

A Study of Cho Taek-Won's Works and Their Artistic and Historical Value

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I. Introduction

This study examines Cho Taek-won's life and works and revisits his achievements in the context of art history. In the history of Korean dance, the new dance period (1920-1945) saw traditional dance, mainly performed in *gwonbeon*, change to stage dance, and foreign dance was introduced in earnest. It was a time of significant change in dance history. If we look at the dance terms of this period, the terms "classical dance" in the 1930s and 1960s and "traditional dance" from the late 1960s were used interchangeably, and while newly stylized works were termed "classical dance" by Choi Seung-hee and Cho Taek-won (Kim, 2021, pp. 1-2), today, dance from the Enlightenment period to Liberation is called "new dance."

Representative figures of the two major trends in new dance, the change of traditional dance into stage dance and the accommodation of Western culture, are Han Sung-joon, who put traditional dance on stage, and Choi Seung-hee and Cho Taek-won, who introduced a new type of work by embracing Western culture. Traditional dance or court dance were classified into traditional dance and others accepted modern dance was named new dance.

New dance began during the colonial period with Ishii Baku, and in this context, new dance was accommodated and developed with the meaning of "Western dance" and "new." At that time, Choi Seung-hee and Cho Taek-won attempted to combine Western dance forms with Korean dance, introducing new dances and original dance works to promote Korean dance worldwide and make

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progress in art dance. However, at a time when arguments have arisen that new dance had the limitation of being mediated by Japanese-style new dance, this researcher believes that it is necessary to reevaluate the achievements of new dancers from a fresh perspective and re-examine the history of Korean dance.

As a representative new dancer, Cho Taek-won is an important figure in the development of modern “dance,” and whose artworks such as *Gasahojeop*, *Manjong*, and *Buyeohoesanggok* we will discuss from the perspective of “art” (Cho, 2007, p. 23). In particular, he opened up a horizon for modern Korean dance through the new perspective of a choreographer expressing “Koreanness” by combining Western dance forms with Korean materials. The ultimate meaning of “Koreanness” is not defined but perceived, and it can be conceptualized as an aesthetic consciousness that changes externally but is common among its contemporaries. Cho Taek-won is an important figure in creating a Korean new dance that exploits this perspective (Lee, 2011, p. 37).

Previous studies include those of Lee Byung-ok (1995), Kim Mal-ae (1998), Kim Yoon-ji (2010), Kim Ki-hwa (2015), and Kim Young-hee and Yoon Myung-hwa (2019). These studies examine Cho Taek-won’s life and artworks or reveal the transmission of his works in the context of the times. However, few studies have revisited Cho Taek-won’s works and achievements during the new dance period from the standpoint of Korean dance history. This study is significant in accommodating various assessments and discussions of new dancers while examining Cho Taek-won’s achievements from a variety of angles within his socio-cultural context and re-examining Korean dance history.

II. Cho Taek-Won’s Life

Cho Taek-won (1907-1976) was a modern artist who tried to express his own philosophy and ideas through his clear view of art in Korean modern dance. Some have discussed the correlation between his political trajectory and artistic performance in his historical situation, but as a dancer who developed dance into art in the period of new dance, this paper examines his life by separating his political trajectory from his artistic works.

Cho Taek-won was born in Hamheung, Hamgyeongnam-do, and developed his artistic temperament in a wealthy environment (Kim, 1998, p.68). An optimist, he promoted Korean dance to the world as well as the Korean dance scene by performing numerous works and over 400 art activities over 30 years with a sense of dance, sophisticated grooming, manners, and excellent social skills. His life can be divided into early, middle, and late periods.

First, the early period (1920s) was when he encountered foreign dance and entered the art world. Showing great interest in Slavic dance and Hopak dance, which were first introduced during his

Whimoon High School years when Korean emigres in Russia visited Korea, he started to learn dance. In particular, greatly moved by seeing Ishii Baku's dance "The Possessed Man" in October 1927, he went to Japan in 1928 to become a student of Ishii Baku for more than three years, and started to dance in earnest following Choi Seung-hee. Encountering modern dance during this period, Cho Taek-won was greatly impressed by the expressiveness rather than the form of dance and tried to put philosophy and ideas into dance.

