

## A first glimpse of Ch'oe Sûng Hûi's 1940 Latin American Tour

Alfredo Romero-Castilla

Centro de Relaciones Internacionales

UNAM

The pathways of research are unpredictable. I never imagined on that morning in August of 1989 as I began my search for information documenting the arrival of the first Korean immigrants to the Yucatan peninsula in 1905, that I would find among the certificates in the National Alien Registry the image of a beautiful woman whose smiling face, framed by a flapper style hairdo, would lead me into the realms of dance history, a field apparently foreign to my activities as a professor of international relations.

The information on the certificate gave her name as Sai Shoki, born in Keiyo (Seoul) in 1912, a "classical" dancer by profession, (sic) of Japanese nationality, whose arrival in Mexico on October 17 1940 was the fulfillment of her contract with Conciertos Daniel enterprises. This limited information did not provide me any further knowledge about her as a person, and her temporary visitor status made it difficult to find out about her in greater detail at that time. Nevertheless, the idea stayed with me that someday I would try and find out more about her and her life story.

A number of years passed before that could happen. Then in 2000 I met Judy Van Zile at a Conference about Asian immigration to the Americas and the Caribbean held in Port of Spain, Trinidad Tobago, who mentioned to me that she had just finished writing a book which contained a chapter dedicated to the dance career of "Ch'oe Sûng Hûi", which was her Korean name, and to her tour that began in the United States in 1938 and continued throughout Europe and Latin America (Van Zile; 2001). Little is known regarding her performances in the latter venues.

I therefore decided to follow her journey through Latin America. My first approach consisted of a paper about her visit to Mexico presented at the XIII Conference of the Asian and African Studies Association of Latin America (ALADAA), held in Bogota in 2011. (Romero-Castilla; 2011). There I met Hosokawa Shuhei, a researcher at the International Center for Japanese Studies, *Nichibunken*, in Kyoto, who was a student of artistic manifestations among Japanese immigrants in Brazil and had all the data regarding her tour which began in Rio de Janeiro in May of 1940, took her to the cities of Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires,

Montevideo, Santiago de Chile, Lima and Bogotá, and ended in Mexico City in November of 1940. Encouraged by this discovery, I decided to seek information in all of these places. However, I was able to visit neither Brazil nor Peru. Today's talk is based on the information obtained to date.

The presentation consists of two parts. The first gives an outline of the historical context for the rise of modern dance in Japan, Korea and Latin America, and the second follows her performance itinerary, a repertoire of the dances she presented and her reception in the different venues where she appeared.

## **1. Modern Dance in Japan, Korea y Latin America**

Sai Shoki is the Japanese spelling of her Korean name and the one she was known by on the marquees and programs of those theatres in Latin America where she performed. She is a pioneering figure of Korean modern dance, celebrated for having preserved the traditional dances while giving them a touch of modern dance. Her artistic career parallels the icons of Korea's historic development during the first half of the twentieth century. This was the period of Japanese colonial domination, an era with very different and controversial interpretations due to the ambiguous relationship that existed between the colonizers and the colonized, a relationship which affected all aspects of Korean social life including the development of modern culture.

To speak of modernity in Japan, Korea and Latin America entails referring to a process of social transformation that varied in its aspects from society to society. It is therefore not possible to envision a single modernity but rather a variety of modernities that are at once expressed through local forms yet also share modernistic tendencies common across the globe. (Dube and Benerjee; 20011). In general one can conceive of modernity as a set of behaviors recognized as being both discontinuous with and in conflict with traditional forms of social life. This set of behaviors first appeared everywhere centuries earlier as a part of social life and is called "modern". (Echeverria; 2009).

Interestingly the most notable phenomenon in the formation of modernity is the expansion of scientific technology due to the role it played in that historic worldwide transformation which stretches from the end of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth, a period in which, in different moments and under different circumstances, Japanese, Korean and Latin American societies began to abandon agriculture as a way of life and enter the urban era.

In the case of Japan the renovation project begun in the mid eighteenth hundreds by the Meiji emperor and a select group of his followers, allowed the establishment of a foundation for the construction of a modern nation based on ideas about civilization and the enlightenment, which would include cultural

expressions along with the transformation of political and economic structures, modeled on the capitalist societies of Europe and the United States.

