

The metacultural outcome—heritage, both the designated masterpieces and the heritage enterprise itself—is intended, if not designed, to be better adapted to the social, political, and economic conditions of our time than the endangered practices themselves (even were they not endangered). This is why heritage is a mode of metacultural production that produces something new, which, though it has recourse to the past, is fundamentally different from it.—Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “World Heritage and Cultural Economics”

South Korea has been at the vanguard of efforts to preserve and protect intangible cultural heritage. South Korea’s model would subsequently influence UNESCO’s creation of a system for designating and preserving World Intangible Heritage. Such projects are not without critics, both within South Korea (C. Choi 1991, 54) and internationally (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006), who see such practices as freezing once-innovative forms and for encouraging conformity to universal standards and protocols that may make awkward fits with local practice. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that any effort to preserve and foster exemplary and endangered cultural practices “alters the relationship of practitioners to their practices” (2006, 196), a phenomenon well documented in Keith Howard’s studies of traditional South Korean performing arts and their modern fate (1989, 1998) and Chungmoo Choi’s account of how heritage designations intensified rivalry and competition among a community of shamans (1991). At the same time, it should be recognized that without the intervention of folklorists and bureaucrats, what we know today as “Korean culture” would undoubtedly be flatter, narrower, and far less fun.

The two chapters in this section share concerns with the slippery category of “authenticity” in the performance of old forms for new audiences. Judy Van Zile describes an early twentieth-century performer of “new dance” whose turn to Korean forms was widely criticized as inauthentic, but with the fullness of time, Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi’s work has become the basis of what are now regarded as signature traditional Korean dances. Keith Howard describes an ongoing argument among performers and connoisseurs of traditional Korean music, between purists and adherents of commercially more successful fusion. These chapters suggest that the debates themselves are the stuff of significant engagement with the performance of culture and are themselves a proper subject of ethnographic inquiry.

## Blurring Tradition and Modernity

### The Impact of Japanese Colonization and Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi on Dance in South Korea Today

To many people, Korea’s modernization in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has meant Westernization. For some dancers, turning away from the sedate dances of the court and the satirical stories of village masked dance-dramas in favor of the pointe shoes of European ballet or the contraction-release technique of US modern dancer Martha Graham has been the path to modernity. For other dancers, becoming modern has not meant creating a dichotomy between what had been traditional and what was being done in the West. Instead, a tension developed between reconciling the past and the present. The dilemma became, How can one be modern in a uniquely Korean way?

This dilemma still provides a creative tension in dance in Korea today, but its seeds were solidly planted during Japanese colonization, with the dancer Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi (1911–1964?) playing an important role in its establishment. The nature and style of dances she created contributed to shaping what scholars today describe as *shinmuyong*, or new dance.<sup>1</sup> The term *shinmuyong* paralleled *shinbuyō* (also meaning new dance), which came into use in Japan in the 1920s, and reflected terminology being applied to many things in Korea; as the country increasingly tried to modernize, Koreans began to speak of new poetry (*shinshi*), new education (*shin’gyoyuk*), new theater (*shin’guk*), and even new women (*shinyōsōng*).<sup>2</sup> The emphasis was on “the new,” and Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi sought to create a new kind of dance, one that was different from the kinds common prior to the twentieth century—the dances performed for entertainment in the royal courts, the dance-dramas of the villages, the dances of shaman, Confucian, and Buddhist rituals.

Despite their development during the early- and mid-twentieth century as something “new,” and the use of “new” in today’s terminology for identifying them, many of these dances have come to be considered, for

general consumption, as representative of “traditional” Korea. The terms “tradition” and “traditional” are fraught with conflicting definitions and understandings. I use them here as they are generally translated from the Korean (*chönt’ong*), and to refer to the kinds of things many Korean dancers and dance scholars today identify as traditional. They are most typically associated with dances that are old and are visually recognizable as being Korean. As will be shown here, however, what constitutes old and Korean dance is constantly being redefined, and a modernized dance tradition has become a contemporary commodity intended to represent Korea both in the past and today.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter examines selected dance characteristics and experiences of Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi, their relationship to the times in which she lived and performed, and their contribution to a kind of dance that serves, today, as a visual symbol of Korea. Ch’oe began her dance career and quickly rose to stardom during colonial times. Her explicit desire to be Korean but in a modern way, and to satisfy diverse audiences in the dances she choreographed and performed prior to relocating to what is now North Korea, are foregrounded in order to show the impact she had on dance in South Korea today. Ultimately her experiences and the kind of dance she pioneered point to issues involved in the ongoing redefinition of tradition and who defines it, and in the uses of tradition in modern times.

