

The Public Face of Korean Dance in Hawai'i: A Story of Three Women

by

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Among immigrant communities in Hawai'i dance has played a significant role in establishing or reinforcing an identity related to that of the homeland, as well as in presenting this identity to the larger community. Dance is presented or participated in in both public contexts, ranging from formal, evening-length concert presentations to large-scale multicultural community events, and private contexts, which include such things as birthday parties and fundraising activities, as well as church events that are intended for a select audience. Korean dance, brought to the islands by immigrants in the early 1900s, has functioned in both of these arenas for almost a century. During this time countless people have been involved in performing, presenting, and observing Korean dance. It is three women, however, who played critical roles in the prominence of Korean dance in public settings: Whang Ha Soo (Whang Hae-su), Halla Pai Huhm (Pae Hal-la Huhm), and Mary Jo Freshley. My purpose here is to trace the contributions of each of these women to the public face of Korean dance in Hawai'i, delineating the nature of the role each played, the types of dance each fostered, and the connections each had to Korea both before and during their involvements in Hawai'i.

The first person to assume a pivotal role in fostering Korean dance in the islands was Whang Ha Soo. Born in 1892 in what is now North Korea, Whang was educated at missionary schools before traveling to the United States (Choy and Sutton 1991). She came to Honolulu in 1919 to take charge of the Korean section of the International Institute at the YWCA, the Young Women's Christian Association (Anonymous 1919). The Institute followed a nationwide YWCA initiative to establish centers throughout the country to aid immigrant women, and Whang was Hawai'i's first Korean social worker (Anonymous n.d.). The institutes were designed to help foster relationships between immigrant women and the local community, and to help immigrant women learn English and the practical details of setting up and running a household in their new homeland. An additional goal was identified as "The Conservation of Old World Arts and Activities" (Anonymous 1932). In a national YWCA report on standards for the institutes, one activity advocated was "old world festivals," which freshened "homesick hearts" and re-awakened "old memories," memories that were "of quite as much importance as . . . the event itself" (ibid). Because of this philosophy, costume pageants, plays, dance performances, and enactments of such traditional activities as wedding ceremonies came to be regular features of events sponsored by the Y that highlighted the heritages of the ethnic groups constituting the institute membership.

In 1927 Whang Ha Soo founded the Hyung Jay (Hyongje), or Sisters' Club, at the YWCA, and served, for many years, as its advisor (Warren Kim 1971:45). Among the club's undertakings was "instruction in the Korean traditional arts by lectures and class discussions, and . . . preserv[ing] the knowledge of the traditional arts" (ibid:4-5). From 1927 through 1940, members of the Hyung Jay Club performed at countless public events.

Only scant details on dances performed during this period can be gleaned from extant records and memories of some older Koreans alive today. One of the earliest films, from 1931, records three high school girls in an excerpt from a dance titled “Scarf Dance,” which vaguely suggests the dance now known as Salp’uri. A later film, from 1948, records an excerpt of a dance that resembles what we now know as court dance. These brief film excerpts, together with photographs and dance titles identified in printed sources, suggest early performances of court-style dances that are performed today in Korea as historical re-creations, folk dances popular in the first half of the twentieth century in Korea, a butterfly dance reminiscent of a traditional Buddhist dance, and a sword dance, which has both folk and court versions.

Who were the people teaching these early dances?

Whang Ha Soo’s role was that of producer and facilitator. She was adept at identifying individuals who could teach dances based on studies before coming to Hawai’i, or who could, in some way, create dances.

Two individuals worked with Whang on many occasions and were directly involved in the teaching of dance. The choreography for a 1934 Hyung Jay Club performance is attributed to “Mrs. Henry D. Lee, . . . reputed to be the finest Korean musician in the territory” (Anonymous 1934), and dancers in a 1940 YWCA performance were taught by Chai Yong Ha (Ch’oe? Ch’ae? Yong-ha), described in a newspaper article as a Buddhist monk before arriving in the islands, who had “a profound knowledge of temple dances of his native homeland” (Anonymous 1945).

