung* has become a historical event. But Kim inserts the idea of artists as active protesters into historical fiction, and, by directly relating protest art with the *kwangdae* of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Kim lays claim to a direct connection between traditional Korean performance and the duty and work of contemporary Korean dramatists and theater performers today.

The Quest of "Koreanness"

Hypothesis

The quest for "Koreanness" has so far limited Korean theater to an exclusively Korean audience, therefore limiting translation, overseas performances, and general discussion within the theater canon and Asian theater studies. Korean playwrights, the Korean government, and the Korean populace have a stake and role in this quest, with divided approaches and divided emphasis on the national feelings of *han* and *hŭng*, suffering and joy, respectively. These insecurities and divided perceptions of identity extend across the border to North Korea, all together creating an uncertain future for contemporary Korean theater. The effort to reconcile an oppressive history, the comedic *kwangdae* tradition, and the incessant drive into the future have only contributed to that uncertainty.

Method and Limitations of Research

The core of my research lies in the text, context, and background of the three plays, the connections between them, and the connections they have with traditional Korean performing arts. Therefore, the textual analysis will come first, then the production history of each play (including audience response), historical analysis of the events pervading the playwrights' minds using relevant sources, and finally an examination of how the traditional elements allow the playwrights to express something fresh and urgent. Essentially, this thesis relies on a dramaturgical approach to the three plays.

In terms of limitations, first, this thesis will not address in depth the issues of translation, nor delve too deeply into nuances of the original Korean text, focusing instead on the generalities as can be taken from translation, with some notes on how the original language affects the Korean audience.

Second, I acknowledge the crimes and horrible actions of playwright Lee Yun-taek, sentenced to six years in prison for the sexual abuse of nine women who worked in his theater. The power given to playwright-directors who lead their theaters has allowed for easier production of plays according to original intent and without the middle-men of separate producers and outside directors, but that immense power has created a power differential that created an avenue for sexual harassment. The esteem, renown, and respect given to playwrights and the control they have over their own work has largely shaped contemporary Korean theater business, so that they can explore beyond the popular and find art. In this

thesis, I have chosen to separate the work from the artist, and analyze the elements of the play and his vision that have contributed to Korean contemporary theater.

Lastly, while the topic can include dozens of plays, there is a necessity to restrict the number of works selected for this investigation. Many other plays employ traditional art forms along with heavy topics (especially those of Korean female playwrights), but have not been translated. The variance of the three playwrights lie mainly in their differing generations, ideologies, and styles, but otherwise, they are all male, Korean, and fairly well-educated. However, while highly focused on three translated plays, I hope my research encourages more exploration, translations, and productions of Korean plays abroad. Korean theater deserves recognition and acknowledgement within and beyond the Korean borders for the continuing captivating struggle of identity in the midst of varying influences on Korean culture.

Chapter Two

Kim Tae-woong's *The Clowns* (2000): *Kwangdae* and Protest Theater

The Clowns is Kim Tae-woong's third play, and it received significant acclaim in Korea, earning four awards. As such, the play established Kim's technique of approaching a larger theme, in this case laughter as a motivation for art, using the sophisticated tools of history, characters, and traditions. The spirit of *kwangdae* display a real presence here with the clown characters featured, and provide a historical approach to hearkening Korean performance traditions.

The importance of *kwangdae* finds its place in the play's title, but *kwangdae* is not the title in Korean. *The Clowns'* original Korean title is *Yi* 《O(爾)》, which literally means 'you', except exclusively used by the king to respectfully address his officials, ministers, etc. Translator Will Kern and Kim Tae-woong both decided that 'You' would not be the best English title, chose *The Clowns*. By that point, Kim Tae-woong had already decided that the clowns should have the most prominent place, as his latest 2010 production gave those characters the most limelight and the most elaborate and spectacular stage presence, even with their few lines.

This play is the most direct example of tracing Korean contemporary theater and drama to older performance forms, given its use of historical characters in a historical setting surrounding an uprising against a tyrannical ruler. While the history books frame ideology as a primary motivator for the rebellion, *The Clowns* bring in the artists' influence on events and the will of the people for a fair and just government as significant factors in inducing change.

Historical Context

General Yi Sŏng-gye founded Chosŏn dynasty when the previous Koryŏ dynasty ruler and leading general insisted on reclaiming Koryŏ land from the emerging Ming dynasty in China. With the help of the Koryŏ literati, Yi Sŏng-gye and his family successfully overthrew the Koryŏ and established the Chosŏn dynasty, becoming the new royal family. Through his reign, and the reigns of his sons and grandson, Chosŏn became grounded on Confucian principles, hence the scholarly examination system and the new literati class.

Confucianism focuses on cultivation of human virtue and maintenance of ethics, particularly in the context of these five bonds: ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, elder brother to younger brother, friend to friend. Each role has its own responsibilities, mainly that the subordinate people often exhibit loyalty and filial piety, while the dominant people exhibit humaneness and benevolence. Governance would, in theory, be based on meritocracy, save the king, who has a degree of divine right. Nevertheless, it was perceived to be the duty of the people to replace an incompetent, flawed ruler.