This modernization project was oriented not only toward Japanese society but had an external focus in which, through ideological discourse, Japan sought to establish its profile as an imperial power as illustrated by its goal to take on the task of “civilizing” their Asian neighbors whom they considered to be uncivilized. (Suzuki; 2009-142).

This idea underlies the plan for the annexation of the Korean Peninsula to Japan which, in addition to political control, would permit them to pursue the cultural assimilation of the Korean people, a task that to them seemed easy due to their assumption that a historic affinity between the Japanese and the Koreans existed which would allow for the success of Japanese educational programs and the teaching of the Japanese language. This prospect was frustrated when demands for Korean independence were made as part of the sudden explosion of nationalistic sentiment that occurred in 1919 and was repressed with extreme violence. (Caprio; 2009).

This failure created a need to proceed differently. At that point, less repressive policies were put into practice in hopes of attenuating social tension such that Koreans were permitted a certain freedom of expression in terms of society, culture y politics. Nonetheless, this in no way signified an abandonment of cultural assimilation as a goal.

Nevertheless, concurrent with these governmental policies, there arose among the Japanese colonial elite, which consisted of government functionaries, academics, collectors and the public consumption of popular culture, an unexpected interest in documenting, preserving and exhibiting those expressions of Korean folk culture and theatre arts which were deserving of cultivation due to their superior quality. (Atkins 20010; 102-46)

As a result of this growing interest, between 1930 and 1940 the imperial Japan found itself suddenly invaded by an effusion of cultural output coming from the Korean peninsula, which captivated Japanese consumers who found in the exoticism and beauty of these artistic expressions a distinctively Korean stamp. This cultural impact was expressed by the folk songs and Ch’oe Sûng Hûi’s choreographies “at a time when assimilation pressures in the colony itself were becoming more forceful.” (Atkins; 2010-11).

Thus it is at this juncture that the artist Sai Shoki appears, which indicates the reason for her success. Her life developed on a parallel trajectory with that of the colonial period. During this time we discover her shadowy image emerging in various forms as daughter of an aristocratic family fallen on hard times, outstanding student at one of the first schools established by the Japanese, her artistic leanings, initially as a singer and later through her training in modern dance in Japan under the tutelage of Ishii Baku, her initial forays as a soloist and her efforts to re-create and preserve traditional dance. The latter she imbued with her own personal stamp,

a strategy that turned out to be congruent with both Korean and Japanese tastes, and something which allowed her passage through fame's doorway launching her as a figure of international renown.

Modernity in Latin America is a totality made up of multiple manifestations which contains not only ethnic roots but is also a result of historical events which Bolivar Echeverria identifies as "mediated by way of cultural cross fertilization", shaped by the confluence of different processes. These include the encounter of native peoples with the Spanish conquistadores, which occurred from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century, followed by social reorganization plans designed and implemented by the Spanish Crown to be soon replaced by the wars of independence which shaped the forms of republican or nationalistic modernity which prevailed from the mid-nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth. (Echeverria; 2006; 208-209).

Among the artistic expressions that manifested during the period of transition to modernity we find that of modern dance. This artistic movement arose on the stages of Europe and the United States and was disseminated to many diverse places by presenting the work of choreographers, dancers, musicians and artists from differing places of origin whose travels traced the pathways of a new expression of the dance, embodied in the figure of the woman dancer.

As they traveled from one country to another in order to study, teach or make appearances, performers of very diverse national origins passed through these crossroads. However this new form of dance did not find fertile ground for its growth just anywhere. In Asia the exceptions were perhaps Japan and concurrently Korea while in Latin America they were found in Argentina and Mexico.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a new breeze began to blow in the field of Japanese art assisted by the political and social atmosphere that arose during the Taisho Period (1912-1926). This was a time when Japanese society began to enjoy the birth of economic affluence and an atmosphere of political freedom, which found its eco in colonial Korea and which changed the face of its journey towards modernity and the nature of popular culture, symbolized by the figure of the *modan gaaru*: the modern woman. (Brown Kendall; 2001-19).

