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THE MANIFESTATION OF URBAN SHAMANISM “DHARMA WHEEL” IN CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONAL DANCE CREATION OF KOREA

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Abstract

As one of the important religions of Korea, Shamanism has collided with Buddhism and Confucianism in the special historical development, which has resulted in localized “difference”. This cultural phenomenon has triggered diversified discussions among the international academia of different fields. During the study in Korea, the author has felt that the traditional dance of Korea, as an important symbol of Korean culture, not only expresses the traditional elements of Korea with an aesthetic attitude in the contemporary society, but also keeps developing by spreading the “contemporary traditional dance creation of Korea”. The author’s research intention has thus been evoked. Through literature review, the author has found that the Korean culture scholars and dancers who are studying Korean culture share a consensus at different levels. On the basis of previous argumentation of other scholars, the research starts from the observation of the “Dharma wheel” manifestation in the contemporary traditional dances of Korea, and explores the seemingly simple relationship between the “manifestation of urban Shamanism Dharma wheel” and the contemporary traditional dance creation of Korea. It makes an attempt to expound the new relationships of Korean dance creation that keeps reshaping the manifestation of dance’s life taking the elements in “cities” as a social mirror, by analyzing and surveying different literature and objects from a cross-cultural perspective. This research is believed to highlight the multiple

meanings of disciplines such as anthropology, history and social science to the performing art studies and is expected to fill the research gap in the contemporary Shaman “Dharma wheel” and performing arts through the connection with “contemporary traditional dance creation of Korea”.

Keywords

Korean Shaman, “Dharma Wheel”, Urban Shamanism, Korean Dance Creation, Manifestation

1. Introduction

“Shamanism” of Korea, as an important item listed in the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the UNESCO, has become an object of study for many disciplines of Asia and the world such as cultural studies, anthropology, ethnology and sociology in Asia and the whole world. Professor Richard Schechner with New York University of the United States, in his major research fields, has explored the Korean Shamanism culture from an observing perspective of social ritual performance. From 2013 to 2015, the author learned performance and creation of traditional Korean dances in the dancing college and the academy of traditional arts of Korea National University of Arts in Seoul of Korea. After observing the “contemporary traditional dances of Korea” and participating in the creation of works, the author has discovered that there seems a symbolic meaning linking the contemporary urban life with traditional faith in the external manifestations of the works and meanwhile it has shown a specific intertextuality. Employing an abstract dancing language to express a concrete existence has always been considered an established rule for creation by Korean dancers. As a result, the spreading of Korean dances in Asia has been recognized naturally and relatively. The symbol and intertextuality arising from the recognition of the “established rule for creation” has triggered many guesses in the academia and circle of dancing. To name some examples, the overall visual feelings of body language may be connected with factors of Buddhism; the detail expression of body language may be related with similarity to the sacrificial ceremonies of Manchu in the Qing Dynasty of China. This clearly reflects some meaning perception of dance creation, carries traditional cultural gene from the contemporary vision and may even be of more complex objective connections with others.

On the similar phenomena, Richard Schechner has particularly proposed an exploration of “classical transformation” of Korean Shamanism in his monograph *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (text book). The “formal reproduction” theory was proposed by Niklas Luhmann in the “system perception and communication” when he elaborated the relationship between “social system” and arts in *The Arts in Society* (*Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*). The

theory can also elaborate the objective inherent relationships of this phenomenon. Yet, there are a lot of differences between the manifestation of “Dharma wheel” of “urban Shamanism” (urban Mou-dan) expressed by the “contemporary traditional dances of Korea (dance creation)” with development characteristics of “classical transformation” and the “classical transformation of “Korean Shamanism” mentioned by Professor Richard Schechner. Particularly the form of creation and performance which is considered by Korean dancers as originating from “the realm of urban Shamanism Dharma wheel” has been recognized by many non-dancer Koreans and continues to grow in the society. In Korea, for the inheritors of traditional arts, this new “contemporary creation and performance of traditional Korean dances” is unacceptable and the “holiness” of urban Shamanism is also being questioned. Particularly with the symbolization of the manifestation of “Dharma wheel” of urban Shamanism, the legitimacy of its “existence” and “transformation” has been strongly questioned and even totally opposed. As a result, there is a lack of related literature and academic and objective discourses on the researches of the issue. In most discourses, the traditional and the contemporary are studied separately, as a result of which the researcher have to choose one side to stand with and the trend is neglected, the problems are not faced and the reality is not accepted.