Second, the middle period (1930s-1950s) is when he developed his art world in earnest. He returned to Seoul in 1932 and opened the Cho Taek-won Dance Research Institute on September 24. He presented 14 works at the First Cho Taek-won Dance Presentation in January 1934, and then held the Second Cho Taek-won Dance Presentation at Bumingwan in January 1935, where he showcased his signature works *Impressions of Seungmu*, *Manjong*, and *Poem* and established himself as a dancer. He commissioned Kim Joon-young to compose the first music for *Impressions of Seungmu* and strove to modernize Korean dance by learning folk dance from Han Sung-joon for use in his works (Kim, 2010, p. 222).

In 1937, he left colonial Korea for France to participate in about 80 performances and a lecture at the Guimet Museum introducing the Orient, and grew artistically by engaging with various foreign art personalities such as dancers and critics. In particular, *Impressions of Seungmu* was lauded, and he changed the title to *Gasahojeop* at the recommendation of poet Jung Ji-yong.

In 1939, he performed the "Cho Taek-won Return Performance" hosted by the *Dong-A Ilbo* at Bumingwan and made a tour of 50 places nationwide, and in 1940 he made new attempts by choreographing the oriental ballet dance drama *Hak* and *Buyeohoesanggok*. During this period, when the General Mobilization Act had been invoked due to the Pacific War, he was appointed the head of the Imperial Military Consolation Performance Team and traveled around China to give consolation performances until Liberation, which caused him difficulties as pro-Japanese. After Liberation, he was shunned by the dance world for political reasons and left for the United States. During this period, Cho Taek-won formed his own artistic world by modernizing traditional dance and using Western culture as material for his work, and promoted Korean new dance to the world, but there is a variety of discussions of his artistic achievements because of his political trajectory.

Third, the late period (1950-1970s) is when he performed a number of performances abroad and retired. After Liberation, he moved to the U.S. in 1947 and continued to perform *Gasahojeop*, *Sinnosimbullo*, *Manjong*, and *Chunhyangjeon* under challenging conditions. In particular, *Sinnosimbullo* received favorable reviews in recognition of its artistry, and he went on to perform more than 400 invitations through various artistic connections in Japan (1952) and France and Europe (1953), and returned to Japan in 1955. He decided to retire in 1957 and gave a "retirement performance" at the age of 50. However, he opened a studio in 1959 at the insistence and sponsorship of the Japanese Funada

brothers.

In 1960, he returned to Korea with the resignation of President Syngman Rhee, and with the political re-evaluations of Choi Seung-hee and Cho Taek-won, some dancers denounced Cho's art (Kim, 1998, p. 71). However, his artistic achievements were recognized at the national level; he was honored with the Seoul Culture Award, the Academy of Arts Award, and the Order of Culture, and in 1976, his turbulent dance career came to an end. With various discussions underway on the dance of the new dance era as accommodated by Japan and its posterity, his achievements in modern dance history are revealed.

If we look at Cho Taek-won's life, we note that he received widespread political support and sponsorship from male elites and was greatly helped to establish himself as a modern boy and unrivaled male new dancer of his time through the media and sponsor groups (Lee, 2016, p. 233). His trajectory during this period can hold different implications depending on political interests, but in terms of dance history, his significant achievements are that he led new dance to an original artistic world that combined Western dance and Koreanness, and that he laid the basis for discussing dance as art. In the next section, we will examine his art historical achievements through his major works.

III. Major Works and Art Historical Achievements

A dancer of New Dance Cho Taek-won established his art world and developed what was limited to the essential meaning of dance into the dance of the theater (Oh, 2005, p. 97). His artworks can be divided into three areas: works that reinterpret Korean materials, works that use Western art as material, and works in the form of the first dance drama. We will examine his artistic achievements and significant contributions to the modernization of Korean dance through his major works.