Modern dance found root in Japan following the opening of the Imperial Theatre in 1911 where the Italian master, Giovanni Rossi began training dancers in the new European dance techniques. Among his disciples there were two who stand out and who would become pillars of the modern dance movement in Japan: Ishii Baku (1886-1962) and Ito Michio (1893-1962). The first of these worked tirelessly to train dancers who would subsequently influence how dance was expressed in Korea and Taiwan. (Yoshida; 2011).

In the case of Korea a political movement made up of intellectuals and students, who along with the rediscovery of traditional culture sought to create a modern identity, produced a favorable climate for the use of these new dance techniques generated in Europe. These conditions coincided with the arrival of the

previously mentions Ishi Baku, a dancer trained in the modern dance forms of German expressionism. Baku performed in Korea and there trained two disciples in an initial effort that would go no further. (Van Zile; 2000-22). Such would not be the case with Sai Shoki who was also his student and who would succeed in becoming an international star in the world of the dance.

As previously mentioned, in Latin America only Argentina and Mexico were conducive to the development of modern dance. At the turn of the century these two countries developed social trends open to accepting new aesthetic expressions. Given the country's patchwork nature in which culture itself becomes the summation of various cultures woven together into a net of exchange among traditions, customs and values that allows for the acceptance of "the foreign", Argentina incorporated without reservation the influences that arrived from outside the country. For this reason their incorporation of the modern dance movement comes as no surprise. (Moyano Isse; p. 12).

At the start of the twentieth century Argentina was visited by several performers from abroad who had studied at the Berlin Opera including Isadora Duncan, Renate Schottelius and Otto Werberg. Later on in the thirties Alexander and Clothilde Sakharoff performed at the Colon and Odeon Theatres and also gave the first classes. But it was in 1941 when modern dance established itself with the arrival of the US dancer and choreographer Miriam Winslow who together with her *partenaire*, Foster Simmons, created the dance company, Ballet Winslow which gave performances in Buenos Aires and toured to various parts of Argentina to great public acclaim until its demise in 1946. (Falcoff; 2008).

It is with the arrival in Buenos Aires of Miriam Winslow, heir to the Dennishawn School that one can speak of modern dance as having a continuous presence in Argentina. Modern dance had arrived from abroad as a new art form, which, without any form of cultural resistance quickly garnered interest, grew and developed in Buenos Aires. (Isse Moyano; p. 11).

In Mexico the opposite occurred. After four centuries of history, Mexico no longer considered the language and techniques of classical ballet to be the highest form of dance, even though it was the choreographic mounting of *Fantasia Mexicana* staged by Anna Pavlova in 1919, which revealed the possibility of creating a kind of modern dance previously unknown in Mexico utilizing the techniques employed by the Russian Ballet. (Tortajada; 1995-45). Later on, during the decade of the thirties, while using the cannons of ballet, sisters Nelly and Gloria Campobello staged works of a nationalistic flavor with what are said to be the first attempts at incorporating nationalistic elements.

Subsequently, influenced by a post revolutionary nationalist ideology, theatrical dance based on foreign models made its appearance in Mexico, in contrast to the situation in Argentina. The 1910 Revolution favored the creation of national artistic expressions, which gave rise to both music and painting and which opened the door to the appearance of new artistic expressions. We find among these manifestations a style of dance very different from that which had been

practiced to date and which was substantially enhanced following the opening of the Palace of Fine Arts on the 27 of September, 1934. This venue opened up a new era in the nature and development of the performing arts in Mexico. (Dallal; 1994-170). In this way nationalism and cutting edge aesthetic expressions were brought together.

It wasn't until 1939, at a time of when cultural flowering and political unrest were at their peak, that two North American choreographers, Anna Sokolow and Waldeen arrived in Mexico. The trainings given by these two nurtured a new dance movement by means of a discussion that not only revolutionized the form and techniques of dance itself but also its creative conception. (Tortajada; 2001-340-422) Thus it was that these Mexican choreographers and dancers established the basis of a movement which today constitutes contemporary Mexican dance. (Tibol;1982-1).