Mrs. Henry D. Lee, or Susan Chun Lee, came to Hawai’i in 1910. According to her daughters, Lee’s brother had studied western medicine in Japan. He returned to Korea to become the first doctor to practice western medicine there, and worked in the royal court. Because of this, Lee saw many upper class things and may have observed some court dance rehearsals or performances. In addition, her elder sister had studied the *kayagum*, giving Lee the opportunity to frequently hear traditional Korean music.

Lee’s daughters describe their mother as a talented musician with an innate ability in many art forms. Although she never studied dance, she taught dances that bear similarities to court dances, the monk’s drum dance, and a sword dance, all of which one daughter says came from Lee’s “fertile imagination.” If she had, indeed, seen court dances in her homeland, when called upon, Lee combined her memories with her artistic gifts, which also included the design and construction of costumes, to teach children who performed in many events.

Chai Yong Ha’s background is more difficult to determine. The State of Hawai’i census of 1910 indicates that he arrived in 1904, that he was 32 years old at the time the census was taken, and that he was working on a plantation on the island of Hawai’i. In 1940 his dance and music abilities became known to Whang Ha Soo, who brought him to the island of O’ahu to teach dance. A YWCA report of that year states that he taught “royal school dancing,” which was probably intended to refer to court dancing (Anonymous 1940b). Newspaper descriptions of performances crediting the dance teaching to Chai include references to a sword dance, and to “Chin Yang Moo” (Anonymous 1940c), which likely referred to the court dance Ch’unaengmu. This suggests that Chai was familiar with not only Buddhist dance, but with court dance and possibly folk dance as well.

While Whang Ha Soo was not responsible for teaching or choreographing dances during this early period, she was responsible for identifying individuals who could undertake these tasks, particularly for establishing Chai Yong Ha as an instructor, and for initiating and organizing a significant number of events in which dance was publicly performed.

Whang left the islands in 1943, after establishing a strong Korean dance presence. Chai Yong Ha continued to be credited with the teaching of dances in programs through 1945, at which time various other individuals are identified as teachers and directors for performances. Based on photographs and dance titles, many of the dances performed from 1945 to 1950 appear to have been continuations of those taught by Chai and Susan Chun Lee.

Nineteen-fifty marks the beginning of a second period in Korean dance in the islands, with the arrival of Halla Huhm. Born in Pusan, Korea in 1922, at the age of five Huhm and four siblings went to Japan, where she was raised by a family relative, Pae Ku-ja, who became her first dance teacher. With the start of World War II, she returned to Korea, and in 1950 emigrated to Hawai'i with her Hawai'i-born Korean-American husband.

Halla Huhm differed from Whang Ha Soo in that she had specifically been trained as a dancer. This training began in Japan and Korea with ballet and changing traditional dance styles growing in popularity in both countries in the first half of the twentieth century. Over time she studied with dancers she helped bring to the islands from Korea, and returned to Korea on many occasions to learn more traditional dances. She studied with Kim Ch'on-hung, a recognized master of court dance; learned Buddhist dances from Pak Song-am, a priest formally recognized by the Korean government for his dance and music expertise; and studied shaman rituals and dances from Yi Chi-san, a shaman from the Seoul area.

Huhm's contributions to the public face of Korean dance in Hawai'i lie in her roles as both performer and teacher. Following her island debut as a performer in 1952 (Anonymous 1952), she quickly became described as "an artist of the first rank" (in Nemethy 1956), and continued to perform throughout her life. Initially teaching at various locations, she eventually opened what became the longest-lived Korean dance studio in the islands.

Halla Huhm taught both the traditional repertoire of her teachers and her own adaptations of dances she learned in various settings. She also choreographed a number of dances in a Korean style. For example, in 1957, at a Christian church service, she performed a dance she choreographed to a piano rendition of the Lord's Prayer, and in 1962 she performed a dance she had been invited to choreograph to Wind Song, music then newly-composed by Alan Hovahness.