Social Stratification in the Chosŏn Dynasty

Chosŏn society, by law, had only two distinct social classes, the *sangmin* (people required to pay taxes and allowed to take the civil service exams) and the *ch'onmin* (the slaves and the unclean). However, in practice, four social classes emerged and solidified over time, with the *yangban* literati at the top; the *chungin* merchants, technical specialists, and

illegitimate children of the *yangban* in the middle; the *sangmin* farmers below them; and the *ch'onmin*, the slaves, clowns, courtesans, and the butchers, below it all. A king, along with a bureaucracy made up of *yangban*, ruled Chosŏn. The *yangban* maintained their status de jure through the *kwagŏ*, the royal examinations taken to obtain high positions in the government.

²⁹ Exempt from taxes, ³⁰ manual labor, and conscription, *yangban* men studied calligraphy, poetry, classical Chinese texts, and Confucian rites from a young age to represent their families honorably. Inevitably, there would remain a struggle of power between the king and the *yangban* gentry.

King Yonsan, the Despot

Although the king, in theory, had absolute authority, the actual amount of power varied throughout the historical periods. Tradition, precedents set by earlier kings, Confucian teachings, and a bureau set to oversee the king's actions limited the king's power. Still, as the king demands loyalty from all his subjects, so the subjects have the right to blame the king for any disaster, either man-made or natural. Overall, the burden of kingship was a heavy burden to bear.

With Yonsan suffering from the trauma of his mother's death at his grandmother's, and possibly his father's, hands, he acted out with cruel vengeance when on the throne, taking in a huge harem of young girls ripped from their homes across the nation, setting up a theater for

²⁹ Although any tax-paying citizen was eligible for civil service, the *yangban* class slowly formed as positions passed within families and members of those families had more time to study for the civil service examination as opposed to others.

³⁰ This was not originally the case, but as *yangban* took civil office, they often shifted the laws in their favor, or used their power to promote lack of enforcement.

common *kwangdae* rather than following court protocol for court entertainers, favoring the *gisaeng* concubine Noksu as the female leader of palace affairs as opposed to his official queen, and striking down anyone who threatened him down with the sword. He was fortunate to inherit a powerful throne strengthened by his father's reign, but rather than rule wisely, he demanded absolute power and despised comparisons to his father. His actions instead created disgust from the *yangban* class, resulting in a rebellion, and history has labeled him the villain ever since.

While the general history of Yonsan inspired *The Clowns*, the specific moment depicted occurred in the 11th year of Yonsan's reign, as recorded in the *Annals of the Chosŏn Dynasty*.³¹ In the record, the *kwangdae* Gonggil confronted Yonsan about his method of ruling by acting as an old man talking about the late King Seongjong, saying "His Majesty was a wise, virtuous king, while I was his quiet servant. But sadly, the wise and virtuous don't last, and the quiet remain." Then Gonggil quoted Analects 12.11, saying, "Let the ruler be a ruler, minister be a minister, father be a father, son be a son. Indeed, if the ruler is not a ruler, even if I have food, how can I eat it?" And Yonsan, angered by Gonggil's mocking of him, and yet too fond to execute him, ordered Gonggil's flogging and exile. The boldness of the lowly entertainer is dramatized in the play.

³¹ The *Annals* cover the 472-year history of the Joseon Dynasty from the 1st ruler, King Taejo, to the 25th ruler, King Cheoljong, and were prepared according to strict compilation standards. The records of King Gojong (26th ruler) and King Sunjong (the 27th and final ruler) are not included in the Joseon Annals because these records were prepared during the Japanese colonial period not in accordance with the strict compilation standards, and there might be distortions of the records. The Joseon Annals consist of 1,893 volumes and are arranged by chronological order, including the events of every single day during the 472-year history.

Plot Summary

The plot of the play has a late point of attack. King Yonsan has already discovered the causes of his mother's death and avenged them (the preliminary event), and Gonggil has already entered the lap of luxury and the bosom of the king. Noksu is already wary and jealous of Gonggil, and the ministers are already frustrated with their king. Some hints to the history, or explicit mention, lies in the dialogue and soliloquies of the characters.

The play opens with a funeral dance ritual, followed by Yonsan expressing grief for his mother's death. Gonggil appears to comfort him, and as they share the night, Yonsan's most favored concubine Noksu gives birth to a child, setting the stage for Gonggil and Noksu's power struggle for their futures and Yonsan's favor.

The conflict starts to come to a head when Yonsan appoints Gonggil as the Daebong of the Hirkuan (leader of the palace theater), per Gonggil's request to the king. Jangsaeng, another *kwangdae*, confronts Gonggil for becoming too politically ambitious and capricious, for losing sight of the *kwangdae*'s mission to produce laughter out of hardship, to speak for the people and not for the establishment. Three conflicts unfold: Gonggil's ideals versus Jangsaeng's ideals, Gonggil versus Noksu, and the king versus his ministers. Jangsaeng leaves, and ends up encountering the *yangban* Park Wonjong, who is starting a plot against the king. At the end of the first act, Noksu begins a plot to destroy Gonggil.

In the second act, using Gonggil's literacy against him, Noksu forges a treacherous note in his handwriting to implicate him in treason. Noksu almost successfully accuses Gonggil, but Jangsaeng returns in time and takes responsibility to save Gonggil. Yonsan orders Jangsaeng's

blinding and execution, ignoring Gonggil's pleas, but allows a final performance. Jangsaeng dies by beheading. Distracted by the internal palace drama, the rebels close in, and in the confusion, Noksu is murdered, Gonggil commits suicide, and the king resigns to his fate as the doors of the palace break open. The play closes with another funeral exorcism rite, mirroring the first one.