All of these movements were occurring simultaneously with or following the visits of Sai Shoki to Buenos Aires and Mexico City, which explains why her art has not been given greater recognition. As a corollary I will note a counterpoint with respect to Brazil, another one of the countries visited by this Korean dancer. Here modern dance had a later development due to, as Cassia Navas points out, historically modernization movements in Brazilian culture are associated with the concept of a national popular culture and do not reveal aesthetic and ideological ideas coming out of the early twentieth century vanguard. (Navas; 1994-36)

## **2. Travels through the Concert Halls of Latin America**

On March 28, 1940 from Los Angeles, Sai Shoki informed the Japanese newspaper, *Houchi Shinbun*, about a contract she had signed to do a tour of Central and South America. The notice mentions a goal of 20 presentations to be given in 20 cities throughout Panamá, Cuba, Perú Argentina and Brazil. The tour would start in mid April and end in July. She estimated that she would have returned to Japan by mid August in time for her to participate in Tokyo's fall season. (Takashima and Chông; 1994-100). During an interview published in the magazine *Nippon* following her return to Tokyo in 1941 Sai Shoki mentioned that her itinerary on the tour had included theatres in Costa Rica and Ecuador.

To begin with, her goal of traveling to five countries and twenty cities in four months is surprising given the great distances that separate one site from another combined with the means of transportation in that era. Of particular interest from the text of that interview is the mention of Costa Rica and Ecuador. Actually she returned to Japan four months later and as far as can we know only visited the capital cities of the above mentioned countries, with the exception of Havana, and additionally the cities of Montevideo, Santiago de Chile and Mexico City. There is no indication that she ever visited San Jose, Costa Rica or Quito, Ecuador. Panama was a port of transit only on her journey first to Brazil and later to Mexico.

According to information obtained by Hosokawa Shuhei, her tour began in Brazil on May 31, 1940. She gave her first presentation at the *Teatro Gimnástico* in Rio de Janeiro. Apparently it was a private performance as there are no advertisements for the presentation. From there she traveled to Sao Paulo where, on July 3, 5 and 7, she gave several very well attended public dance performances at that city's Municipal Theatre. She then flew from this city to Argentina.

She made her debut in this country on June 20 of 1940 at Teatro Politeama in Buenos Aires where she also gave performances on June 24 and July 1. According to information in the newspaper *La Prensa*, "the large audiences [at these functions] gave her a most warm and well deserved welcome."

In Montevideo she made her debut at Teatro Solis on Monday, July 15, 1940 where she apparently made only one appearance. Although it is possible that she gave a second one as indicated in an announcement by an anonymous writer of a column that appeared in the *El Diario* newspaper: "Solis enterprises is arranging a new recital by Sai Shoki which will probably take place next Friday afternoon." Accompanying this same notice we find the title "The Mysterious Dance of Sai Shoki" accompanying some vignettes drawn by the sketch artist Héctor Ortiz Garzón.

The second phase was in Santiago de Chile where she made her debut on Monday, August 5 at the Teatro Municipal. She gave two more performances on August 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. From this city she traveled to Lima. She had her first performance there at the Municipal Theatre on August 25<sup>th</sup> and two more performances on August 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>. The second to last stop was at the Teatro Colon in Bogotá where she apparently gave two performances on September 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of 1940.

In Mexico, on Thursday, October 17, 1940 an announcement appeared in the entertainment section of the newspapers *El Nacional*, *El Universal* y *Excelsior* regarding the debut of Sai Shoki in Bellas Artes on October 23<sup>rd</sup>. She performed three more times in this venue: on October 26, November 3 (at a charity matinee) and the following November 8<sup>th</sup>.

Regarding her repertoire, she performed the same dances in all the theatres where she appeared, the order varying according to what day she was performing. The first part of the program began with two *Kisaeng* Dances, continued with "Sword Dance", "Melody of the Jade Flute", *Whalyang* (The Joy of Youth), Bodhisattva "Hugen", "Dream of Youth", and ended with "Three Traditional Rhythms". The second part started with "The Greatest General under the Sun" and continued with "Vengeance of a Heroic Woman", "Masked Dance", "Ancient Prisoner" (which in Spanish Ancient was referred as medieval), "Seoul Fortune Teller" and ending with "Bodhisattva Kwannon". In subsequent functions these dances alternated with others such as: "Court Lady of Shiragi", "Dance of the Mandinga", "Harvest Dance", "Child Bridegroom", "Korean Popular Songs", "The Dance of the Butterfly" and "Peasant girl".

