

## Border-Crossing: Choe Seung-hui's Life and the Modern Experience

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### Abstract

The central purpose of this research is to probe the connection between Choe Seung-hui and the modern. The life of Choe Seung-hui, more than any other, must be understood under the larger rubric of the modern period and structure. Choe Seung-hui, who was dubbed "the dancer of the peninsula," "Korean dancer," and "the world dancer," was, without question, the most famous figure of that period. How can Choe Seung-hui's success be explained? Her success is intimately linked with-to modern conditions, and her life offers an important clue in shedding light on how she and her contemporaries experienced modernity both as a system and as an ideology. Choe Seung-hui is both a single individual and a complex icon produced by numerous audiences, critics, and the spirit of that period.

Based on existing research, this paper attempts to connect the "visual," the nucleus of the modern experience, with Choe Seung-hui's dance and her life. In other words, Choe Seung-hui lived the most spectacular life of that period, and through her we can arrive at an understanding of what it meant to be a spectacle, and examine the rise and power of the spectacle within the space of the modern.

**Keywords:** Korean modernity, border-aesthetics, colonialism, visual anthropology

## Introduction

Encountering Choe Seung-hui through literature and photographs was an unexpected experience for me. Not only was it impossible for me, who is neither a dance specialist nor a dance historian, to have met Choe Seung-hui (1911-1969),<sup>1</sup> a star in Japan and Korea as well as in the world of the 1930s, but my knowledge of and interest in her was equivalent to the way teens of today would think of Neil Diamond or another icon of the 1960s.

The catalyst for my research on Choe Seung-hui actually came from my interest in the fan dance. Through research on tourism posters that have been produced by the Korea Tourism Organization, I came to realize that images of women have frequently been used to symbolize Korea, especially images of women performing the fan dance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I decided to conduct deeper research into the fan dance.

My very first encounter with Choe came while studying the debate surrounding the inception of the fan dance. A monthly magazine named *Gaekseok* (Auditorium/**Audience?**)<sup>3</sup> featured a special report entitled, “Refocus on Dancer Choe Seung-hui Who Defected to North Korea,” in the September 1989 issue. The heart of the debate in many articles was whether the fan dance originated with Choe Seung-hui or Kim Baek-bong, but my own interest leaned more towards biographical facts and testimonies from various people regarding Choe Seung-hui’s life and art. *Gaekseok*’s special report caused quite a ripple in the dance world at the time and in its wake raised the curtain on full-scale research being done on Choe Seung-hui from the 1990s to the present. Thus, my readings on Choe Seung-hui began here but eventually extended beyond the initial fan dance research to encompass biographical research.<sup>4</sup>

However, the purpose of this paper is neither to shed light on the exact origins of the fan dance nor is it a biographical research on Choe Seung-hui. **Instead, the goal is to** become immersed in the modern period through a biographical reading of a single individual: the dance and life of Choe Seung-hui, who is regarded as a mythical figure in Korean dance history as well as in world dance history. Through reading about Choe Seung-hui, we can begin to grasp what is meant by “the modern.”

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<sup>1</sup> “In the morning session in school during the Japanese colonial period, our students saluted the Japanese emperor facing the east and swore that they were the people of the Japanese emperor. In this milieu, neither Syngman Rhee nor Kim Gu **wasere** known, and Kim Il Sung and Bak Heo-yeong were gossiped about only behind the scenes. Even at such times, everybody knew Choe Seung-hui together with Son Gi-jeong.” See Chung (1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Kim Y. (2003, 83-105).

<sup>3</sup> The first article on Choe Seung-hui **appeared** after the lifting of the ban and reinstatement of pro-North people along **with new foreign policy, such as the pro-communism policy.**

<sup>4</sup> For basic **research materials** related to dance, I would like to thank Choe Hae-ri, an editor of the **monthly magazine Mom** (The Body), who has kindly provided me with both research materials **s** regarding Choe Seung-hui and **the** occasional constructive advice.

Although it will be discussed later in the paper, the central ~~question-purpose~~ of this research is to probe the connection between Choe Seung-hui and the modern. The life of Choe Seung-hui, more than any other, must be understood under the larger rubric of the modern period and structure. Choe Seung-hui, who was dubbed “the dancer of the peninsula,” “Korean dancer,” and “the world dancer,” was, without question, the most famous figure of that period. How can Choe Seung-hui’s success be explained? Her success is intimately linked ~~with-to~~ modern conditions, and her life offers an important clue to shedding light on how she and her contemporaries experienced the modern both as a system and as an ideology. Choe Seung-hui was both a single individual and a complex icon produced by numerous audiences, critics, and the spirit of that period.

Based on existing research, this paper attempts to connect the “visual,” the nucleus of the modern experience with Choe Seung-hui’s dance and her life. In other words, Choe Seung-hui lived the most spectacular life of that period, and through her we can arrive at an understanding of what it meant to be a spectacle, and examine the rise and power of the spectacle within the space of the modern.

### **The Life of Choe Seung-heui: A Short Critical Biography**

Choe Seung-hui’s name is always preceded by various modifiers. During her lifetime, these included “the dancer of the peninsula,” “the flower of Joseon,” and “the dancer of the world.” ~~After she exited the stage,~~ they were “the dancer of legend” and “the immortal myth.” Thought of as the person who lived the most dramatic life among Koreans of the twentieth century, her life even became the subject of a TV drama. Her life can be construed as a piece of drama since she had a dazzling stage career that no other dancer could even come close to emulating while simultaneously ~~experiencing~~ the vicissitudes of life under the colonial period and the division of the peninsula. Her life, even before being the history of an individual, represents a window onto a cross section of Korea’s modern culture.