Production History

Born in 1965, playwright Kim Tae-woong received his Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Seoul National University, and received his MFA in playwriting from the Korea National University of Arts (K-ARTS). Currently a playwriting professor at K-ARTS, Kim Tae-woong, by the time he writes *The Clowns*, or *Yi* in its original title, has seen significant examples of positive and negative change. These changes include the military dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee, Park's assassination in 1979, President Chun Doo-hwan's coup d'état in 1979, the Gwangju massacre in 1980, the start of the current Korean republic in 1987, the 1988 Olympics, and the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Not only do these events inevitably warp Kim's ideas of authority and political leadership, but also his views of Korean culture.

Kim Tae-woong has taken the directorial role for every known Korean production of *The Clowns*. The play was first performed at Arko Arts Theater in 2000, featuring Oh Man-seok as Gonggil, Kim Roi-ha as King Yonsan, Kim Jin-kyung as Noksu, and Lee Seung-hoon as Jangsaeng.



Figure 2.1. Arko exterior, Photograph by Arts Council Korea



Figure 2.2. Arko Main Theater Interior, where the play was staged, Photography by Arts Council Korea



Figure 2.3. Original poster for the original 2000 production, with Oh Man-seok's face replacing the \circ in 이 .

These actors have reprised their roles in some of the eight times the play was officially presented in Korea. For example, Oh Man-seok has played Gonggil four times on stage. The productions have been nearly identical in staging, even as Kim Tae-woong himself discovers more nuances in the characters through the actors' work, and in a personal interview has described that the main character of the play in his head has changed several times over the course of the years.

Traditional Forms In The Play

Na-rye: Official Rites

The play opens and ends with what's translated as an exorcism ritual, featuring the *Pang-sang-shi*, a folk character from Korean masked dance that keeps evil spirits away from funerals. In technical Korean terms, the rite is called *Na-rye*, the rite performed by masked officiants aimed at warding off evil spirits. Evidently, the *Na-rye* was imported from China. The ancient Chinese classic "Liji" (Kor. 예기, Chin. 禮記, Book of Rites, Unknown) recorded that these masked exorcism rites were held three times a year, in the last month of spring, at mid-autumn and in the last month of autumn. The first one was called *gungna* (Kor. 국나, Chin. 國儺), the second one, *cheonjana* (Kor. 천자나, Chin. 天子儺), and the third one, *daena* (Kor. 대나, Chin. 大儺). These are official and austere compared to the *kwangdae* performances.

Kwangdae

The troupe of *kwangdae* first appear in Act 1 Scene 5, where they engage in witty banter, satirizing the palace situation with Noksu, King Yonsan, and even making fun of Gonggil, who they feel is no longer one of their own. It is also implied that they are engaging in *gokye* (acrobatics) throughout the scene, and this is evident in production photos from 2009 and 2010:



Figure 2.4. The *kwangdaes* in the 2009 *The Clowns* production. Photograph by Jeong-ho Kim



Figure 2.5. The *kwangdaes* in the 2010 *The Clowns* production. Photograph by Hwe-young Yang



Figure 2.6. 10th anniversary kwangdae act on stage in 2010. Photograph by Geoje.

The *Pang-sang-shi* from the first scene is in the background, but the clowns pay no heed and do as they are accustomed to. They do it simply for their own enjoyment, stifled by the palace strictures, despite the luxuries it offers, and noting the lack of free speech as court performers:

Clown 1: The king is like a mountain and Noksu is a lake, laying flat on her back with her feet in the air. How can he attend to his people when he can't take his eyes off her dirty water?

Clown 2: Shhh! Be quiet, man! Carpenter Kim was killed for joking like that.
(Act 1 Scene 5, pg. 17)

This implies that theatrical art can only fill its purpose when out of the government's clutches and free to interact with its intended audience. It is the *kwangdaes'* purpose to make people laugh in their hardship, not entertain one, selfish man at the expense of others. And they regain that purpose in the Blind Bong and Blind Kang performance in Act 2 Scene 8:



Figure 2.7. 2006 poster for *The Clowns* featuring the blind man act. Photograph by Arts Council Korea.

While some of the dialogue derives from the 1996 play *키스* (Kiss) by Yoon Young-Seon, a playwright and professor at the Korean National University of Arts, it's essentially Gonggil's redemption as a *kwangdae*, perhaps indicative of Korean theater's redemption as a whole from propagandistic theater, but unlike contemporary theater, Gonggil is too late in realizing how he has betrayed himself: "I betrayed myself because as soon as I found a life of comfort, I put behind everything I was. Now, finally, I can find myself again. Now I feel my heart beating and I feel alive, Your Majesty. I feel really happy. I feel my heart bursting." (Act 2 Scene 7, pg. 95)

Additionally, this scene implies what Jangsaeng has done outside the palace when he joined Park Wonjong, gathering people for the rebellion, using his talents as a *kwangdae* to stir up action to create a better order without the despot Yonsan. The play exemplifies the power of free art, where entertainers create culture, mobilize people, and change the world more quickly and effectively than its politicians and rulers.

The H ũ ng and Han

In an interview with playwright Kim Tae-woong, he stated,

I've always been interested in traditional performances back in the Joseon period. Traditional Western performances are usually centered on the drama itself, while ancient Koreans focused solely on "the joy of plays." When I wrote this one, I put most of my focus on disclosing the difference between the powers of the king and of the clown, and what kind of laughs the play can produce and how it will end.