Throughout the discussion it is important to keep in mind that history is slippery and all too often leaves a trail of unanswerable questions. It is challenging to determine the so-called facts of what transpired, particularly when they relate to an intangible art form such as dance, or to motivations from a time when personal beliefs that served as the basis for actions were constantly shifting as political policies changed and individuals sought ways to navigate the intertwining webs of colonialism, modernity, and nationalism. Because of the volatile era in which she lived, her husband’s and possibly her own political entanglements, emotions related to her eventual iconic status, and censorship that erased many people from Korea’s history, including its dance history, there is often conflicting or missing information about the details of Ch’oe’s life and work. Nonetheless, these challenges do not preclude examining the ironies involved in how modernity has contributed to defining tradition in dance and how a modernized tradition became a national symbol in Korea. The biographical sketch and information provided here chart selected landmarks in Ch’oe’s life, but the discussion focuses on her activities during the colo-

nial period, because the dances she created then left an indelible mark on dance in South Korea today.

### Biographical sketch

Ch’oe Sŭng-hŭi was born into a wealthy upper-class (*yangban*) family in the city of Seoul on November 24, 1911, a little more than a year after Japanese colonization officially began.<sup>4</sup> The youngest of four siblings, she was still a child when circumstances changed abruptly—her family lost property they owned, and her father’s penchant for drinking strained the family coffers.<sup>5</sup> Her personal life, as well as the political and social upheaval of the period, contributed to challenges that marked both her youth and her artistic career. It was “a time when cultural earthquakes rocked our country,” as one Korean described it, and “the modern world knocked, pounded, and battered its way into our consciousness” (Kang Pyōngju [Kang Byung Ju], quoted in Kang H. 2001, 6).

The impact of these “earthquakes” on Ch’oe began at the time of her graduation from Sukmyōng Girls’ School in 1925 and continued when, in 1926, her brother took her to see a performance in Seoul by the visiting Japanese modern dancer Ishii Baku (1886–1962).<sup>6</sup> Her fascination with what she saw performed on a Western-style theater stage was tempered by prevailing negative attitudes toward dancers. In an autobiography written when she was only twenty-five years old, she said, “I thought dance was something low and crude. But with the influence of my brother’s words, as I watched the stage my whole being was quickly attracted . . . by some kind of powerful inspiration. . . . Ishii’s famous works . . . have a powerful underlying feeling that evoked the spirit hiding at the bottom of my heart” (quoted in Hirabayashi 1977, 188).

Encouraged by her brother, Ch’oe met with Ishii to inquire about studying with him, and much to the chagrin of her family, particularly her mother, she followed Ishii back to Japan. She studied with him for about eight years, with several periods during which they severed their student-teacher relationship and then resumed it. Throughout those years, she performed in both Seoul and Tokyo, sometimes with Ishii’s company and sometimes independently. She opened a dance studio in Seoul in 1929, but because of financial difficulties it was short-lived.

While continuing her dance studies and establishing a performing career, in 1931 Ch’oe married An Mak, a political activist who became a

recognized socialist writer and played a major role in her dance career.<sup>7</sup> An completed a university degree in Russian literature, graduating in 1935 from Waseda University. In 1932 they had a daughter, who later became a dancer, and in 1945 (while in China), a son, who became a violinist. In 1935 Ch'oe signed a contract to star in the film *Hanto no Maihimei* (The dancing princess of the Peninsula), a phrase often used to describe her in later years.<sup>8</sup> Ch'oe's career began to escalate, and in addition to her success as a dancer, she became a popular female icon, appearing in newspaper advertisements for such things as stationery, makeup, and snacks.