1. Reinterpretation of Korean materials: Gasahojeop

In the early days of his artistic career, Cho Taek-won attempted choreography that reinterpreted dances and themes having Koreanness in his own way. In particular, he tried to boldly use themes and folk dances of Korean aesthetics with the "inner expressiveness" that stands out in modern dance. *Gasahojeop* is a dance and representative work that reveals this tendency.

Gasahojeop premiered in January 1935 as *Impressions of Seungmu* and is a rendering of traditional dance into a staged dance based on *Seungmu*. He learned traditional dance from Han Sung-joon under his teacher Ishiibaku's words, "Create Korean dance since you're Korean," and tried to build an original art world on such a Korean foundation. In particular, while new dancers of the time tended to

focus on creating new dances, Cho accepted this approach positively. The background of this work is as follows.

When I returned to Korea, I learned *seungmu* from a *gisaeng* named Kim Baek-ok who was good at *seungmu*. ... I thought that for this to be art, I first need to have pride, and my ideas and interpretations must be included. Impressions of *Seungmu* was a result of adding my own interpretation. It was also my first creative dance. ... I didn't dance the old Korean dance as it was, but I filtered my thoughts and reconstructed it (Cho, 1976, pp. 55-56).

It was an artistic rebellion against the inner lack that only served for smiling and performing tricks without highlighting the religious spirit or profound philosophical, mental background learned in Buddhism (An, 1978, p. 37).

In the above passage, we can catch a glimpse of his art world, which tries to reinterpret tradition originally and transform it in a modern manner, shifting away from the formal beauty emphasized in tradition. Cho Taek-won viewed *Seungmu* as a dance that lacked interiority and the profound spirit and philosophy of Buddhism and concentrated only on skills, and the work was part of his effort to overcome this. In light of the historical tendency to focus on elements revealed externally rather than philosophy and emotional expression, his dance method greatly influenced the dance world. In other words, this work is an inner dance that reveals his personality that interpreted the traditional dance of *seungmu* in his own way (Bae, 2006, p. 30).

In addition, there is a peculiarity in the use of music in *Gasahojeop* in that he composed the first dance music and choreographed the work. Against the tendency to choose and choreograph Western or Japanese songs, the pop music composer Kim Joon-young wrote the song for *Gasahojeop*. It can be confirmed from his writings: "It was the first time in this land that original music was composed and danced to (Cho, 1973, p. 52)."

The outfit was also based on the *seungmu* outfit, wearing white trousers and jacket, a cone, and *jangsam*, which shows that he choreographed a work giving a new interpretation that did not depart greatly from tradition and the category of creativity.

Later, poet Jung Ji-yong praised Cho Taek-won's dance, saying, "My breath became broad and large because of Cho's *Seungmu*, and it was the great *seungmu* of a great man where the promise of the stage and the theater was fulfilled (*Dong-A Ilbo* review, 1938)." suggesting that this work developed into a dance that formed solidarity with the audience beyond mere individual excitement. Later, he gave it the title *Gasahojeop* because the *jangsam*'s movement seemed to embody the appearance of a butterfly flying (Kim, 2019, p. 258). This dance is ranked among Cho Taek-won's representative works and is considered a monumental work that lead the trend of new dance through its many

overseas and domestic performances.

Thus, in *Gasahojeop* Cho Taek-won choreographed the reinterpreted work in his unique way based on Korean tradition, and as a work that expresses inner ideas through a dynamic and masculine dance instead of focusing on outward movements, it can be said to be a significant work in the history of Korean dance.

2. A work that uses Western art as material: Manjong

Cho Taek-won constantly tried to modernize Korean dance by combining Korean dance and Western dance forms, and while he started by grafting modern dance to Korean dance, he gradually created works focusing on Western moods and beauty. His work in France greatly influenced this and he affirms that he had grown significantly as an artist and a human being through his performances in Paris and meetings with world-class artists. In particular, he thought that Western romantic music and naturalist art had to serve as a basis for impressing the Korean people with dance (Lee, 2016, p. 226). His representative work in this respect is *Manjong*.