The effectiveness of the clowning depends on the text and the performances, and while the translation is inadequate to capture the nuance and wit of the clowns' dialogue, in its original language every performance tells a story, cleverly building up to a satirical punch line, usually featuring corruption or government oppression, rather than a cheap tirade of insults. The brutal honesty of the situation displayed in caricatures and stylized speech is what induces laughter, the *hŭng* with which they perform reveals and relieves *han*.

In the play, Yonsan tries to play the role of the victim, but *han* is collective. His main crime in the play is trying to have both the *hŭng* and *han* to himself, when it belongs to the people. This crime is effectively true of Korean governments historically, which sought to claim, control, and manipulate the *hŭng* and *han* of the people.

Chapter Three

Pak Cho-yol's *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail* (1974): The Government Versus the People

The government censorship committee's refusal to license a production of *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail* in 1974 is a vivid example of government control over artistic expression. The play's reflection of Korea's division and its anti-military stance truly captured the *han* of the Korean people, but for the government, stability in established power held greater importance than the representative integrity of Korean theater.

Plot Summary

Taking place in the 1920s, the play, a folk tale about the inhumanity of war, begins with a prologue featuring a *daegeum* (a Korean instrument, translated as a clarinet in the English text) and a traditional singer. While I couldn't find any images of this prologue's staging, a recorded production did not include an instrument, but an a cappella performance of a traditional song as the trees, flowers, and animals appear and exit as noted in the stage directions.

A simple farmer, O Chang-gun, beloved by his mother, wife, and cow, is conscripted by mistake. Caught in an absurd world where the army of Easterly is pitted against the forces of Westerly, death is his only way out. The characters in different locations speak to each other in dreams. With onstage music and actors switching roles constantly (first an animal, next a tree, then a person), the play uses story theater style and is packed with black humor. After training, bureaucratic errors and delays, O Chang-gun ends up in the battlefield, where he is captured by the forces of Westerly. After interrogation, the Westerly forces have him executed. With O

Chang-gun's body lost across enemy lines, the Easterly forces bring only his toenail to the family. The cow keens for his master in pitiful moans and the trees bear his casket.

About the Playwright

Born in 1930 in what is now North Korea, Pak Choyŏl left behind his family during the Korean War, fleeing to the south. After serving for some twelve years in the military, he entered the Theater Academy at the Drama Center in Seoul. In his ten plays, Pak displays a desire for the unification of north and south, and blends farce, allegory, and elements of the theater of the absurd.

Pak's first play, *Sightseeing Zone*, questions motives of both North and South Korean governments, as well as the United States and the UN. Unsurprisingly, the government censored this work and investigated Pak; this play was never produced. Writing allegorically about north-south relations in his second play, *The Rabbit and the Hunter*, Pak avoided censorship and successfully created a commercial hit, receiving the award for best play in 1964. *O Chang-gun's Toenail* is Pak's eighth play, where he was once again accused of pro-Communist sentiment for his evident longing for his mother and home in the north. The play was not staged until 1988, with the softening of government regulations.

Pak Choyŏl passed away in 2016, but his work has continued under other directors in 2018 and 2019, coinciding with the film adaptation release.

Traditional Forms in the Play

While traditional elements are less evident here than the other plays under consideration, the set design shown in production photos pays homage to traditional Korean visual arts, with its depiction of mounded hills.



Figure 3.1. A 2006 production of *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail*. Photographer unknown.



Figure 3.2. 2019 Production of *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail*. Photographer unknown.

This contributes to the traditional Korean fairytale atmosphere requested by Pak Choyŏl, where trees walk about, loveable idiots take center stage, and animals interact anthropomorphically.

The most anthropomorphic animal in the play, the cow, a character in several Korean folktales about hard work and a farmer's duty, is not the dairy cow Americans are familiar with, but the brown Korean Native, its portrayal consistent with the likenesses of cows in Choson dynasty Kim Hongdo's artwork.



Figure 3.3. 2018 Production of *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail*, with Oh Chang-gun, Mother, and the cow Moksui. Photograph by News Stage



Figure 3.4 Hongdo Kim, *Plowing a Rice Field*, 18th century, paper, National Museum of Korea, <https://www.museum.go.kr/site/eng/relic/represent/view?relicId=530>

The cow's anthropomorphic qualities are accentuated by the actor's movements, and recorded productions of the play show actors moving similarly to the stylized manner of *kwangdae*, expressing the script's humor in the same speech patterns. For example, the bureaucrats in the

bureaucrat scene, in production, speak with the conventionalized *kwangdae* tone, creating a black humor mood despite the frustrating nature of the scene's content with incompetent bureaucrats and the drastic impact of mishandled paperwork.

Lastly, the interlude of music throughout the play, with characters sometimes singing, hearken to *kwangdae* performance forms that would include traditional instrument interludes between skits and attract or keep the attention of the ever-moving audience of the streets.