From 1938 to 1940 Ch'oe toured and performed in North and South America and Europe. She returned to Japan at the end of 1940, just before the United States entered World War II. Prior to her tour Japan had become Ch'oe's primary home, but when she returned, she began to move back and forth between Japan, Korea, and China, sometimes to perform and sometimes to flee the rapidly changing political climate. In 1945 or 1946, first her husband and then Ch'oe and her children fled to P'yongyang, where they remained when the Peninsula was officially divided.<sup>9</sup>

Ch'oe performed in North Korea, set up a school, and eventually became a favored government officer.<sup>10</sup> Her school gained national support, and in the early 1950s she received government recognition for her role in the arts, including the title of Peoples' Actor for her contribution to "authentic art during the war against America" (Takashima and Chöng 1994, 215). Her husband became increasingly involved in political activities but, because of his views, lost favor with the North Korean government. In 1986 a Japanese publication claimed Ch'oe, her daughter, and her husband had been arrested and executed, but gave no dates (*ibid.*, 214). The same year, a Korean dancer resident in Japan reported that name lists published annually in North Korea had included Ch'oe until 1964, but not after that time (*ibid.*).<sup>11</sup> In February 2003, Ch'oe Sëng-hëi was one of twenty-two people reburied in the North Korean Cemetery of Patriots and was "rehabilitated" as a People's Actor (Park 2006, 632).

### Dance training

Ch'oe describes her introduction to Korean dance as coming from her father: "When my father was in a good mood, he stayed at home relaxing, and when he drank too much, he got carried away and showed me a dance

called *kutkōri ch'um*.... In Korea this dance was presented at parties when people started getting drunk. While I watched him dance *kutkōri ch'um*, I was memorizing it without even knowing it" (quoted in Hirabayashi 1977, 187). *Kutkōri* refers to a particular drum rhythm, and *kutkōri ch'um* identifies a kind of informal, improvised dance done, as Ch'oe describes, by untrained individuals at parties. People who do *kutkōri ch'um* usually incorporate movements similar to some of those they have seen executed by trained performers, such as lifting and lowering the shoulders, extending the arms sideward at shoulder height, and inwardly rotating the arms and relaxing the wrists so the fingers point downward. Ch'oe's introduction to Korean dance, therefore, was as an "audience member" at an informal "performance." Although the movements were representative of many kinds of older Korean dance, what she saw was not a fixed choreography that used clearly codified movements, nor any of the dances performed for entertainment in the former royal court or on special occasions in villages.

Ch'oe's formal training, which was not in Korean dance, began in 1926, the year she followed Ishii Baku to Tokyo. Ishii was initially reluctant to take Ch'oe on as a student, because of her lack of dance training. But eventually he "began to think that it might be important to have an excellent dancer come from Korea to soften the relationship between two ethnic people, and also for the Korean people to be known in the world" (Hirabayashi 1977, 189). These words suggest the importance he gave to maintaining some kind of distinct Korean identity, despite the country's colonial status, an issue that became increasingly important in Ch'oe's dance aesthetic.

The focus of Ch'oe's training was the Italian-style ballet and Western-style modern dance Ishii had learned and subsequently adapted.<sup>12</sup> Despite his training in ballet, Ishii questioned its validity and favored modern dance, but he believed that directly importing Western dance was boring and that there was a limit to simply imitating its form. He wanted to create a new kind of Japanese dance that was not just an imitation of other forms and that was concerned with issues of humanity and modern society. His works were noted for being harsh, often dealing with themes of social injustice and poverty in a realistic manner.<sup>13</sup> Although at first he made a conscious effort to reject traditional Japanese dance, feeling it was trapped in the past, he eventually came to believe that his roots

had subconsciously imbued his dance with both a Japanese feeling and originality and that one must “reconstruct one’s own ethnic spirit using an international or universal technique” (quoted in Hirabayashi 1977, 193).

Ishii’s desire to both retain a Japanese aesthetic and develop something original had a strong impact on Ch’oe, leading to a tension she felt as she developed her own dance style and moved through her career. On the one hand, she was pulled by what many considered “traditional”—the older dances of Korea that were believed to exhibit a uniquely indigenous aesthetic and had been performed in villages or the royal court before colonization and exposure to Western modern dance. On the other hand, she was keen to draw on the contemporary, Western-influenced concert dance of her training with Ishii Baku. These pulls were further tempered by her desire to please her audiences and be a successful performing artist, political tensions within Korea at the time, and the push for modernity, which often meant Westernization, within the country as a whole and particularly in the performing arts. What is ironic is that the tensions Ch’oe experienced increasingly throughout her dance life continue to be manifest in the Korean dance world in the twenty-first century, and that the kind of dance she created is now regarded as unambiguously “Korean.”