Choe Seung-hui was the youngest daughter of Choe Jun-hyeon’s four children. Because of her outstanding marks in school, she skipped a grade to graduate from Sookmyung Women’s Middle School. Although she wanted to enroll in a music school in Tokyo in the hopes of succeeding as a singer, there were difficulties in gaining admission at such an advanced age. On top of this, her family suffered hardships due to the confiscation of their land through land surveys by the Japanese imperial forces and ~~were as~~ barely making ends meet, relying on the second son, Choe Seung-ho’s salary. Choe Seung-hui decided initially to enter a teacher’s college in consideration of her family’s finances, however, her application was denied due to her young age. While she was contemplating new paths, she

chanced upon a performance by Ishii Baku<sup>5</sup> in Gyeongseong (today's Seoul) in 1926, and at the recommendation of her older brother, Choe Seung-il,<sup>6</sup> she decided to choose the path of a dancer. Although there were some complications, she followed Ishii Baku's dance troupe to Japan only a few days after meeting him.

Choe Seung-hui participated in various performances held by the Ishii Dance Research Center just a few months after traveling to Japan. These facts testify to her amazing talent and work ethic. Under Ishii Baku's guidance, Choe Seung-hui practiced dance night and day and worked tirelessly as a member of the Ishii Baku's dance troupe. Through performances in Japan and ~~in~~ her native country,<sup>7</sup> she gradually came to be recognized by her own name as dancer Choe Seung-hui. This meant that it took Choe Seung-hui a mere three years to return to Gyeongseong<sup>8</sup> in 1929, reborn as a dancer, and established for the first time a dance research center bearing her own name near Namsan mountain. Her dance research center, however, underwent various hardships. On top of financial difficulties, Choe had to endure the hostile gaze of the conservative milieu that did not understand her art and considered her to be just a single woman rather than a performing artist.

Just as her encounter with Ishii Baku was a decisive turning point in Choe Seung-hui's life, her meeting with An Mak<sup>9</sup> marked an incident that would come to be more than just a simple meeting with a future marriage partner. An Mak, whom she met through her brother Choe Seung-il's efforts and Bak Yeong-hui's mediation, was Choe Seung-hui's husband as well as a partner involved in all aspects of her activities. An Mak recommended Choe Seung-hui's trademark bobbed haircut, inspected her stage costumes, and played an important role throughout the entire process necessary for each performance. It is a well-known fact that he programmed Choe Seung-hui's activities as a concert planner and wielded great influence over Choe Seung-hui's artistic views. Ironically both figures who played decisive roles in Choe Seung-hui's dance career used the Chinese character *mak* (漠), meaning "desert," in their names. The wedding between An Mak and Choe Seung-hui took place in 1931.

Choe Seung-hui returned to the Ishii Baku Dance Research Center in 1933 in order to overcome the difficulties facing her own research center as well as other troublesome affairs.

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<sup>5</sup> This performance was held for three days from March 20, 1926, and this has been considered the starting point of Korean modern dance. **Seoul Public Hall (also known as Hasegawa Public Hall)**, the venues for this performance, ~~was~~ located in Sogong-dong across from the current **Hotel Westin Chosun**.

<sup>6</sup> He was one of the people who had the most direct and positive influence on Choe Seung-hui's dance activities as well as her starting dance. In 1922 he was a member of Yeomgungsa 焰群社, Korea's first proletarian literature group. He was popular at that time in the culture world by-for participating in the proletarian literature movement while working in-at the Gyeongseong Broadcasting Station (the first Korean broadcasting station; today known as the Korea Broadcasting System today).

<sup>7</sup> Ishii Baku's second and third performances (1927, 1928)

<sup>8</sup> The fact that she had the will to be independent as a dancer and turned her-way-towards/away from? Ishii Konami, who seceded from the research center, is known as the reason why she parted with Ishii Baku and came back to Seoul. See Kawabata Yasunari (1939).

<sup>9</sup> An Mak (real name ~~as~~ An Pil-seung, 1909-1958) was a member of the Korea Artista Proleta Federatio (KAPF) literature group and an influential person in the art movement.

Having returned to Japan with her young daughter, An Seung-ja (who changed her name to An Seung-hui after her defection to North Korea), Choe Seung-hui focused on ~~her~~ dance with renewed determination. With her first dance recital in 1934,<sup>10</sup> she emerged as Japan's most noted new dancer. In the second and third dance recitals, she continued to receive highest accolades, and her explosive popularity expanded beyond the dance world to find her being embraced by Japanese ~~mass-popular~~ culture in general. As a result, she was hired as a model ~~in-for~~ various advertisements and starred in several movies. She first began to broaden her activities beyond dance when she made a film entitled *The Dancer of the Peninsula (Bando-ui muhui)*, an autobiographical treatment that enjoyed a long run, as well as recording an album.<sup>11</sup> Beyond her career as a dancer, Choe Seung-hui was a celebrated beauty, both in Japan and by her audiences. She was more than a dancer—she was a star. The committee formed to support her activities listed such prominent figures as Kawabata Yasunari, Yamamoto Norihigo in Japan, and Korean national leaders, including Song Jin-u and Yeo Un-hyeong. At the height of her popularity, she held over 600 performances in major cities in Japan from 1934 to 1937, and it is estimated that over two million people watched her perform.

Having established her position as a dancer and emboldened by the ensuing popular success, Choe Seung-hui began to realize yet another dream. Although she had received invitations from countries all over the world due to her brilliant career in Japan, Choe Seung-hui aspired to become more than just a star in Japan and Korea; she sought to be acknowledged as a world dancer and to embark on tours of the United States and Europe.