Han and Hŭng

The black humor of military experience, probably derived from Pak's own personal experience, and the simple mind of O Chang-gun, highlights the helplessness of the average and normal in Korean society at this time, and they can do nothing but laugh, sing,³² or die to escape. The opening part of the idyllic rural atmosphere, with O Chang-gun and his family, is the height of the play's humor and lightness, and slowly the play tips the balance in favor of *han*. By the end of the play, the *han* of violence, war, and division overpowers any *hŭng*, and rather than ending with a message of hope, Pak only asks the audience for sympathy for this situation with the closing musicians who mirror the opening sequence. When the play was written in the 1970s, the pain of the war was not a mere thing in the distant past, but very near to the heart, but the government desired that the people move forward relentlessly into the future. This play sought to give people the time and pause to hold onto the *han* of the past that can make the future mean more in the long run.

³² Scene 6: Training Camp C, when the soldiers sing to keep their minds off the prospect of dying

Chapter Four

Lee Yun-taek's *Dummy Bride* (1993): The Collision of Indigenous and Outside Forms

Plot Summary

The narrative progression of *The Dummy Bride* is fairly straightforward. Set in present Shindorim district, a fringe area of metropolitan city of Seoul, the stage is virtually empty. There is only the covered food carriage of the dummy bride, and beside it there is a signboard for the entrance of the Shindorim subway station. The first scene is titled "Waiting for the People of Beautiful Minds." The production begins with the mechanical voice notifying the arrival of the train from the subway station: "Attention, please. The train is arriving soon to the station. Please take one step back to the line for your own safety."³³ After that, a young beggar, Michael, his name reminiscent of a Christian angel, appears with his father, the Blind Singer. Michael tells his father his dream about the dummy bride of legend. He says, "The Dummy Bride riding in a white sailboat is coming across that dark sky every night in my dream."³⁴ His father firmly tells his son, "she won't come here where we live" because "she cannot find people who have beautiful minds here anymore."³⁵ Michael asserts that his father went blind due to his bleak views. As the Blind Singer sings of one searching for people who have beautiful minds, he lights a lamp, and the Dummy Bride enters pulling her food wagon. She waits for customers under a lamp, against the dark sky. In a sense, deliberately, the dream of the young

³³ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 63

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 64

beggar is brought to life, but in contrast to his belief in goodness and beauty, this dream turns out to be nightmarish. Centered around the food carriage of the dummy bride, the denizens of Shindorim crowd into the plaza of the Shindorim subway station.

Lee Yun-taek presents characters from various socio-political backgrounds, but they can be roughly divided into two groups according to their social status: the Drunk, the Patriotic Young Man, the Jobless Young Man, and the Police Sergeant as the representatives of the petit bourgeoisie, and the Head of the Pseudo-Christian Religion, Little Beggar, the Blind Singer, Michael, and the Hooker are the portraits of the outcasts of Korean society. There are few female characters except the Hooker. In the 1993 production, the dummy bride was performed by an actress with a (traditional style) puppet attached to her front.

The frustrated patriotic young man declares that people's political awareness is numbed. As he distributes leaflets, he speaks with quiet eloquence, "Please read this leaflet in the manner of the petit bourgeoisie. It's quite all right for you to see this leaflet as an undemocratic viewpoint . . . We are in the midst of disaster during these so-called 'great 90's.' The labors of patriotic young men have become meaningless. Who was it who sent the tyrant to the *Paektam* temple?³⁶ Weren't we the very men who had the university's president's head shaved? For whom are our patriotic taxes used?" At last, he shouts, "Let's declare war on unjust distribution. Awake, ladies and gentlemen! You're becoming unconscious! . . . It is the sarcasm of the petit bourgeoisie like you that we should guard against."³⁷ A sense of shame wells up from the sardonic drunk. When the Drunk pulls on the leg of the Hooker, she calls him an animal, and the Drunk responds, "I am animal indeed when May comes. Once upon a time, in

³⁶ President Chun Doo Hwan, a military leader of South Korea, was exiled to *Paektam* Temple from 1988 to 1990.

³⁷ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 135-6

May, since I was not in *Kwangju*, I am an animal.³⁸ That we are still alive is a shame. I would like to be reborn as an animal, this life of shame purified as an animal.”³⁹

Deliberately, Lee Yun-taek juxtaposes the political vision of the Young Patriotic Man with the religious prophecy of the sham messiah (the Head of the pseudo-Christian religion). The Patriotic Young Man pleads, “Give us one more chance, please. Only we can save this world. We will do it. Let’s go! Up to the Baegdu Mountain.⁴⁰ From Halla Mountain to Baekdu Mountain.” In the meantime, the sham messiah preaches, “The end is coming from the air. Since I do not want my beloved enemies living in sin on this soil any longer, I will cross the 38th Parallel myself, leading a large formation of Phantom bombers. I will blow up the atomic factory in Youngbyeon first, sending our northern brothers and sisters to heaven. Then you survivors, do not lose your chance before Heaven’s Gate is closed.”⁴¹ The Police Sergeant calls him a human trafficker, and tries to arrest him. The sham messiah gives the sergeant some cash, and the sergeant happily disappears with it. The scene is a bitter satire of the alleged political accommodation behind the phony reconciliation, which the Patriotic Young Man indicts as spiritual corruption. The Police Sergeant is the faithful follower of the reality principle. He asserts, “The world is changed. Let’s get over the mutual reconciling and forgiveness and leave the past to the judgment of history.” He derides the Patriotic Young Man, saying, “It’s no good now, you know, to chant slogans, practice resistance and dismantle the Establishment.”⁴²

³⁸ This refers to the Gwangju Uprising by the Korean government on May 18, 1980, when citizens took up arms after students demonstrating were fired upon, killed, raped, and beaten by government troops. This uprising ended on May 27th, and as many as 2,000 people died.