With regard to the reviews and comments that appeared in the press, these are mostly informational. It is important to note that while there were critics with a specialized knowledge of modern dance in Europe and the United States, the same was not true in Latin American countries, places in which neither the public nor the critics were especially familiar with this new current in the field of dance. What the Latin American audiences did have was a desire to be amazed by artistic creations coming from the “mysterious orient” which is a tone that prevailed in the extant newspaper articles and reviews. This fascination, in turn, explains why the performances were so successful with the public, because additionally the privileged sectors in Latin American society enjoyed attending the occasional theatrical function when available.

From among the published material I will be making reference to various newspaper articles, two interviews and a magazine article. As I previously indicated, I was unable to consult Brazilian newspapers and am only aware of the testimony of Hosokawa Shuhei who mentioned articles and reviews that appeared in the newspapers *O Estado de Sao Paulo* and *Correio Paulista* and in the Sao Paulo Japanese community press. According to him, the texts written in Portuguese and those written in Japanese express differing opinions, in particular with regards to the Bodhisattva Kwannon dance, which in Brazilian eyes represented “the elegance of Buddhism” while for the public of Japanese origin demonstrated “the sensuality of Korean dance”.

Announcements of her performances in the no longer extant Teatro Politeama appeared in a number of Buenos Aires newspapers. The anonymous author of a column that appeared in the newspaper *La Prensa* pointed how remote Sai Shoki’s choreography was from the sensibilities of the Argentine public. From among the 13 numbers she performed, what the author of the article found most compelling was “Her elegant aristocratic temperament” as she performed “The Melody of the Jade Flute” and “Sword Dance” and above all the “Bodhisattva Kwannon” dance, which the audience requested she repeat.

On the occasion of her presentation at Teatro Solís in Montevideo, the reporter made note of the dancer’s physical beauty, her facial expressiveness and the cadences of her movement, which although distant “in time and space from our sensibilities, create a strange effect”. He also highlights the pieces’ colorful beauty and originality as seen in “Dreams of Youth”, “The Greatest General Under the Sun” and “The Ancient Prisoner”, and he praises the suggestively fluid design of Bodhisattva “Kwannon” which earned her “repeated encores”.

I found no printed reviews in the newspapers of Santiago de Chile; there were only the advertisements for her performances.

With the gracious support of my colleague Amelia Morimoto, I obtained press releases announcing her performances from the newspapers *El Comercio* and *La Prensa* in Lima. The latter contained an interview in which Sai Shoki recounts her artistic history and explains her intention to revive those Korean dances that were no longer being performed. She also speaks about her work of

compiling traditional dances, a task which has her feeling like “the owner of twenty centuries of tradition.”

In Bogota she was awarded more space in the newspaper *El Tiempo*. We find among its pages, in addition to a photograph of her arrival in Bogota, another from the day of her debut taken during her interpretation of the dance “Melody of the Jade Flute”, an interview and commentary by Victor Mallarino for whom this article was his initiation as a theatrical and artistic reviewer.

In the interview she mentions her history and development, her tour of the United States and Europe and explains her concept of the dance about which she said: “...it must be an expression of personal emotion...I appear before the public to communicate a feeling, legends of the orient with their fantasy and charm”.

In his column Victor Mallarino begins by stressing that the importance of Sai Shoki and her art lies the way it reveals and displays for the audiences of Bogota a virtually unknown genre and how it in a sense documents “the diverse range, from warrior and religious rituals to a type of pantomimed burlesque done with stylized grace and elegant humor”. He was especially drawn to the simple, romantic *Kisaeng* dances, which “presented a nearly ecstatic idealization of the Bodhisattva Kwanon, full of eurhythmic grace”. The author ends his article by saying that the public “fully understood the elevated artistic mystery of Sai Shoki the night of her debut performance”.