### Development as a dancer

Ch’oe originally choreographed dances in the modern style of her teacher.<sup>14</sup> Photographs of some of these dances are remarkably similar to those of what was known as *ausdruckstanz* (expressionist dance) or *neue tanz* (new dance) in Germany, a kind of dance that is generally believed to have begun at the end of World War I and that spread rapidly, becoming the hallmark of a modern trend in dance throughout Europe. It advocated a freedom in the use of the body that was uncharacteristic of older dances of Korea’s court and villages, was concerned with expressing strong personal emotion through movement, and often dealt with social themes from the darker side of life (Manning 1993; Partsch-Bergsohn 1994). It was this style that was blossoming in a modernizing Japan and that had so deeply affected Ch’oe’s teacher, Ishii Baku. Ch’oe originally began to choreograph her own dances in this style, declaring, “I like to express something that has social meaning and that is full of the feelings of life. Although it might be a little complex dramatically, I like to express something that has substance” (quoted in Takashima and Chöng 1994, 58).<sup>15</sup>

A photograph of one of Ch’oe’s early dances, *With No Path to Follow* (choreographed in the early 1930s), shows the dancer’s tension-filled fingers spread widely and arched, both arms bent at the elbows in harsh angles, and a dramatically mournful expression on her face.<sup>16</sup> Her costume includes a tight-fitting dark skirt with a hem that descends diagonally from about hip level to halfway between her knees and ankles, the edge torn in long strips as if pulled from a rag bin, and a wide swatch of dark fabric, draped around her neck and pulled taut across her breasts, reveals a bare midriff. As she balances on the balls of her feet, reminiscent of ballet, and sports short, bobbed hair, this image clearly reflects the Westernizing trends in dance as well as assertive feminist attitudes becoming popular at the time in both Korea and Japan.<sup>17</sup>

When Ch’oe performed this and other similar kinds of dance in Korea, they generally were not well received. Whether because of then-current negative attitudes toward dancers, particularly women, or the newness of the style, many people could not find a connection to what they were seeing on stage. And some were troubled by a woman dancer performing in a public setting. In former times women dancers usually were either itinerant village performers or official court entertainers (*kisaeng*). When the court-sponsored *kisaeng* system was abolished, the Japanese government established a legalized system of public prostitution that absorbed many former court entertainers (Ha 2005). Thus the public could not easily distinguish between “dancers” and “prostitutes,” and being a female dancer brought with it a stigma that had to be fought against constantly. One recent writer describes Ch’oe as having to “endure the hostile gaze of the conservative milieu that did not understand her art and considered her to be just a single [unmarried] woman,” people who were thus unable to focus on her as a performing artist (Young-hoon Kim 2006, 174). Some writers believe Ch’oe married An Mak to specifically counter this attitude, which considered a woman performing on stage, and hence calling attention to being physically observed, an open advertisement for her sexual availability (see Park 2006, 604).

In 1933 Ch’oe returned to Ishii Baku in Japan following her first solo performances in Korea. Ishii encouraged her to abandon the foreign contemporary aesthetic approach she was using and to go back to her own roots. At that time Han Söng-jun (1874–1942), a Korean dancer who was developing his own style based on traditional Korean forms, was in Japan. Han had begun his dance studies with his grandfather, learning tradi-

tional tightrope walking, drumming, and some southern styles of village dances, including shaman dances. During the early 1900s he re-created and rearranged many village dances for theatrical performance by female entertainers (H. Choi 1995, 173).<sup>18</sup> Ch'oe studied with Han, but only for a short time.<sup>19</sup> It is unclear whether the brevity of her study with him was due to his involvement with female entertainers and Ch'oe's concern with distancing herself from such people or to her interest in moving beyond the older-style Korean-flavored dance Han was doing in order to develop her own style. But her days with him planted seeds for her interest in the dance of her own people, leading to some further explorations of older dances when she returned to the place of her birth. Like both Ishii and Han, however, she became intent on developing a style of her own, one she described as being "Korean in essence but that was capable of responding to and expressing modern concerns" (Ch'oe Sang-cheul 1996, 211–212). Thus, as Ch'oe implemented her aesthetic philosophy, the tension between retaining a unique, specifically Korean identity and reflecting the growing trend toward a Western-influenced modernity intensified. Her challenge was not to be Korean *or* modern but rather to find a way to be modern in a particularly Korean way.

