

Precarious Body: The Choreographic Documentary Glory of between Korea Military Service and Dance

By Jae Lee Kim

Glory is a critical work portraying how the Korean military service and dance competition affect and control a dancer's body. The Republic of Korea is the only divided country in the world, and technically speaking is still under suspension of fire. According to military service law, all men at the age of 18 have to serve a mandatory military service. Military service in Korea was first implemented by President Rhee Seung-Man in 1949, abolished temporarily in 1950, and reinstated in 1951. The division of South and North Korea that lasted for about 70 years and the desperate defense consciousness after the colonial experience resulted in a culture in which military defense was given top priority and debate about it was not possible (Kwon In-Sook, 2005, p. 211).

However, the Special Act on Military Service was enacted in 1973. According to this new law, those who have won certain competitions in arts and sports are exempted from military service. Since 1983, this special act has been applied to male dancers in Korea. ¹ This was done in consideration of the special nature of art, but it has become such a sensitive social issue in South Korea, as a system that gives limited privileges to certain competition winners.

The choreographer of Glory, Kwon Lyon-Eun ² tracks dance that exists unstably between the body and the institution focusing on the phenomenon that occurs in this particular national condition. At the research stage of this work, she chose the ethnographic method to closely examine the individuals experiences and interview with dancers who had participated in the dance competitions in order to collect materials for choreography.

While I was participating as a dramaturg in this work, I suggested the concept of 'Choreographic Documentary' in order to create the form of the dance piece. A choreographic documentary refers to creating a structure of choreography based on empirical data and events and making it into a performance. Boris Groys stated that the use of documentation in an artwork is art and artistic practice itself, rather than a movement towards artwork creation (2015, p. 45). Documentation is formed by the exploration of art in different cultural and environmental conditions, and by the intimacy between life and art.

In Glory, the question for the choreographer is not "What is dance?" in the sense of abstract or universal meaning, but is "What is 'this' dance of 'this' body?" It is an attempt to give meaning to the act of a choreographer who investigates 'empirical' materials of dance based on a real person and experience by using the form of documentary, rather than focusing on the production of artwork. When the modes of documentary are applied to the choreographic work, it is important to focus on the body, enactment, and physical thinking found in empirical data and develop them into an aesthetic form. In this sense, the choreographer has to take account of the mechanisms in dance and performance. The choreography has

been a way of thinking about the relationship between aesthetics and politics (Hewitt, 2005, p. 3). This was the work of critical attitudes that transformed social resistance into an art form that holds the aesthetic attitude of dance.

1. Apparatus as Control of Body

For the research of this choreography, interviews were conducted with 50 male dancers who had entered a dance competition, and 10 of the 50 participated in an in-depth interview. It is extremely rare to get an exemption from the national military service by winning a dance competition, and the opportunity is very limited as well. According to the interviews, many male dancers used the same expression that it is like waging a "war" to get an "honored" place within the world of dance. But their effort to avoid military service resulted in another type of control over their bodies by a different institution. The research outcome, combined with the story of a male dancer, developed into a piece.

[...]

The piece is made mainly with stories of male dancers who have entered dance competitions, but the influence of such experience is not limited to certain groups. The winner's dance is copied by other dancers, and transmitted and spread to other bodies as he gets the privilege to teach and train the younger generation his own style and training method. Training for competition in Korea does not stay at the individual level but creates a way of discipline that is technique-oriented, hierarchical, and oppressive. This also expands to the critical view on control and oppression against the body and structural violence in Korean culture and society. Glory might seem as criticism on the privilege of exemption from military service, but that is not what is at the heart of this work. In Korea, women can't freely participate in the discussion of the military service, and there was controversy over the fact that the choreographer of this piece was female. However, the influence of military service is widespread in Korean society and not limited to the field of dance. And I became critical minded about it. The military ideology can be found everywhere in Korea and we are all witnesses, regardless of sex. The work mainly deals with violence against the body when training in particular techniques. From the viewpoint of gender, women tend to be more perceptive and sensitive about violence 3.

Furthermore, it also reveals that the nature of an institution that allows the body to move mechanically cannot be based on solidity, agreement, or rationality, and the system works in favor of a certain group of people.

After another second place in the competition, I prepared for my ninth competition. The title is Goodbye, My Dance. While rehearsing, I heard that the law was revised and that the second winner can also be exempted from the military duty. I didn't need to practice anymore, and I was finally able to break up with dance. 4

In contemporary dance, an individual body can function as a place of critique of culture and society (Kunst, 2015). A body can't separate itself from the society it belongs to, and this principle applies both to the body of dancers on the stage and off the stage. In Glory, the individual body's vulnerability is exposed through the experience of his body, his dance, the dance he was taught, and his injuries. But at the same time, the vulnerability of dancer's body also reveals the restricting and oppressive institutions and the authority behind them.

- 1 The special exemption system, which has been granted to domestic dance competitions since 2008 through the revision, will be reduced to only those who win the second place or higher in international dance competitions. The proposed revision also attracted the opposition from the dance and art circles. Weekly Kyunghyang. February 2008, issue 761. Retrieved May 30, 2018. <http://weekly.khan.co.kr/khnm.html?mode=view&code=115&artid=16763&pt=nv>.
- 2 Glory was choregraphed by Kwon Lyon-Eun, premiered at Théâtre de la Ville, Paris in 2016 and performed for Korea National Contemporary Dance Company program at Daehakro Arts Theater (main hall) Seoul in 2017, Danse Élargie suite! at Théâtre des Abbesses in Paris, and at Korean Dance Festival in The Place, London in 2018.
- 3 Interview with Kwon Lyon-Eun, Sep. 27. 2017.
- 4 Extracted from the male dancer (Ahn Nam-Keun)'s speech in Glory