The three years from 1937 that she spent touring the United States, Europe, and South America marked another turning point for Choe Seung-hui. She promulgated her dance to the world while simultaneously grasping the direction of world dance and acquiring onsite knowledge about different nations' dances. Acknowledged as a world dancer, Choe Seung-hui returned to Japan to put on long-term solo performances never before seen in dance performance history. ~~With the confidence gained as a result of her achievements, she was able to determine the direction of her art to her heart's content.~~

However, with the start of World War II (1939-1945) and the pressure of Japanese militarism, independent artistic activities were no longer guaranteed and she began visiting Japanese military bases. She designed and performed a dance based on Japanese mythology and donated the proceeds to the Japanese war effort, thus becoming associated with pro-Japanese sentiments. During this period, however, Choe Seung-hui also encountered Chinese dance and fostered friendships with Chinese artists like [Mairan Pang](#). Through this experience, she began to articulate a concrete conception of Eastern ballet and probed the meaning of dance, focusing on what it represents within the entire culture rather than just for the dancer.

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<sup>10</sup> September 20, 1934, Japanese Youth Hall

<sup>11</sup> Her songs recorded in 1936 still exist today, and thus we can hear the voice of Choe Seung-hui, who once ~~desired-aspired~~ to be a vocalist.

In addition, she conducted research to find new subjects for dance within traditional cultures and to ascertain how various national dances should be reinterpreted.

Choe Seung-hui returned momentarily to Seoul from China after receiving news of Japan's defeat and Joseon's independence but decided to defect to North Korea at An Mak's encouragement. Given the hostile scrutiny of her pro-Japanese activities in South Korea, **Kim Il Sung's welcoming defection policies for cultural figures combined with An Mak's recommendation proved attractive, and Choe Seung-hui escaped trouble yet again.** After her defection, Choe Seung-hui, with the support of Kim Il Sung and the party leaders, enjoyed unparalleled artistic freedom and financial backing. Her dance research studio was established near the Daedonggang river, **and** with the support of the people as well as cooperation and respect from numerous students, she was able to begin a new life as a dancer and leader. Although there must have been limitations due to her age, she devoted herself to developing a military form of dance, as opposed to a solo, and she was continuously eager to prove herself as a world dancer by remaining active, for example, successfully leading tours of Eastern Europe. Even in 1950, in the midst of the Korean War, she continued to teach and research dance in the Central Theater Academy (Jungang Huigeuk Hagwon) in Beijing with the Chinese, including Koreans residing in China, as her target audience. Until the mid 1950s, after her return to Pyongyang in the aftermath of the Korean War, Choe Seung-hui was truly an unrivaled figure in North Korea's dance world. In 1956, she produced her masterpiece and North Korea's first color film, *Sadoseong's Story* (*Sadoseong-ui iyagi*). But following the purge of her husband, Choe Seung-hui's dance underwent a reevaluation that ultimately attracted Kim Il Sung's suspicions and the collapse of her status. After producing various theses, including one entitled "Korea's dance movements and the superiority of their methods and national uniqueness"<sup>12</sup> in 1966, Choe Seung-hui disappeared from official records.

### Extant Research

Research on Choe Seung-hui's life during the Japanese colonial period and the division of the peninsula was subject to restriction for political reasons, even after the lifting of **the ban** in the late 1980s.<sup>13</sup> These "political reasons" refer not only to the sharply opposed political systems of North and South Korea but also to the numerous individuals linked with Choe Seung-hui. Debates are bound to surface ranging from the ideology reflected in Choe Seung-hui's artistic activities to the lineage of teacher to disciple within dance.

In practice, ideological evaluation and artistic criticism of Choe Seung-hui's achievements and artistic activities cannot be easily divided, nor should they be divided if a

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<sup>12</sup> *Munhak sinmun* (Literature Newspaper), March 22, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Until the late 1980's, **the** South Korean government **has**-legally banned any researches on individuals who had defected to North Korea.

person's activities are to be considered as a whole. Ideological and artistic divisions are only conceptually possible in regarding the life of Choe Seung-hui, who had no choice but to live a life of struggle.

As previously mentioned, the most notable work after the weekly magazine *Gaekseok*'s special report on Choe Seung-hui in 1989 was Chung Byung-Ho's "Dancing Choe Seung-hui—A Joseon Woman Who Mesmerized the World" published in 1995. Chung Byung-Ho presented the most extensive biographical sources by compiling existing material and personally collecting material since 1988. It was an enormous tour de force brimming over with not only newspaper articles and scholarly papers but also testimonies collected from over eighty people connected to Choe Seung-hui including her family, relatives, and students.

Other articles have included "The Influence of Choe Seung-hui's Art on Korean Modern Dance"<sup>14</sup> and "Choe Seung-hui's Dance Art Study from the Perspective of Women's Rights"<sup>15</sup> that attempt to approach Choe Seung-hui's dance by evaluating her from various sociological dimensions.

If Chung Byug-Ho's work basically ~~dwelled~~ focused on collecting historical materials, Yi Ae-sun's work as a doctoral dissertation offers the most singularly comprehensive discussion among the research on Choe Seung-hui that began towards the end of the 1980s. Through Choe Seung-hui's dance research, Yi Ae-sun includes "Choe Seung-hui's life, [and] world perspective along with the development of literary ideology, on top of [the] continuation and development of nation's traditional dance, [and the] theoretical basics of Choe Seung-hui's dance."