Based on the above findings and thoughts, the research has reached the following key points that may contribute to the argumentation by means of involvement in practice, literature comparison, observation and interview. First, the author has summarized the mechanism in the research of performing arts from the perspectives of historical studies, sociology and anthropology and confirmed that the phenomenon must be based on some specific primitive “faith”. In the social site in reality, there may be “communication” conditions for reproduction driven by specific aesthetic cognition. Second, by tracing the changes of Korean Shamanism faith and the aesthetic mechanism of contemporary Koreans in Shamanism faith, it has been confirmed that the shifting from an agricultural society to an urban society has become a main factor for “selective” reservation and changes. Third, returning to the historical origin of the creation of “contemporary traditional dances” and the current creation model, the author has analyzed the symbolic meaning of the restructured dancing language and confirmed the causal relation in the manifestation of “Dharma wheel” based on the current status of Shamanism in the urban life and the contents and forms of “selective” reservations and changes.

This paper will be based on the logical elements in the course of research and establish its argumentation on the elaboration of the dancing college and the academy of traditional arts of Korea National University of Arts, which is recognized by all Korean people as its highest school of arts. By raising questions, the paper states the causes of the current status of “Dharma

wheel” in Korean Shamanism and Shamanism dances, the differences between Shamanism and urban Shamanism, and the necessity and artistic values of “Dharma wheel” of urban Shamanism manifested in the contemporary creation of traditional dances.

2. Why is “Dharma wheel” manifested in Korean Shamanism and Shamanism dances?

Shamanism can be considered as a national religion of Korea, as Catholicism and Protestant Christianity are the national religions of European countries. The study also showed that “Generally Korean scholars believe that Shamanism is a native religion of Korean people, which originated from the faith that all creatures have a spirit in the primitive times. With the historical development, it has ushered in different historical periods.”(Meng Huiying, 2005) The Shamanism tradition of Korea has a long history, which can trace back to as early as the era of Koguryo (after 5th century AD, it was commonly referred to as Corea). In his academic paper *The Role of Shamanism in the History of Korea*, Yun, Eun-hee (윤이흠\尹以钦), a Korean scholar has drawn two conclusions when he raised the concept of “the view of history of religions”.

First, according to a textual research of *A History of China*, *The History of the Three Kingdoms and History of the Han Dynasty of China*, and *the Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms and The Anecdotes of the Three Kingdoms of Korea*, Confucianism was introduced into the Korean peninsular during the Warring States period in the history of China (403-221 BC). In 372 AD, a royal academy was established by the Koguryo royalty, which began to give regular Confucianism education when Buddhism also entered the Korean peninsular. Thenceforth, the culture was integrated and developed based on the public demands on the Shamanism customs that were formed and prevailing among the folks when Korean people and Jurchen people lived together.

Second, based on the arguments of the first textual research, the author has analyzed the functional positioning of Shamanism in history at three levels from the perspective of sociology. First, a channel of vigor for the public demands. Second, a kind of cultural development and guidance for the folks and the authority. And a third main function has derived from the aforesaid two functions, i.e., public culture will be protected and preserved in any time and space. Shamanism of the so-called “Painting of All Deities” (see Figure 1) has shaped deities according to the demands of people. Therefore, the “deities” as we see come from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, as well as “Korean deities” under different stages that have arisen from the alternation of the faith (see Figure 2).



Figure 1: Shamanism deities (also called “painting of six major deities”)

Figure 2: “Seven Star Deities” (called “Life and Death Deities” by the folks)/General Cui Ying (崔嬴)



Figure 3: Female Mou-dang is “Drawing Amulet”

Figure 4: A Male Pa-suk is “Rotating to Dispel Evil Spirit”

(Fig. 1 to 4 are provided by Professor Nam Jo-ho (남정호/南贞镐). Source of data: The Art Information Library of Korea National University of Arts, 2015)

Shamanism in Korea was originally called Mou-dang (무당). It can be said that Mou-dang enjoys an irreplaceable status in the heart of Korean people and the formation of their deep culture, which is mainly female and also honored as “Man-sin” (만신) (see Figure 3). Male Shamanism clergy is known as “Pa-suk” (박수). When they practice a sacrificial ceremony, they are also dressed in female costume. They communicate with Mou-dang and deities relying on special devices and body language (see Figure 4). Lee Hojae (이호재,李浩載), a Korean Shamanism scholar, in his paper Structure and Thoughts of the Traditions of Korean Shamanism, pointed out that the traditions of Korean Shamanism are composed of faith system and behavior system, which do not separate from each other. He argued that in the faith system and behavior system, there is primitive faith as well as a pursuit of a goal in reality. The concept states that the phenomenon based on the faith system and behavior system is in fact a Korean dancing phenomenon and stresses that dancing has been created by Mou-dang based

on the endowment of deities. The traditional Korean Shamanism is divided into four faith systems, which are “outlook on the universe”, “outlook on life”, “outlook on afterlife” and “outlook on deities”. Among the four faith systems, “Mou-dang” manipulates the entire life and death ceremony of Shamanism followers. It can be said that they are dancing for “deities” and the dance has evolved from the history and blended with the dancing creation of Mou-dang. The four outlooks of Shamanism faith system, the passing down of life and death ceremony and the self-creation of Mou-dang are also consistent with the holiness and universal value of “Dharma wheel”. This indicates the reason why “Dharma wheel” is manifested in the continuous causal circle of Korean Shamanism and Korean Shamanism dances.