³⁹ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 136

⁴⁰ Baegdu Mountain is in North Korea. This cry is a call for reunification.

⁴¹ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 137

⁴² Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 138.

In the second scene, titled “Mask Playing in the Age of No Prospects,” the appearance of a singing and dancing puppet music box adds mirth to the scene. To the popular songs from the music box, in a state of hallucination, the denizens slowly dance. In this scene, Lee Yun-taek deliberately evokes “the spectacle of Sodom.”⁴³ After they have all gone, the Patriotic Young Man in despair commits suicide. Later, like the Patriotic Young Man who promised to save the world but could not save himself, the sham messiah cannot find relief, hanging himself. For the Patriotic Young Man, the dummy bride sings a funeral song tuned with a traditional melody, *jeongka*. *Jeongka* is a traditional court song of the aristocrats of the Chosŏn dynasty. By contrasting this solemn music to the popular songs from the music box, Lee Yun-taek marks the sacredness of the dummy bride as a bearer of neglected tradition. At night, wearing traditional style masks, the Drunk, the Jobless Young Man, and the Police Sergeant come to the food wagon of the dummy bride. With the grotesque masks, their bestial desires at night are highlighted. When they dance, the Dummy Bride joins in, and at the peak of the dance, it turns into “body poshi or sexual almsgiving.” “Poshi” expresses the Buddhist spirit of generous and unconditional giving, but in the scene, the “body poshi” of the dummy bride is manifested as a gang rape. In the stage direction, Lee Yun-taek writes, “the Bride painfully accepts her own lot as she bodily copulates with the reality.”⁴⁴ It seems that Lee Yun-taek attributes divinity to ordinary human women who can forgive men unconditionally.

In the last scene, titled “Nobody Accepts New Hope,” the three men deny the baby resulting from the “body poshi,” who is the metaphorical representation of the existence of hope for the corrupted generation that fathered it. The Dummy Bride bemoans her lot,

⁴³ Ibid, 139.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 84.

lamenting, “I left my hometown close to heaven and came here, since I believed that living like a beggar here was better than leading a secluded life in the mountains. But, is no man willing to accept my hope [baby]?” The Police Sergeant responds coldly, “You are not a common woman. You are saying that you want to live with all of us, with three husbands?” The Dummy Bride clutches the Police Sergeant, saying, “I did not mean it. I don’t care about myself. I can raise this baby, do anything in this world. But, please have my baby’s name entered in your family register so that my baby can live with a name [legally].”⁴⁵

Lamenting over their denial and betrayal of the three men, the dummy bride commits suicide. The three men hear a baby’s crying from the dead bride, but they bury the dead body of the bride with the baby under the subway station. It is the Blind Singer and Michael who dig up the bride and the baby when a baby’s crying is still heard. The bride and the baby are revealed, taking their place in a sailboat made from the bride’s food wagon. At the end, the same announcement from the speakers of the subway station is heard through the voice of the dummy bride as her food wagon is transformed into a white sailboat heading for heaven. When the sailboat launches, the area denizens throw their masks to the bride, thus cleansing themselves of their sins.

In his directorial note for *The Dummy Bride*, Lee Yun-taek writes, “through the mythic narratives of the sacrificial love of the dummy bride I try to search for the meaning of this world in which human beings can be human beings.” In *The Dummy Bride*, Lee Yun-taek expresses his aspiration to spiritual redemption imperative for the chaotic multi-ethnic community. In the

⁴⁵ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 90

dehumanized materialistic community symbolized by the music box, the God or Maitreya is meant to serve as the spiritual center for the world in which human beings can live humanely.

Production History and Reception

Reviewing a 1999 production of *The Dummy Bride*, Chi Hye, in her essay published in the feminist journal *If*, denounces “the poetic beautification of violence (the gang rape) through the traditional performing art.” According to her report, the act of gang rape was artistically symbolized as the scene of “body poshi” when the nightclub of the police sergeant is thrust into the womb of the dummy bride lying down in the center of the stage. The woman reviewer expresses her strong resistance to the masculine gaze regulating the scene of “body poshi.” The woman reviewer observes, “The traditional still means the feminine; if so, should women continually sing a song of *han* as both victims of men and mothers who will rescue them?” (1999: 180). Whereas the playwright presumes the woman’s sacrifice as the basis for unconditional love, the woman reviewer problematizes the mythic basis itself. The act of love of the dummy bride elevated into the ethnic myth in the production of *The Dummy Bride* means sacrifice to one gender and redemption to the other gender. The masculine conceptualization of sacrifice and redemption is reinforced in the last scene where the Hooker, the only female (human) character except the “dummy” bride, does not appear in the company of the sinners whose sins are cleansed by the resurrected divinity.

Masked Dance

Lee Yun-taek plays with the multiple meanings of “t'al” (traditional mask) in Korean usage. Traditionally, “t'al” in Korean refers to both sacred things and evil things (mishap, trouble, illness, fault, etc.). Hence, anciently, in kamyŏngŭk performance the masks were treated as divine objects, but at the end of the performance, they were thrown into the bonfire lit up for the night performance to ward off evil. In an associative connection, in the last scene, the denizen customers of the dummy bride take off their masks and throw them into the sailing boat for the cleansing of their sins.