Compared to ~~the~~ existing studies, this research has some contrasting differences. First, while the majority of studies on Choe Seung-hui were conducted from the perspective of a dance specialist or a dance historian, this study considers Choe Seung-hui as an icon of the period from an anthropological point of view. Choe Seung-hui's life reveals not only her dramatic achievements as a dancer but also some critical aspects of the modern experience. The main focus of this study is to understand the early modern experience through Choe Seung-hui's dance and, more importantly, her life as a whole. In these efforts, such discussions ~~of~~ in "the visuality," "the body," "the modern star" that are made in exploring Choe Seung-hui's life are considered ~~to be~~ an unprecedented theoretical attempt. Despite several limitations, I hope this study will contribute to expanding the theoretical horizons in studying Choe Seung-hui's dance and life.

## Theoretical Background

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<sup>14</sup> Bak M. (1993).

<sup>15</sup> Yu (1997).

Although rapid industrialization and urbanization brought material prosperity to Koreans, abrupt structural changes also made them question the general direction of their lives. The experience of the so-called IMF crisis in 1997 made Koreans, who had been sold on capitalistic development for half a century, question how they truly wished to live their lives. The prevailing national predicament of being split into North and South beckoned Koreans to reexamine the various contradictions that had occurred over the years. The intervention of foreign forces in the development process and ensuing infringement on Korea's sovereignty, the colonial experience of Japanese imperialism, societal chaos in the aftermath of liberation, ~~and~~ the Korean War that resulted from ~~the~~ dissension between the left and the right, the confrontation between the North and South, South Korea's industrialization after the 1960s, the democratization movement of the 1980s, the nuclear crisis on the peninsula centered around North Korea in the late 1990s—these experiences hatched ~~an~~ awareness of the renewed need to define Korea's past and the origin of modernity.

Defining modernity through such a process is the most critical component in explaining modernity or that point in time and bears special meaning in terms of researching Korea, which has been evaluated as ~~being~~ the most successful case of accelerated modernization.

What is modernity? Discussion of this significant historical step, which represented a transformation of policies, ideologies, and culture, is a very complicated one. The difficulties in determining the concepts of modernity that preoccupy many scholars' debates lie in the unique diversity of time and space unfolded by modernity. Just as the flow of history cannot be demarcated with mere numbers, the characteristics of the period called modernity cannot be classified into a single definitive concept. Modernity under discussion is a composite of the said modern and modernity. It signifies an amalgamation of the scientific spirit centered on rationality along with an institutionalized device that allowed the pursuit of individual's ~~s'~~s political freedom and reasonableness.

Modernity is fundamentally a concept of borders. Introduction of new ideologies, institutions, and cultures marks the arrival of a new border that divides one era from another. Escape from feudalistic systems, birth of a new independent power called citizenship, views of nature, and new evaluations of the quality of life all suggest ~~a~~ new consciousness of borders in relation to the past, the present, and the future. More than any other time period, modernity held the promise of a new world and was born as a result of the definite border between modernity and the past. However, these modern characteristics and elements constituting modernity are not necessarily actualized uniformly in real space. Various comparative studies are being conducted, including ~~the~~ studies related to the uniqueness revealed by the **Third World** modernization process.

Korea's modernization was unique in that it took place to meet the needs of the Japanese. **As a result of this external coercion, Korean modernization was deformed.** Korea's modern plans drawn by the Japanese, who held absolute influence over Korea's modern space,

were actually indeed **intended** for the continental expansion of Japanese imperialism and were interpreted for Japan. The procession of modernization under the “forced marriage” of the Japanese imperialist army produced numerous casualties within the violence and confusion that resulted from soldiers being forced to fight to the death.

According to No Hyeong-seok, “Modernity did not limit itself to battle wounds and fear. On the other side of this **modern city/modernity?** during the 1920s and the 1930s opens the stage of sensuality and consumerism. The magnetic pull to modernization’s primal power was overwhelming in the face of visual charms sprinkled on by various modern products.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, modernity made its approach through images.

The **ideology of** modernity was not simply limited to the conceptual realm but represented a transformation of daily life. Modernity was not a mere thought process but something that had to be experienced and was accompanied by control of nature grounded on progress and the reorganization of material space through urbanization. The new space founded on modernity was a planned space called “a city” and modernity grew upon this space. Streets designed for efficiency, traffic-centered roads built for the rapidly expanding urban populace, introduction of industrial spaces for free economic transactions and consumption: these are all general characteristics of modern space.

These external aspects of the city become monopolized by the dominant group. The harsh concretization of the borderline between the so-called northern and southern villages in Seoul, **coexisting with the rapidly** decrease in traditional spaces, well demonstrate the deformity of the situation. The southern villages newly built to accommodate the increase in Japanese residential and consumer areas, juxtaposed with the northern villages that were barely subsisting in their resistance, visually represented the dichotomy between tradition and modernity to early twentieth century Koreans. The introduction of streetlights newly established the border between night and day and signified a change to Korean’s way of life. In contrast to the dark streets of the northern villages, the ever-prosperous sleepless space of the southern villages **wasere** under the domination of the dualistic consciousness of old and new, tradition and modernity. Although occupied by the consciousness of new desires, the simultaneous frustration of unfulfilled desires fueled the desire for a new **consciousness**. **Under modernity, consciousness remains ostracized and suspended, while corporality has already entered the stage.**

Whether we like it or not, the electric lights of modernity grab and pull at our gaze. As is well known, the modern attaches great importance to visuality.<sup>17</sup> Through special methods, modern planning controls our gaze and provides spectacles. **As modern elements, the newly built roads in the southern villages, dazzling consumer spaces, and modern buildings with roots in Western tradition were spectacular in their appearance. However, the**

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<sup>16</sup> No Hyong-sek (2004, 6).