Over the years a number of individuals served as assistants to Halla Huhm. Most maintained their studio affiliation for several years and then moved on to other things. But one, Mary Jo Freshley, became deeply committed to Korean dance, assisting Halla Huhm with both business and teaching responsibilities at the studio and traveling, like Huhm, to Korea on numerous occasions to study with recognized dance authorities. Freshley studied *nongak* (Korean farmers' band dance and music) from Kim Pyong-sop, drumming from members of the well-known contemporary SamulNori group, and like Halla Huhm, court dance with Kim Ch'on-hung.

Freshley, who was born in 1934 in Ohio of European ancestry, assumed full responsibilities for the Halla Huhm Dance Studio upon the death of Halla Huhm in 1994. Although she had studied several kinds of dance in college, her interest in Korean dance did not begin until after she moved to Hawai'i in 1961 to teach physical education to elementary-level students. Piqued by her exposure to Korean dance in a University of Hawai'i class taught by Halla Huhm, she continued her studies at Huhm's Studio. Most significant in Freshley's involvement with Korean dance is that unlike Whang Ha Soo and Halla Huhm, she is not Korean. But her dance knowledge and abilities were formally acknowledged by Huhm in 1975 with the awarding of a special teaching certificate.

In many ways Freshley continues the roles and contributions of Halla Huhm. Like Huhm she is both a performer and teacher as well as a student, seeks ways to expose the community to a broad spectrum of kinds of Korean dance, maintains strong ties to Korea by inviting guest teachers to Hawai'i and by visiting Korea to expand her own training, and creates some of her own dances. In 1995, for example, she collaborated with several advanced students to create Aloha Changgonori, a piece that wove together elements of the then-popular Korean samulnori and instruments used in hula, which Freshley had also studied. After its performance in Honolulu, Freshley and her students were invited by Kim Duk-su, director of the original samulnori group, to perform Aloha Changgonori at a festival in Korea. The group was awarded second place in the foreigners' division.

Freshley's most significant contribution to Korean dance in Hawai'i may come about simply by virtue of who she is?or rather, is not. Because of her extraordinary knowledge and dedication, and her continual acceptance of requests for students to perform in public venues, the fact that she is not Korean has stimulated the interest of many Koreans in their own culture.

How does Korean dance in Hawai'i and the story of its three women advocates relate to events happening in Korea and Hawai'i? Whang Ha Soo's arrival in the islands occurred less than a year after Korea's March First nation-wide independence movement. With the establishment of Hawai'i as an external base for nationalist activities, there was a concern with delineating a Korean identity that was unique from that of Korea's Japanese colonizer. This was evident in the Korean National Association in Hawai'i's 1920s creation of an organization known as the Nam-Pung-Sa with the explicit goal of teaching "the unique Korean arts" (Warren Kim 1971:45). Coincidentally this concern aligned perfectly with the YWCA international institutes' mandate to advocate traditional cultural activities of members of immigrant communities. Thus, Whang Ha Soo's initiation of countless public performances supported the goals of the YWCA as well as those of Korea's nationalistic efforts. Dances that at the beginning of Korean immigration to Hawai'i were considered inappropriate for performance by women or children because of their association with female entertainers (*kisaeng*) and shamans in Korea (Bernice Kim 1937:116) quickly came to be an important representation of Korean-ness performed largely by women and children.

Halla Huhm's increasingly deeper personal involvement with Korean dance and her concerns with informing the Korean and non-Korean communities, alike, about traditional culture may have been a legacy of her own upbringing. Her family background is shrouded in a tangled web of Japanese-Korean relationships. Spending her formative years in Japan made her more fluent in the Japanese language than Korean, and many close associates felt that her demeanor?and even some of her early dancing?was more

Japanese than Korean. It is possible her commitment to Korean dance was the result of a personal reconciling of her own complex background.