Western Influence: Christianity

Christian tradition is embedded in the play, as according to Richard Nichols in his notes, “The concluding scenes in the play constitute a ‘passion play.’ The Messiah drags in a crucifix, hangs himself after conducting ‘the last Mass on this planet’ and ascends to Heaven. The Christian imagery is not misplaced.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, what he overlooks is the complicated weaving of traditional and Christian mythologies and imagery in the play. Failing to mention the original source material of the Buddhist fable, the translators of *The Dummy Bride*, Kim Dongwook and Richard Nichols, shed light only on Christian mythology, ignoring the rebirth of Maitreyabodhisattva at the end of the play. In the original Korean play published in 2006, Lee Yun-t'aek writes, “Under the sail, the bride with mourning garments takes her seat, and holds

⁴⁶ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 128.

the living Maitreya with open eyes.”⁴⁷ In the English version, the stage direction is translated as follows: “Under the sail, the bride, wearing mourning cloth, takes her seat, and, in her arms, she holds a statue of a child with open eyes.”⁴⁸ To be sure, there are confusing semiotic signals between the Christian mythology and the Buddhist mythology in the play. The contrast between darkness and light (black and white) and the topography of Hell (underground subway station), Earth (station plaza) and Heaven (sky) is clearly from the Christian mythology. The name, Michael, the city of Sodom, and the imagery of the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ come from the Bible. In Buddhism, self-awakening (self-enlightenment) is the way to Nirvana (salvation), and human beings are not described as sinners. The life itself is the “sea of trouble.”⁴⁹ On top of it, the image of the white sailboat originates from the shamanist ritual for a dead soul. The complex weaving of the Christian, the Buddhist, and the shamanist worldviews in the play directly reflects contemporary Korean culture.

Eastern Influence

In *The Dummy Bride* (1993), Lee Yun-taek adopts a Buddhist fable of pabogakshi, literally meaning a foolish bride, who sacrifices herself with a merciful heart. Lee Yun-t’aek takes his main images and stories from the tale of Maitreyabodhisattva. According to the tale, from nowhere a woman comes to a village, where she performs an act of benevolence to men in the village who are in need of sexual gratification. She sleeps with a leper, a disabled man, and a

⁴⁷ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 97.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 151.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 97.

poor man, and so forth. For all that, she is accused of an offense against public decency and is expelled from the village. In her place, the villagers find a stone Buddha (Maitreyabodhisattva) statue, and they come to realize that she was the avatar of Maitreyabodhisattva and gave her body as alms to the men. Through the reconstruction of this Buddhist myth, Lee Yun-taek presents the spirit of sacrifice and redemption as “the archetypal mentality” necessary for Korean ethnic community to integrate the disunited nation. In his directorial note for *The Dummy Bride*, Lee Yun-taek writes, “in *The Dummy Bride*, through the application of the double constructive matrixes of the reality motive and the mythic motive, I attempt to delve into the meaning of love that can be extended to the state of the whole society and become the ethnic [national] myth beyond the limitation of individual possession and attachment” (1993: 270). But, in *The Dummy Bride*, Lee Yun-taek’s postulation of sacrifice and redemption as core values of national spirit eschews political analysis for fable and religiosity. Thus, his sharp political comments in the first part of the play merely serve this religious spirituality.

For Lee Yun-taek, the sublime significance of love can be found in the sacrifice of a woman in the sense that the true Maitreyabodhisattva (messiah) can resurrect society through becoming a mother. In *The Dummy Bride*, this image is the site of conflicting Buddhist and Confucian ideologies. It is recognized that in Buddhist thought and practices personal relationships like family are rarely treated, since in Buddhism any kind of possession and attachment is an object of distraction. Likewise, shamanism does not provide principles and morals for human relationships, either. If we read the play carefully, it is not difficult to find the interpolation of the Confucian myth of motherhood inserted in the Buddhist fable. When the Blind Singer urges the dummy bride to leave this world that “has no center,” the Dummy Bride

insists, “I will live here anyway. I will produce a baby, who will grow as it should be in nature. I will put my hope in my baby.”⁵⁰ Yet, Lee Yun-taek changed the traditional sources and inserted the phallogocentric Confucian myth of the womb. Until recently, the modern Korean family register system had been based on the Confucian notion of patriarchal headship. A child without a name admitted by her/his head of the family is at worst legally a non-person. Even though the image of the Dummy Bride is mainly derived from a Buddhist myth, the Dummy Bride is portrayed as a Confucian type of a mother, in that the Buddhist myth does not offer any archetype of motherhood. Visually, she is portrayed as a type of traditional Korean mother. In a traditional garment and a hairstyle during the Chosŏn dynasty, she is symbolized as the haven of Confucian morals appropriate to a virtuous woman: quiet, patient, obedient, and sacrificial.

Han and Hŭng

Through the portrayals of the Drunk, the Patriotic Young Man, and the Jobless Young Man, Lee Yun-taek expresses the sentiments of renunciation, frustration, and nihilism pervasive among young people in the early 1990s as they witnessed the illicit connection between the existing power elite and the revolutionary democratic forces of the previous decades. For them, the trauma of the Kwangju massacre was not healed yet, and the chastisement of the dictator (Chun Doo-hwan) not complete. The rape of the Dummy Bride and the story of the beggars also portray *han* overpowering *hŭng*, as shown in previous plays.