<sup>17</sup> Jenks (1995, 1-16).

entrance of southern villages as ~~an~~ this element of spectacle did not simply mark a division between the northern and southern villages or the Korean residential area and Japanese residential area; they marked the ~~but an~~ integration of the southern villages. Rather than a mere material space, the southern villages were a symbol of the modern and an alluring advertisement for a new, dominant way of life. This spectacle was embodied in the electric lights and was powerfully attractive. As indicated by Guy Debord, “there rose a modern habit of aimlessly prowling the streets and storefronts at night among Koreans in the 1920s and the 1930s.”<sup>18</sup> “Modern image, the shock of the spectacle transforms from the level of being to the level of having and the having is directly related to appearing.” Modern society is a “society of the spectacle.”<sup>19</sup>

Arriving in Hanyang after ten years  
Only Namsan mountain stands as green as yesteryear  
In windows lining the streets, lights galore  
Trams sound their horns under the electric wires crisscrossing the air  
Marks of a new civilization everywhere you look

-- “Entering Seoul” by Maecheon Hwang Hyeon (1855-1910)

Mayer, an urban planning scholar, stated that no other city in history experienced such rapid and concentrated growth as Seoul. Seoul, which began its transformation at such an amazing speed, provided denizens of the capital with a new inner experience privy only to city dwellers. For Koreans at that time, the advent of modernity was understood not under larger paradigms, such as huge changes in structure or historical incidents that controlled a new mode of life, but as a process of direct and sensual experience accompanied by changes in daily life.

In this modern space Choe Seung-hui was a star. Although she gained fame as a dancer, she was more than a dancer in people’s psyches, and what Choe Seung-hui displayed was not simply dance. Choe Seung-hui’s body, her movements, and her actions themselves were yet another form of spectacle.

This research, then, starts from Choe Seung-hui as a spectacle. Choe Seung-hui of the 1930s was the most prominent symbol, and her success shared intimate connections with [the new era called modernity](#). Against this background, the following discussion will center on Choe Seung-hui’s body and her movements as well as visual elements such as the stage and lighting.

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<sup>18</sup> No Hyeong-seok (2004, 55).

<sup>19</sup> Debord (1983, 1-11).

## The Body

The public gaze on Choe Seung-hui was, more than anything else, directed towards her body and outer appearance. Although dance as a visual art form is based on the body, interpretations of Choe Seung-hui's body reflect different understandings contingent upon different situations.

First of all, the most prominent physical feature of Choe Seung-hui to attract people's gaze was her height. In a group photograph for a performance in the capital two years after she had become Ishii Baku's disciple at the age of sixteen, Choe Seung-hui is the tallest in the group. Although she was only eighteen, her height in high heels exceeded 170cm.

As can be surmised from the later height restriction of 150 cm in the recruitment of dancers,<sup>20</sup> Choe Seung-hui appears to have been markedly taller than most women of her time, but her height was also well above that of the average male. Although some might attribute this to her extensive physical training in ballet, it is said that she was already quite tall even before she went to Japan.

Without exception, everyone who has seen Choe Seung-hui dance noted her body and her physical appearance. Let us examine the words of the Japanese literary figure Kawabata Yasunari, who had begun to notice Choe's dance performances when she worked with Ishii Baku in Japan. Her large-tall body made a striking initial impact as a tower of strength in the eyes of Kawabata Yasunari, who regarded Choe Seung-hui as the greatest dancer in Japan: "First of all, it is a great body. This is the size of her dance. It is strength. It is a scent of her nation found only in her."<sup>21</sup>

Dance critic Sonoji Gogo who saw Choe Seung-hui's first dance recital began by saying, "Madam Choe possesses a superior body. This is particularly fortunate for a dancer."<sup>22</sup> In addition, Nakamura Shuuchi said, "Choe Seung-hui's 'sword dance' was a strong dance that gave life to large lines befitting her."<sup>23</sup> These were all observations that focused on Choe Seung-hui's height and the powerful expression it exuded. Accolades continued from the debut performances, and even in the second dance recital, Choe Seung-hui's physique dominated the critics' headlines. Kamishi Shoogan stated, "I applaud your Amazonian physique more than anything else. Strength from that physique produces art unmatched by others" (Chung 1995, 105).

These kinds of reviews are grounded on multiple and complex backgrounds that must be understood as an extension of "escaping Asia to enter Europe" (*tara ipgu*) and "entering

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<sup>20</sup> Chung (1995).

<sup>21</sup> Kawabata (1939).

<sup>22</sup> Chung (1995, 88).

<sup>23</sup> Chung (1995, 89).

Asia to escape Europe” (*iba talgu*). “For the Japanese, civilization and enlightenment did not represent a simple reform of customs or Western lifestyle but represented an active process of reaching a state equivalent to that of a Western civilization.”<sup>24</sup> With complete self-denial, ~~those striving for these~~ modernization ~~efforts~~ based on the Western model began to desire not their own body or the body of the East but the Western body in size and strength. In this vein, Choe Seung-hui’s body supplanted the inadequate body of the East.

However, the Japanese gaze trained on Choe Seung-hui’s body was not simply directed towards her “Western” physique. The Japanese also took note of what they saw as Eastern spirit revealed through Choe Seung-hui’s physique, which embodied the Western mien. Ethnic (nationalistic) expressions along with her spectacular physique enthralled the Japanese and led them to lionize her performances. “With the dawning of the fact that Western modernization and Japanese Westernization cannot be the same” Japan once again wished to find the roots of their own identity in Asia.<sup>25</sup> The Japanese gaze, in defining their own identity, was transposed from one of “escaping Asia to enter Europe” (*tara ipgu*) to “entering Asia to escape Europe” (*iba talgu*).