Manjong is a dance that borrows the title and image of a painting with the intention of modernizing Korean dance. This work is an adaptation of “The Gleaners” by the 19th-century realist painter Jean-François Millet that expresses the landscape of rural Korea to the music of Chopin’s nocturnes. Its motif is based on a painting, but, significantly, it was reinterpreted based on Korean sentiment (Lee, 2011, p. 39).

The work conveys the nobility of life and the profound providence of creation through a farmer couple praying reverently against the backdrop of a red sunset. Listening to Chopin’s nocturnes as played by the composer Kim Saeng-ryeo and looking at Millet’s painting hanging in the room, Cho choreographed the work inspired by peace, silence, unrealistic piety, and the mysterious excitement of nature. Continuous with his art world of expressing inner philosophy and emotion, this work choreographs a dance with Cho’s artistic inspiration and positive attitude toward life in order to deliver the painting’s color, three-dimensional feel, and composition to the audience.

In particular, it presents a new dance that combines Western and Korean dance techniques in terms of dance skills and visualizes the techniques of modern dance and ballet as Korean images. The movement is still, and while the expression of energy is not too strong, in some parts ballet techniques are used; a characteristic of this work is that it accommodates and transforms Western dance forms based on traditional Korean dance.

According to Cho Dong-hwa, “*Manjong* is only an early work among his vast works, but it shows ‘why dance is art’” (*Seoul Review*, No. 46). Similarly, a reviewer for *Dong-A Ilbo* stated, “It’s not just about imitating the beautiful motions of the body, but its value lies in the ability to make it into art. ... *Manjong* does not stop at appearances but boldly gives us our artistic appreciation from Millet’s ‘The

Gleaners” (Dong-A Ilbo review, 1938).

Ultimately, *Manjong* revealed an imitative style that accommodated the form of early Western dance, but it was recreated into a Korean dance that fits the Korean sentiment. With this work, Cho opened up the perspectives of recognizing dance as art and created a new image of Korean dance in a complex manner by combining the forms and techniques of Korean traditional dance and ballet. In other words, his works can be evaluated as historically significant art in that it transformed the Western dance form to express the Korean temperament.

3. The first dance-drama-type: Hak

In his encounter with various Western dances in France, Cho constantly attempted to combine Korean materials and ballet forms, which became the origin of Korean dramatic dance. *Hak* is representative of this.

Hak was inspired by Anna Pavlova’s *The Dying Swan* and the crane dance and ballet shoes of Serge Lifar, a world-renowned French choreographer and dancer. He tried to show oriental aesthetics symbolically through the subject of the crane by introducing a dance drama format, which began with his recognition of the value of the traditional prototype based on favorable reviews by French critics of Korean culture (Kim, 2014, p. 13).

When Cho Taek-won was working on *Hak*, the most important part was the prototypical motif, the composition of the story, and music. In particular, for Cho Taek-won, who directly studied traditional dance with Han Sung-joon, who had played a major role in the restoration and development of traditional dance during the new dance period, the crane dance served as a fundamental motif; and indeed the work was completed with much help from Han Sung-joon. Several Japanese artists who understood Korean culture participated, such as Murayama Tomoyoshi for production and Tokoku Takagi for musical composition. Thus planned, *Hak* premiered in Japan in a four-act dance drama format, and as the first to attempt an East Asian ballet, it was published under the name of “grand ballet” in the media and was recorded as the first work performed with orchestra accompaniment (Dong-A Ilbo, 1939).

However, being a partial, indeed incomplete borrowing of ballet’s formal beauty on the basis of Korean sentiments, it shows a lack of perfection and was criticized by Cho himself as well as the Japanese public. He stated that the reason for the failure was constraints on the expression of Korean emotions from the music being written by Japanese composers, which seems to be the result of the gap between traditional dance and ballet in the process of borrowing only the external images of ballet.

However, while the concept of dance poetry and drama was not then common currency, his attempt significantly influenced the new dance period artistically as an “experiment in grand ballet.” As the

origin of Korean dramatic dance, *Hak*'s value was not recognized at the time, but we may say that it is highly significant in the history of dance.