The depersonalization of the Dummy Bride with the mask hearkens to the *kwangdae hŭng* spirit. But despite her promises of salvation and her traditional form, no man is willing to

⁵⁰ Yun-taek Lee, *Four Contemporary Korean Plays*, trans. Dongwook Kim and Richard Nichols (Lanham, MD: University Press of America 2007), 82.

take responsibility and she hangs herself. Life is dispensable; other dummy brides will appear to provide food, liquor, and sex in contemporary Korea. Still, as she sails away in her boat, she can cleanse sins by taking their masks, except she remains unable to reach the beggar's mask, indicative of a society where those who have nothing stand to lose even more.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The *kwangdae* of Chosŏn provided mirth, satire, and escape to the people of Chosŏn. Unlike court jesters, the *kwangdae* traditionally had no place among the refined, and sought to heal the *han* of the people with their *hŭng*. The *hŭng* never removed the *han*, but made it bearable at least for a moment, even if the pain of reality hit harder after a given performance. Additionally, the creativity and humor of the *kwangdae* was ever tempered by royal severity; while allowed free speech behind the *t'al* masks, too much would be quite the risk to this low class of performers.

The contemporary theater of Korea ended up occupying the same niche as the *kwangdae*, in a way. Providing humor, escape, and satire in the midst of an oppressive history, starting from royalty to Japanese imperialism to faux-democratic regimes. In the confusion of moving forward, these playwrights sought answers for national pain in the traditions of their forefathers. I have examined other reasons for looking back, such as their settling in university building basements and the creativity required by censorship, but the answer to why these playwrights sought to find essential Koreanness in older forms was because of its playfulness and its simplicity. Kim employs it directly with the historical setting of *The Clowns*, while the folk-tale nature, idiot protagonist, and the tone of some dialogue in *Oh Chang-gun's Toenail* has a more subtle take on Korean humor. *The Dummy Bride's* use of masks and interplay of different traditions and ideologies displays the struggle of Korean society today to find its joyous salvation.

But in all these plays, no matter how the *hŭng* enters and brings enjoyment, usually in the early and middle parts of the plays, *han* overpowers in the end. The *hŭng* complements the *han*, it is a subsidiary. The deaths of Jangsaeng (*The Clowns*), Oh Chang-gun (*Oh Chang-gun's Toenail*), and the Dummy Bride (*The Dummy Bride*) are deaths of the simple, pure *hŭng* giving way to a nearly hopeless *han* of a society where social expectations and suicide rates are high, capitalist selfishness is rewarded, and sexual crime is rampant.

I believe this is a direct effect of the peninsula's division, where that reconciliation has become less and less hopeful over the years, with younger generations forgetting and older generations still having family members on the other side. *The Clowns* has the most hopeful ending, to be sure, as it should as the latest play written among the set, but still required the death of the clowns for the new, better era to begin.

This is also a direct effect of a national drive to stay ahead so as to not repeat a tragic history again. With the general belief that the Chosŏn dynasty's failure to advance technologically and scientifically contributed to its downfall, much focus has been given to technical innovation in South Korea, but that leaves a society with no outlet. Theater seeks to be that outlet, but also becomes another toxic environment, such as the Hirakuan in *The Clowns*, not immune to the problems of society at large.

Yet another part of why *han* consistently overpowers the *hŭng* is the treatment of female characters in all three plays. Noticeably, the playwrights discussed are all men, and the women of the plays are vilified, abused, or helpless in the face of great change. Jang Noksu engages in petty scheming for the man that defines her life. The mother, wife, and cow of Oh Chang-gun can do nothing to save him, not even noticing the mistake of his draft earlier in the

play, and they are removed from much of the action. The Dummy Bride is violated in the name of salvation, is rejected, and departs. This shows a blatant disregard of women's empowerment, perhaps reflective of women's position in Korean society, a more grim reading when considering Lee Yun-taek's own crimes. Even the *kwangdae* tradition consisted entirely of men, the only performing women being the *gisaeng* courtesans.

The imbalance of people, of genders, and of the arts and sciences contribute to the imbalance of *han* and *hŭng* in these playwrights' works. I believe they are taking the right path to Koreanness by incorporating the joy and playfulness of older forms, but truly reconciling the theater with Korean society means a recognition and correction of problems that surely affect Korean drama. And in the spirit of how Jangsaeng actively affected change in Chosŏn in *The Clowns*, theater should be the place where that change begins. I have hope that Korean theater will continue its experimentation with ritual and traditional folk performances while acknowledging the problematic toxicity in some of its ideology.

Interestingly enough, the empowerment of women and the more pronounced *hŭng* has found its way in Korean television, with which Korean theater has started to compete with for talent and audience. My reading of these plays believes that the avant-garde direction and the stillness of contemporary Korean theater provides a niche escape for Korean audiences, if they can be so persuaded to leave the hectic, fast-moving world behind them for an hour or two, at least to make sense of capitalism in a collectivist society. Setting aside the marginalization of women and the imbalance of *han*, these playwrights collectively see Korean theater as a communal event, meant for the layperson, and filled with the longing for simpler times.

Whether that holds enough value for one's time and whether that's enough to keep experimental theater afloat financially are questions that remain unanswered.

I cannot predict the shape, tone, and promise of Korean drama and theater in the future, but the plays discussed here certainly feel distinctly Korean, with the virtues and vices of Korea itself.

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