Let us examine Kawabata Yasunari’s review again. “In watching Madam Choe perform the Korean dance, one can feel her emphatically instructing Japan’s Western dancers to plant their roots in their own ethnic tradition. However, Choe Seung-hui is not merely reenacting the Korean dance but renewing the old, strengthening the weak, and reviving the dead. It is a Korean dance of her own creation. The nationalism always consuming her head and heart and pulsating within her veins and in her dance should be most highly extolled in all of Korea.”<sup>26</sup>

These points reveal the tension in the dual gaze of the Japanese born within the dichotomy of tradition and modern, East and West. The Japanese modernization initiated with the determination to follow the West had its share of success, but at the same time Japan had to revert from escaping the East (*tara*) to revitalizing the East (*heunga*) and confront the fresh task of newly establishing their identity. Against this backdrop, the rise of the East versus the West was construed as indicative of the superiority of the East. The point, however, that is acknowledged here is not the “Koreanness” found in Choe Seung-hui’s dance but the finding of an Asian figure by Japan who had no alternative but to recoil from a fallacious situation.

In actuality, this anxiety over identity is directly metastasized within the process of Choe Seung-hui’s modern experience: she directly quoted Kawabata Yasunari’s review of her dance in the book, *Basics of Korean National Dance* ~~*Basics*~~ (Joseon minjok muyong gibon). If Japan’s gaze was a product exhibited through the process of looking inward and looking to the teacher of modernity, the West, then yet another layer is added to Choe Seung-hui’s case to include the West, Japan, and her own nation, Korea.

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<sup>24</sup> Bak J. (2003, 72).

<sup>25</sup> Bak J. (2003, 76).

<sup>26</sup> Kawabata (1939).

Remarks about Choe Seung-hui's body were made frequently even during her tours around the United States and Europe. An interesting fact is that these gazes differed in their focal point. The San Francisco *Examiner*'s review of her 1939 performance in San Francisco's Curran Theatre stated, "Choe Seung-hui is very beautiful. She has a careful smile on her face ~~exuding that exudes~~ confidence. She is wearing a silk frock derived from the Eastern tradition, and it is modern and fantastic. Its color and elegance were truly attractive."<sup>27</sup> In addition, "she is well-proportioned with infinite elegance along with intricately moving hands and various makeup techniques" (*Los Angeles Times*).<sup>28</sup> "As soon as that woman's shell-like hands finished their final movement, the curtain fell and the bell rang. Choe Seung-hui mesmerized her fans. Perfect rhythm, elegance, glamorous costumes, music from ancient Korea, in a word, it was a dance of charm and beauty" (*Los Angeles Examiner*).<sup>29</sup> In sum, these concert reviews reveal that the eyes of the U.S. audience and the critics point not towards Choe Seung-hui's strength or size but towards her elegance and delicateness.

Continuing from the U.S. tour, Paris *Le Figaro* pinpointed the following details of her performance held on January 31, 1939 in the Theatre des Champs-Elysees: "Her sculptural lines, and the expression and comedy of her marvelous hand gestures along with the threatening mask manifest very diverse emotions. She really showed an Eastern fantasy."<sup>30</sup> After the success of her Paris performances, she received the highest accolades in her tours through Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. The reviews in other European countries all connect her to the mysterious East with her "Oriental face," "hypnotizing body gestures," and "delicate touches."

Such facts contrast directly with the Japanese gaze and signify that Choe Seung-hui's appearance and movements were looked on as emblems of an Eastern fantasy. If the Japanese found the strength and size they believed to be lacking in Asian bodies through Choe Seung-hui's body, then the Westerners found an Eastern delicateness and mysteriousness that they believed was distinct from the Western body.

It can be surmised from such contrasting concert reviews that Choe Seung-hui's calculated intentions had, without a doubt, found their impact. She prepared performances centered on Eastern or Korean dances in anticipation of the audiences in the U.S. and Europe, and these were done bearing in mind the show's successful run.

No matter how Choe Seung-hui's appearance is interpreted within the bordering frames of the East and West, it is undeniable that her charm left a deep impression on all of her audiences. Choe Seung-hui's bodhisattva dance<sup>31</sup> performed in 1937 resembled a semi-nude dance and shocked her audiences enormously at the time. It was perceived to be more

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<sup>27</sup> Chung (1995, 138).

<sup>28</sup> Chung (1995, 139).

<sup>29</sup> Chung (1995, 139).

<sup>30</sup> Chung (1995, 153).

<sup>31</sup> Choe Seung-hui's bodhisattva dance exists in various forms and are pieces that were slightly altered to fit the region in which they were performed.

erotic than a fully nude dance. “There was no such thing as a strip show then, and Choe Seung-hui’s semi-nude dance was possibly the final semi-strip show allowed in the midst of the war. But I think Choe Seung-hui’s semi-nude bodhisattva dance showed much more erotic posture than a nude stripper.”<sup>32</sup>

As reflected in author Mishima Yukio’s writing, it is not too difficult to judge how powerful Choe Seung-hui’s appearance must have been at the time. It is difficult to deny that Choe Seung-hui’s body was an object of voyeurism in considering these points, whether her audience was from the East or West.