Mary Jo Freshley's involvement with Korean dance emanated from an appreciation of the dance form itself. As she became increasingly immersed in her studies she also became increasingly aware of the multiple facets of Korean culture embedded in the dance, and turned to using dance as a vehicle for helping people—both Korean and not Korean—to better understand this “other” culture. With new waves of immigrants coming from a greatly modernized, and highly westernized, Korean society, and second, third, and fourth generations who are considerably removed from their traditional heritage, Freshley is a repository of knowledge many local Koreans do not have. At the same time she contributes significantly to the public face of Korean dance in the islands, however, her role in the perpetuation of Korean dance has sparked discussions among many as to the appropriateness of a non-Korean continuing this heritage.

There are some who would interpret the activities and motivations of these three women in highly political ways. Korean-American Peggy Myo-Young Choy, for example, layers issues of colonization and racism onto the period of Whang Ha Soo, criticizing the policies of the institute she worked for and asserting that the role of institute activities during Whang's time was “a microcosm of the larger racist colonial society in the [Hawaiian] islands” (Choy 2000:242). If she took into account the concurrent nationalistic movement in Korea and its influence on activities among members of the immigrant community, including the goals of the Nam-Pung-Sa, the arts organization established by members of the nationalistic movement, Choy might focus her colonial concerns on two colonizers, Japan and the United States.

In Halla Huhm's case, speculating on her motivations could shift away from the personal agency I have suggested to an interpretation that casts blame on the colonizing powers of Japan that clearly influenced her youth and formative years, leaving scars she would seek to heal later. As she established her life in Hawai'i this interpretation could further place blame on the need for maintaining uniqueness amidst the globalizing push that contributes to an ever homogenizing society, which for many is the result of the power of European-American influence.

Mary Jo Freshley's contributions raise issues of cultural ownership. Those with post-modern inclinations could interpret Freshley's interests and activities as an inappropriate assumption of what rightfully belongs to others—again, the specter of colonization.

Interestingly questions of cultural ownership could be raised in relation to all three women. With her Christian upbringing, activities occurring in Korea during her early years, and the young age at which she left Korea, traditional dance was almost certainly not an integral component of the culture with which Whang Ha Soo was intimately involved. In the case of Halla Huhm, with her immersion in the language and culture of Japan during her formative years, and her early western-based dance training and involvement with Japanese dance as well as dance forms of other cultures, it could be argued that she, too, ultimately became involved in an aspect of culture that originally belonged to an “other.”

There is no question that Korean dance in Hawai'i has been used at different times for different purposes, sometimes for political, racist, and colonial reasons. Through distinctive ways of using the body and unique musical accompaniment and costumes,

dance quickly became a symbol in the islands of things Korean. It served as a recreational or leisure activity, and as a communal activity that pulled together individuals with a shared heritage. As it was performed in public arenas, it reinforced this shared heritage, serving as a cultural icon. For older Koreans, it was a reminder of a past that lay thousands of miles away. For some younger Koreans, it taught them, through a literally embodied experience, of a past they never knew in its original setting. For non-Koreans, it was a lesson in the culture of a potentially exotic other. For many, it was a strong identity marker—a symbol of uniqueness.

I propose, however, a more fundamental purpose for involvement with Korean dance in Hawai'i, one that allows for strong agency on the part of those directly involved; a purpose that places even dance in political contexts in a different light. The arts play a powerful role in simply enjoying activities of the body. Korean dance in Hawai'i has played, and continues to play, many roles, one of which is precisely the pleasure of involvement with aesthetic experiences, either as a performer or a viewer. Since the beginning of immigration in the early twentieth century, Korean dance in the islands has maintained strong links to Korea, whether in the form of remembered dances, return visits to Korea by local dancers, or visits to Hawai'i of dancers from Korea. At the same time, however, it has been performed in new contexts, has merged with movement stylings of other dance forms, and been performed and taught by individuals not of Korean ancestry. For almost 100 years Korean dance in Hawai'i has embraced the other—whether that other is defined as individuals born in the islands, individuals whose ancestry is traced to cultures and countries beyond Korea, or the country and culture of Korea itself.

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