IV. Conclusion and Suggestions

We have examined the life and works of Cho Taek-won, who led the new dance period, and revisited his achievements in the context of art history.

New dance was established by the development of traditional dance and the accommodation of Western dance during Japanese colonial rule, and while new dance was formed from the deep roots of Korean culture, it began from the choreographer's new perspective on Korean culture. Since the modern concept of art was established while accommodating and developing Western dance mediated by Ishii Baku, there has been a variety of scholarly reevaluations of new dance, but it is necessary to re-examine the achievements of Cho Taek-won, who choreographed works from a new perspective and led the creation of new dance, from different angles and against the particular historical background of his time.

Cho Taek-won's achievements and art historical value as examined in this study are as follows.

First, as a dancer who presented the direction of creativity, Cho's art historical value lies in his symbolic significance as a representative figure of the new dance period. Strictly speaking, the tradition of folk dance was not standardized and systematized at the time and there was no clear idea for how to approach the Western dance that was flooding into Korea. Cho Taek-won started by imitating Western dance forms in his early years, but it is significant that he gradually reinterpreted and recreated it in works with Koreanness, suggesting the direction for creative dance based on the spirit of new dance.

Arguing that "Dance is not a skill but a product of the spirit coming from the soul," he laid the foundation for early creative dance that emphasized the interpretation of the tradition and expression of the subject by emphasizing dance as "non-thought" in which interiority is formalized and "dance" is left behind. Thus, his philosophy of art is of value in the history of dance as a symbol of the move toward novelty in a chaotic period.

Second, Cho is of value art historically because he significantly contributed to the modernization of Korean dance in the new dance period. Cho made great achievements in the modernization of Korean dance by reinterpreting Korean material, using Western art as the subject of his work, and choreographing the first dance drama-style work. He recreated dance according to the Korean aesthetic sense in *Gasahojeop* and in *Manjong*, for although Western materials were introduced, the works were recreated through a process of accommodation and transformation based on his own

interpretation. In addition, as with *Hak*, he presented for the first time a work that served as the prototype of Korean dance drama and introduced the form of ballet.

The concept of “Koreanness” can be said to be the Korean identity that has synchronicity and continuity encompassing the present and future, and Cho played a major role in opening the possibility of inheriting and transforming this tradition by modernizing traditional dance based on such “Koreanness.”

Third, Cho is of art historical value because he enabled “dance,” which was limited to its essential meaning, to be discussed as “art.” Cho developed his art world actively through newspapers and sponsor groups such as *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*, which served as an important opportunity for dance to be given a character as art (Cho, 2007, p. 25). In particular, he played an important role in instilling the perception that dance functions as art, such as the discovery of life through dance, self-awareness as a dancer, rendering dance on stage, and recognition of the value of dance as an independent activity (Lee, 2002, p. 75).

In addition, Cho made a great contribution to expanding the horizon of modern dance art through collaboration with various art genres, such as arguing that development and harmony with other arts such as music and art are necessary in order to develop dance art, securing the composition of music as a dance accompaniment for the first time in Korea, and using Western paintings as themes. Furthermore, the core of Cho’s art world is “not merely imitating the body beautifully but the ability to render the inside into art,” which has become the spirit of creative dance that continues to this day.

Amid the discussions of new dancers during the new dance period currently underway, Cho’s political moves are criticized as those of a middle-group artist during the Japanese colonial period, but his achievements are considered historically valuable art. It is to be hoped that this study will inspire further discussions and assessments of new dance and new dancers in the future.

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This study examines Cho Taek-won's life and works to revisit his achievements in the context of art history.

Since the modern concept of art was established while accommodating and developing Western dance introduced by Ishii Baku, there has been a variety of scholarly revaluations of new dance, but it is necessary to re-examine the achievements of Cho Taek-won, who choreographed works from a new perspective and led the creation of new dance, from different angles and against the particular historical background of his time.

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Keywords: New dance(신무용), Cho Taek-won(조택원), Modern Art(근대예술), Modernization of Korean dance(한국춤의 현대화), *Gasahojeop*(가사호첩)