### Light, Stage, and Movement

As aforementioned, the southern village planned in Seoul, then called Gyeongseong, by the Japanese imperialists, was a space of consumption and pleasure; at night, it presented a dramatic contrast of shimmering lights to the dark northern village in Seoul. Electric lights, more than any other Western artifact, possessed the single most powerful magnetism. The stage was a special space for Choe Seung-hui, the spectacle. And she reinforced her image through her movements on stage.

A new space called the “theater” rose to satisfy the cultural cravings of the newly established urban citizens in Seoul. Dance that used to be maintained by female entertainers in pleasure quarters was now newly packaged and consumed on stage as new cultural products. A space that was particularly coveted by general concert artists including dancers at the time was Gyeongseong Public Hall (Gyeongseong Gonghoedang). Gyeongseong Public Hall, also known as Hasegawa Public Hall, was also where Choe Seung-hui first enjoyed her teacher Ishii Baku’s performance. Modern cities gave birth to the stage,<sup>33</sup> and Choe Seung-hui thrived on the stage with the spotlight focused on her. If traditional dance was formulated in restricted spaces such as palaces and pleasure quarters, the new dance was promulgated through stage arts for new urban consumers. Choe Seung-hui’s avid interest in stage lighting can easily be gauged by glancing through her biographical material.

After the second concert in Japan, she employed Takashima Koyoshiro<sup>34</sup> and Choe Jin (Japanese name Amano)<sup>35</sup> for performances in Korea, and Yun Jae-cheon<sup>36</sup> after her defection to North Korea. During her activities in Japan, she employed such lighting experts

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<sup>32</sup> Chung (1995, 232).

<sup>33</sup> There were also Dongyang Theater, the YMCA Hall, and later Bumin-gwan (currently the Seoul City Council Building).

<sup>34</sup> On February 1, 1930, the year Choe Seung-hui turned 20 years old, Takashima Koushiro was in charge of lighting for the first Choe Seung-hui dance recital held in Gyeongseong Public Hall, hosted by *Maeil Sinbo*.

<sup>35</sup> Lighting engineer at Gyeongseong Bumin-gwan.

<sup>36</sup> Chung (1995, 265).

as Yi Jong-nam<sup>37</sup> and Oma Saburo.<sup>38</sup> She maximized the effectiveness of her appearance and movements through elaborate lighting designs. In selecting performance halls, the lighting system was one of her main criteria. Chung Byung-Ho, who compiled Choe Seung-hui's biography, recounts his personal experience in the book's foreword, "At first, the lights illuminate the belly button then spread to other parts of the body. The sight may have been enhanced by my youth, but it was so enchanting. All I could say was, how can a person be so beautiful! How can such beautiful art exist!" (Chung Byung-Ho 1995, 11). Lighting, such as spotlighting and arc lighting, were the most effective in making Choe Seung-hui's solo performances more attractive and focusing the eyes of the audience on one spot.

Choe Seung-hui also paid as much attention to stage costumes as she did to lighting. Professional artists and designers created her stage costumes, and professional seamstresses were employed to make costumes that were uniquely her own. According to Chung Byung-Ho, "the initial costumes were managed by Tani Momoko's (a prominent ballerina) mother and after that, around 1937, a famous artist named Kim Jeong-wan<sup>39</sup> took over the design" (Chung 1995, 387). As demonstrated through the bodhisattva dance, the costumes were designed to wrap her body. The transparent stage costumes heightened her sensuality, and it seems apparent that she also planned out the accessories in order to maximize the lighting effect. Another important factor were the large number of sequins sewn onto her costumes and headdress so that the reflections from the light would focus the eyes and make her movements appear as if in a fantasy. Her students state that Choe Seung-hui sometimes made the costumes herself, and as a result of her modeling work in advertisements, she was capable of doing her own makeup. In short, "she had an uncanny ability to match the colors of the costumes with the lighting, a genius!" (Yi Ae-sun 2002, 262). Choe Seung-hui was a magician with lighting and was responsible for reinstating onto the stage the body that had been hidden in the shadows of feudalism.

Her movements on stage were also new. Ishii Bakhu's dance was rooted in modern dance and therefore, the basic positions and body training Choe Seung-hui first received were founded on Western dance and ballet. Vertical expressions such as jumps and fast, continuous turns rather than curves were employed. Traditional dance moves of the pleasure quarters emphasized the upper body movements over the lower, and in comparison Choe Seung-hui's movements were incomparably dynamic. Western dance movements such as the Grand Jete were used in Choe Seung-hui's dance, and in place of the traditional dance tendency to focus on one's own dance, Choe Seung-hui's dance established a new relationship with the audience by becoming one with them. Choe Seung-hui highly valued rapport with the audience to the extent that numerous audiences left feeling that she danced for them alone as individuals even

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<sup>37</sup> In charge of lighting during local city tours in Japan after the second dance recital.

<sup>38</sup> Chung (1995, 119).

<sup>39</sup> Kim Jeong-wan is known for taking the first place in the oriental section of the Paris dance show in 1937. See Chung (1995, 137).

in the midst of her dynamic movements.

Another characteristic that set Choe Seung-hui's movements apart was the way she utilized the stage. In contrast to traditional dance where dancers stayed rooted to one spot and became more immersed in their own dance, Choe Seung-hui introduced a new sense of spatiality to the stage by dividing the stage.

Choe Seung-hui's dance cannot be categorized by simply contrasting her dynamic movements and utilization of the stage with traditional dance. It should not be overlooked that, in overseas performances, it was usually the most limited movements and introverted dance that captivated her audiences. Choe Seung-hui more than any other expertly practiced the aesthetics of borders by crossing tradition and modernity as well as East and West.