As I pointed out previously, the newspapers in Mexico City carried advertisements of Sai Shoki’s performances at The Palace of Fine Arts. Everything suggests that the program notes themselves were taken from the press releases distributed by Conciertos Daniel, as demonstrated by mentioning that Sai Shoki sought “to revive the traditional dances of Korea, Manchukuo and Japan by bringing them up to date and transforming them into creations of universal value that have been unanimously celebrated throughout the world”, which appeared in the newspaper *Excelsior* on October 23, 1940. This particular appraisal is noteworthy because, judging by the repertoire, the program consisted mainly of traditional Korean dances.

The following article was written by Jose Vasconcelos, a public figure who, while serving as Secretary of Public Education between 1921 and 1924, gave great impetus to the areas of education and culture including the creation of a new national dance form that would be an embodiment of the renaissance that was enlivening the culture in general. (Tortajada; 1995-44). It is surprising that, given his background and preparation, Vasconcelos was unable to recognize the revitalizing nature of the Sai Shoki’s dances as related to her goal of renewing traditional Korean dance.

His appraisals are based on preconceived ideas regarding the superiority of Christian art when compared with Asian and Korean art, expressions that he continuously refers to as Chinese. Although one cannot negate the imprimatur of China on the development of Korean culture, this in no way implies that they are

the same. The language of the dance is written with Chinese characters, but over time there have also been influences from Japan and other European languages. There were likewise Chinese dance forms that fused with Korean forms so completely that one can no longer differentiate them.

According to Vasconcelos Sai Shoki was a creator of neither the dances nor the subject matter, rather her dances are different from the Korean tradition, that is to say they are Chinese with Buddhist, and perhaps Russian, influences. *Whalyang* asserts that because it is a dance rooted in a form of music that would fit nicely as part of a symphonic work it lacks exoticism y adds that with her agile dance steps, airy leaps and with the movement of her arms she creates a joy that illumines her face. Thus her dance is "Admirable for no other reason that it transforms limberness of movement into a language almost as fluid as thought, compelling because of its expressive rhythmic mastery". (Vasconcelos; 1940).

I would like to bring this presentation to a close with the following remarks. In conclusion I wish to start by pointing out that it is the social milieu that determines the meaning given to human existence. Thus are the life and art of Ch'oe Sûng-hûi products of her era and of the circumstances that made the land of her birth a Japanese colony, a process linked to the transforming modernization that was happening in Japan and to Japan's failed desire to carry out a cultural assimilation of the Koreans. Due to the ambiguity in which the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers developed, an opposite result was produced in which certain sectors among the Japanese developed an interest in the preservation of Korean cultural expression with the subsequent attraction to these expressions on the part of the Japanese public.

This conjunction facilitated the artistic rise of Sai Shoki whose personal circumstances motivated her to preserve traditional dance and, by incorporating modern dance techniques, give it a new character. Her physical beauty coupled with a superb stage presence led to her success in the country of her birth and in Japan. These triumphs encouraged her to plan an international tour, the third phase of which brought her to Latin America.

Her encounter with Latin American audiences unveils the diverse character of modernity that could be seen in this part of the world, where a modern dance movement had barely begun. Although incipient in Argentina and Mexico, in the rest of the places she visited it was practically nonexistent. The tour allowed her to discover particular characteristics of the Latin American ambience, whose lands were far from being backward, (*Nippon*; 1941) and to feel attracted by the warmth of her public, which while perhaps not familiar with the art of modern dance, showed themselves capable of enjoying aesthetic expressions with origins in a distant, exotic land and presented by a beautiful woman full of grace and mystery.

In closing, I would like to point out the correspondence of purpose between Sai Shoki's recreation of traditional Korean dance along with her movement to search out new forms of dance expression, and that of the first two groups to give presentations in Mexico City at the Palace of Fine Arts in the interim, performances

headed by Anna Sokolov and Waldeen who, although coming from foreign parts, taught their students to know and see themselves as a part of their birth country, of its artists and its folk art. This is a rare and unexpected coincidence, which marks the convergence in time and space of three notable personages who have, at last, received recognition for the significant role they played in the development of modern dance in Korea and in Mexico.

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