Ch'oe's concern with a Korean identity in her dance has been construed by some as capitulating to Japan's policies to foster, at times, things of Korean heritage, as reflected, for example, in the comments of her teacher, referred to earlier, when he articulated a rationale for taking on a Korean student.<sup>20</sup> When looked at from this perspective, her artistic choices can be interpreted as catering to Japanese authorities who were in a position to prohibit or censor performances. At the same time, however, this concern can be interpreted as demonstrating Ch'oe's own desire to maintain a visible Korean-ness in her dance. Ch'oe may have been joining some Korean cultural nationalists who, given the new opportunities afforded by the freer policies of the colonizer at times during the occupation period, returned to their older art forms in order to reestablish an identity distinct from that of Japan. In either case, her actions reflected conflicting trends between the modern and what was described as traditional, in the sense of being older and pre-Western influence, manifested in both Korea and Japan. Her actions also probably reflected her desire to satisfy the diverse expectations of her ticket-paying audiences, something she had to do if she was to continue her career.

As Ch'oe began to clarify her aesthetic focus, she created a piece titled

*Ehea noara* (choreographed in the early 1930s, after *With No Path to Follow*), which became a signature work for many years.<sup>21</sup> Early pictures of this dance, and film footage of her performing it much later in her life, show an image antithetical to her previous works. In *Ehea noara* we see a figure completely concealed in traditional-style Korean men's clothing — legs covered in baggy Korean pants (*paji*), arms and torso concealed in a traditional-style long cloak (*turumagi*, or *top'o*), feet covered in tight-fitting socks (*posōn*), and a short stovepipe-style hat (*kat*). Her positions in various photographs of this dance show her arms extended sideward at shoulder height, her head tilted, and suggest shoulder actions often identified as stereotypical features of older ("traditional") Korean dance.<sup>22</sup> The lifted knee in many of the photographs, together with the broad smile on Ch'oe's face, suggest the joviality found in *kutkōri ch'um*, the dance Ch'oe remembered her father doing when he had drunk too much and was relaxing, and whose movements she claimed to have memorized as a child. This kind of dance reflected the new direction her choreography had begun to take — toward a visual image recognizably linked to some older Korean dance forms at the same time that it deviated from them. The extroverted presentational nature of the dance and its lifted leg gestures would not have been appropriate for a "traditional Korean woman."

Despite the seeming Korean-ness of *Ehea noara*, it was harshly criticized by a Korean playwright and journal editor who described it as "co-opted with vulgar popularity" and further suggested that Ch'oe "study more deeply and show the rightness . . . of an elegant and solemn Chosen [Chosōn, or Korean] dance" (Ham Dae-hun, quoted in Park 2006, 612). The reason for the severe critique was likely that a dance similar to those improvised by men at drinking parties had been performed by a woman, onstage, and had employed greatly exaggerated movements and facial expressions not typical of, for example, dances previously performed for court entertainment. But the views of Koreans varied; while some saw such dances as making a mockery of Korean culture, others considered them a source of national pride (Park 2006, 611). One Korean critic suggested that Ch'oe had been successful in her goal to modernize Korean dance when he commented that in *Ehea noara*, as well as another dance, "she melded the material of indigenous dance in her own artistic kiln and molded it in a new way" (quoted in Takashima 1959, 61). This critic, as well as some other early writers in both Japan and Korea, praised Ch'oe for creating new versions of older dances (e.g., Kim Ch'ōng-uk 1999, 78–81). In-



Figure 8.1. Ch'oe Sung-hui in a pose from *Young Korean Bridegroom*, a dance that appears to have been similar in nature to *Ehea noara*. Photographer unknown (Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

terestingly, however, the Japanese tended to favor her Korean-style dances more than the Koreans did.<sup>23</sup>

Ch'oe continued to create new dances she claimed were rooted in older ones, with such titles as *Korean Festival Dance*, *Peasant Girl*, *Young Korean Bridegroom*, and *Drum Dance* (see Figure 8.1). In many of these she wore costumes readily discernible as adaptations of traditional Korean attire



Figure 8.2. A still of Ch'oe Sung-hui from the dance sometimes referred to as *Bodhisattva*. Photograph by Soichi Sunami (Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations). Courtesy of the Sunami family.

(*hanbok*), and many photographs suggest modifications of movements used in older dances considered to be traditional. One dance, however, stands out in sharp contrast to these and, like *Ehea noara*, became another signature piece. It was known, at various times, as *Kwanum posal*, *Posalmu*, *Pohyon posal*, *Kamu posal*, or simply *Bodhisattva* (Figure 8.2).<sup>24</sup> What made this dance distinctive were both its costume and its movements.<sup>25</sup> Although the costume changed at different times, its most common version was extremely revealing, to the extent that Ch'oe was sometimes described as being seminude (Mishima Yukio, quoted in Park 2006, 614). Small pieces