### Choe Seung-hui, the First Modern Star

Choe Seung-hui was not only a star on-stage but off-stage as well. Her success as a dancer was a catalyst in her becoming the focus of attention from-in pop culture. As mentioned before, after her success in personal recitals, she was acknowledged as the greatest model in the Japanese advertising market and. In the wake of this fame, Choe Seung-hui's appearances transformed from that of a dancer into one of a star catching the eyes of the general public. Her trademark bobbed hair was the most modern thing about her. Her clothes and accessories were also items that were most fashionable and most desired by modern women. The turban that she wore was a spin-off on the 1940s' style of wrapping one's head in a scarf, and it was followed by some artists and stars more than the general public. Her beauty, her fame, and her performance as a world dancer required a new birth through self-denial; her image was strong enough to not only be admired by women but also to leave a deep impression on numerous petit bourgeois. She was a symbol of success and an emblem of the ultra modern.

Choe Seung-hui was taller than most dance students, but she did not initially don clothes to attract people's attention nor was she always a fashion leader. A year before she went to Japan, she wore her hair in the traditional long braid with the traditional Korean dress, *hanbok*. Even in a photo that was taken right before she went to Japan in 1926, she kept her hair long even though she was wearing a Western suit and hat. The pictures of-from her years as a student in the dance research center around 1927 all show her in a typical everyday clothing.

If it is true that the bobbed hair that became Choe Seung-hui's trademark started with her husband, An Mak's, suggestion, then it can be deduced that she began to wear bobs after her marriage in 1931. Although it is suggested that the motives behind the bobbed hair were to concoct a trait that was uniquely Choe Seung-hui, or that the short hair made it easier to put on and take off different hairstyles, it is difficult to ascertain the exact reasons. Choe Seung-hui's bobbed hairstyle really was not exclusively hers and was popular among modern women

at the time, nor did it originate with her. However, as the most popular dancer in Japan after 1933, whose appearance mesmerized her audience, it is quite natural that her bobbed hair became her trademark.

According to Chung Byung-Ho, Choe Seung-hui enjoyed “glamorous clothes and accessories to ~~an~~ the extent that her husband An Mak warned her to curb her extravagant lifestyle, and sometimes she was told to wear clothes to suit the situation of her supporters” (Chung 1995, 85).

To promulgate her image as a star, Choe Seung-hui produced and sold her own picture bromides, a practice that no other dancers had even attempted. She compiled several dance scenes by commissioning the best photographers of the time and sold it to her audience, seeking not only to promote the shows but also to widely spread her exclusive image as a star. She also opened the Choe Seung-hui art exhibition to further establish her star image.

## Conclusion

Stipulations for a new life, whether they are coerced or voluntary, are founded on cutting away from or through some reinterpretation of the past, and it requires crumbling the border of the past and establishing a new border. The new onrush of the modern is linked with this deconstruction and the birth of borders. Choe Seung-hui’s life, which was transformed from that of the dancer of the peninsula to the greatest dancer in Japan and finally to a world-class dancer, is closely related to numerous modern borders.

Firstly, Choe Seung-hui reinterpreted the traditional dance that dwelled either in the pleasure quarters, farmers’ dances, or circus mask dances into a dance that is performed on stage. In consideration of the fact<sup>40</sup> that the term *muyong* (dance), meaning dance as an art, was not yet in use, and the term *mudo* (ballroom dance?), meaning social dance, only began to be used after 1925, Choe Seung-hui’s career was a remarkable one and marked a true departure for dance from the traditional space to a modern one. Her dance also freely crossed the lines between Eastern and Western dance. Tradition was newly defined through her. For Choe Seung-hui, who had successfully reinterpreted traditional elements into dance, there was no past to which she had to return. Tradition was a mere extension of the endlessly reinterpreting and developing modern project.

Choe Seung-hui’s border crossing should be noted from the vantage point of a dancer as well as that of a modern woman (*sin yeoseong*). An Seung-ja’s (the first daughter of Choe Seung-heui) name bears her wish for her to be victorious, as Choe Seung-hui named her with the character for “victory” (*seung*). Choe Seung-hui wanted her to “conquer the men despite

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<sup>40</sup> Bak Y. (1989, 187)

being a woman and become a great figure.”<sup>41</sup> She was thoroughly aware of women’s new position in a feudalistic male-centered society and consciously pursued both her marriage and dance.<sup>42</sup>

Choe Seung-hui crossed many national borders that were impossible for anyone else. She toured all over the United States and Europe, and even crossed the borders of South American countries that most Koreans had not even heard of. She crossed not only national borders but borders of genre.

However, these border crossings were not always done freely. For Choe Seung-hui, who had to contend with collisions and negotiations with numerous modern borders, life was a strategy of surviving modernity. Her artistic interests, referred to as border aesthetics in this paper, cannot be separated from the spirit of the era and its societal conditions. Although her life shined-shone more brilliantly through the limitations of imperialism and colonialism, she was at once their scapegoat. Her traces interspersed through Japan’s invasion of China after Korea, the European World War [?] from Korea to Japan, and from China to North Korea are all related to every modern borderline we can find. This paper focused on Choe Seung-hui not simply because she was a great dancer but because she anguished over how to resolve the relationship between tradition and modernity, and moreover she was a citizen of the Third World who had the courage to pursue her own philosophy and practice.

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<sup>41</sup> Chung (1995, 74).

<sup>42</sup> Yu Mi-hui (1997).

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## GLOSSARY

*heunga* 興亞  
*iba talgu* 入亞脫歐  
*mudo* 舞道  
*muyong* 舞踊  
*seung* 勝  
*sin yeoseong* 新女性  
*tara ipgu* 脫亞入歐