**Shinmuyong (c. 1926)**

**Summary**

*Shinmuyong* means literally ‘New Dance’ in Korean, but today it is categorized as creative Korean dance. In the early twentieth century, *Ausdruckstanz* (Expressionist Dance) from Germany had a decisive influence on Japanese modern dancers. This kind of dance was introduced to Korea in 1926 when Japanese dance innovator Ishii Baku (1886-1962) presented his work for the first time in Korea under the title of *Shinmuyong*, which was a translation of the German phrase *Neuer Tanz*. However, the meaning of the *Shinmuyong* changed radically in the 1930s and 1940s. After Ishii’s performance in Korea, several young Korean intellectuals decided to learn Western modern dance from Ishii in Japan. Although they learned modern dance especially based on German *Ausdruckstanz*, they choreographed their own dances with elements of traditional Korean dance in the 1930s. Furthermore, after a world tour in the late 1930s, the *Shinmuyong* dancers actively turned to creating a hybrid Asian dance form in the 1940s, so that *Shinmuyong* became a composite form. Choi Seung-hee (1911-1969) and Cho Taek-won (1907-1976), amongst others, are considered important representatives of *Shinmuyong*.

**Importance to Modernism and Modernization**

*Shinmuyong* was established during the Japanese colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945. Specifically, during the 1920s, under the influence of the so-called Taishô-Democracy, which refers to social as well as artistic liberalization during the Taishô era in Japan (1912-1926), various Japanese modern dancers performed in Korea, including Ishii Baku whose *Shinmuyong* style was inspired by German dance innovations. As a result, the *Shinmuyong* that emerged in the mid 1920s in Korea took Western modern dance, especially German *Ausdruckstanz*, as its reference. Furthermore, Korean audiences started to think of modern dance in opposition to traditional Korean dance. For many people, modern dance became a symbol of development and civilization whereas traditional Korean dance reflected the obsolete and regressive aspects of Korean society.

Amongst Ishii’s Korean modern dance students were the illustrious dancers Choi Seung-hee and Cho Taek-won, who started to study modern dance at Ishii’s dance studio in Tokyo after Ishii’s first and second Korean tour respectively. Before going to Japan, neither of them had much experience with modern dance from the West, nor Korean traditional dance. Nevertheless, after they were accepted by Ishii, they worked in his company as dancers and choreographers under their Japanized names: Sai Shoki was the Japanese pronunciation of Choi’s Korean name and Cho was known as Fukukawa Moto. Like Ishii, who was particularly influenced by Mary Wigman (1886-1973) and Harald Kreutzberg (1902-1968), these Korean dancers sometimes performed new dance pieces without any background music.

After these attempts failed to receive significant attention in Japan or Korea, Korean *Shinmuyong* dancers applied elements of traditional Korean dance to their own choreographic works, thus ‘modernizing’ Korean traditional dance.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ishii urged his students to adapt traditional Korean dance because he believed that dancers should base their choreography on their own culture. Following their mentor’s advice, Choi and Cho briefly studied traditional Korean with the Korean dance master Han Seong-jun (1874-1942). They did not study traditional dance in a sustained manner as it was not their goal to reproduce or imitate authentic Korean dance.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, they strove for creating a new kind of stage dance in which they expressed not only their ethnicity, but their personalities as well. This style of dance was presented under the name of *Shinmuyong* in the 1930s in Korea and the Korean audiences generally viewed it as high art in contrast to traditional Korean folk dance, which was considered as a vulgar low art.

After their successful artistic activities as Korean dancers, especially in Japan, Choi and Cho toured separately in the West in the late 1930s. At that time, many Asian dancers toured in the West to introduce their own work and to gauge Western responses. Korean dancers similarly wanted to establish themselves as modern dancers in a globalized dance scene rather than perform within a strictly Korean context. On this basis, they showed not only pieces that were motivated by traditional Korean dance, but also Western-style modern dance to audiences in the United States and Europe. Although they were introduced as Korean dancers under their Japanized names to Western audiences, it was their ‘Koreanized’ dance that earned them positive reviews.

After their experience in the West, many Korean dancers began to define their cultural identities beyond nationality and instead began to choreograph new pieces with Chinese and Japanese cultural elements like Chinese folk dances as well as Peking Opera or Japanese folktales. In the 1940s, they also concentrated on creating massive group dance pieces rather than solo dances. In these group pieces, they often emphasized dynamic movements like spinning in space, which is seldom part of traditional Korean dance. In this sense, these hybridized characteristics of the Korean *Shinmuyong* reflect the multiple identities of Korean *Shinmuyong* dancers and their complex relationships to their colonized homeland.

After the end of the Japanese colonial rule in 1945, a few *Shinmuyong* dancers, including Choi Seung-hee, went to North Korea and contributed to the development as well as the institutionalization of Korean dance there. Other dancers stayed in South Korea and continued to create *Shinmuyong* pieces.

**Okju Son**

**A Short List of Key Choreographies (chronological)**

*Gasahojub* (*Surplice of Butterfly*, choreographed by Cho, Taek-won, 1933)

*Ehea Noara* (There is no English translation for this title, which is not a real word in Korean, choreographed by Choi, Seung-hee, 1934)

*Seungmu* (*Monk Dance*, choreographed by Choi, Seung-hee, 1934)

*Manjong* (*The Angelus*, choreographed by Cho, Taek-won, 1935)

*Bosalchum* (*Bodhisattva*, choreographed by Choi, Seung-hee, 1937)

**References and Further Reading**

Brandstetter, Gabriele. (1995) *Tanz-Lektüren: Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (*Dance-Readings: Body Images and Spatial Configurations of the Avantgarde*), Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer.

Choe, Sang-cheul. (1996) *Seung-hee Choi, Pioneer of Korean Modern Dance: Her Life and Art under Japanese Occupation 1910-1945*, Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.

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Karatani, Kôjin. (1993) *Origins of modern Japanese literature*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Van Zile, Judy. (2001) *Perspectives on Korean Dance*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

**Moving Image Material**

*Choi Seunghee: The Story of a Dancer*. (2008). Seoul: Daeju Media. DVD.

*The Endless Story of Choi Seung hee*. (2011). Seoul: Shinnara. DVD.

*Gasahojub*. (1998). Seoul: Arts Council Korea. VHS.

**Paratextual Materials**

The website of Korean History On-line <http://www.koreanhistory.or.kr/> offers video clips and newspaper articles about the *Shinmuyong*. (In Korean)

The website of the Oral History of Korean Arts <http://oralhistory.knaa.or.kr/> offers materials about biography, photo and interview of the *Shinmuyong* dancers as well as of the Korean traditional dancers. (In Korean)

1. Choe, Sang-cheul, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)