3. Are there Similarities and differences between Shamanism and Urban Shamanism?

There are three forms of Korean ceremonies, which are Shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism, of which Shamanism is most developed and has infiltrated into all other forms of ceremonies. Shamanism ceremony itself is a “very great artwork”, which is distributed in many performing arts. According to the summary of research data of National Gugak Center (한국국악원), in the current performing art system of Korea, the traditional performing arts are mainly classified into two categories. The first category is intangible cultural heritage, which is mainly observed in totally traditional forms. The second category is the contemporary creation and construction of traditional dances, which is mainly established on the cultural foundation of inheritance background and advocates creating by means of a linkage with modern aesthetics. The exposition of the two categories shows the modernity of Shamanism developing in cities.

The changes of dances can also be observed from the perspective of Shamanism. For example, Figure 5 to 6 show the ceremony scenes of “dancing for deities” of early Mou-dang, which attaches importance to the performing process of “inviting the deities, greeting the deities, entertaining the deities and seeing off the deities”. The main function of dancing is mainly reflected in such major functions as worshiping the nature, worshiping the totem and worshiping the ancestors.



Figure 5: “Female Mou-dang dancing for deities”(무녀신춤)

Figure 6: Female Mou-dang ready to dance for the deities

Figure 7 to 8 show Mou-dang is listening to the praying of the people and considering their relationship with the deities by analyzing their praying. This function and characteristic of assistance highlights a shift from early “dancing for deities” to “dancing for the people”. Most scholars argue that the shift has originated from the change law of Shamanism itself, such as the reason for the shifting from Buddhist deities to Taoist deities and then to the deities in the historical development of Korea. But what remains unchanged is that they have observed the differentiation of deities in different systems. On the other hand, it originates from the communication between political system and the life of common people in society, which is just like a change of aesthetics. Shifting from an era to another, what has remained unchanged is the core spirit in the differentiation of systems.



Figure 7: Female Mou-dang is listening to the praying of common people

Figure 8: Female Mou-dang changes her dressing and dances according to the praying

In the development process, Shamanism and dances not only continue to reserve the Dharma wheel spirit of four faith systems under the native faith, but also change in connection with society with the progress of time and space, such as the sacrificial activities and dancing performances of business nature. The business arena has also shifted from mysterious and concealed areas to cities. This existence and meaning is interpreted with the symbol of “Dharma wheel” in the cities. Figure 9 to 10 show the workplaces of Shamanism Mou-dang which can be seen everywhere in the city of Seoul of Korea.



Figure 9: Female Mou-dang on the way to work at the workplace

Figure 10: Mou-dang workplace in a community of Seoul

(Fig. 9 comes from Baidu search of “Witchcraft”, and Fig. 10 was taken at a community of Seoul, 2016)

On the other hand, it can also be traced from the Hangeul (훈민정음) invented by King Sejong the Great (who was on the throne from 1418 to 1450). This is the logic behind the relationships between dances and Shamanism, Shamanism and people, people and dances. For example, it's commonly believed that this performing art with a strong nature of dancing is in fact a performing art with the function of religious spirit guidance, which not only directly constitutes an important part of Korean traditional dances, but also supports the Korean dancers to believe that “Shamanism” can help bring more possibilities to the practical and theoretical researches on the development of “the contemporary creation of traditional Korean dances (dance creation, 창무)”. In other words, whether in tradition or contemporary tradition of Korean dances, the process from “native” to “revival” pursued by Koreans has not changed “native” through “revival”. This phenomenon is a manifestation of “ethnic group” characteristics and can also be said to be a unique cultural gene endowed by history to Koreans. Therefore, even if we have seen “beauty” in the creation of new works, we have never got rid of the historical and ethnic nature of such cultural gene. This is an inevitable stage of cultural development in the course of social changes, and also because it is a manifestation of “Shamanism and urban Shamanism” of Korean society in a certain stage, which has started the differentiation and development of a linkage with “Dharma wheel” through the formation of “extension”.

4. Why “Dharma wheel” of urban Shamanism is manifested in the contemporary creation of traditional dances?

The above two parts indicate that Korean dances and Shamanism maintain a necessary continuous relationship in the historical and social space through different extensions of

“Dharma wheel”. Yet this conclusion in fact cannot completely correspond to the “contradiction” between what the author has seen during the study in Korea and the concepts of contemporary creators of traditional Korean dances. For example, in the urban space of Seoul, when the sacrificial places of Shamanism can be seen everywhere and in fact the symbols of “Dharma wheel” are used as road signs, how to trigger the recognition in the “Dharma wheel” in the contemporary creation of traditional dances in the actual watching of performances? On this issue, the author believes that the above two parts should be taken as the foundation for conclusion. And an interpretation mode connecting history and society should be searched for from the level of objective decomposition and cognition of Korean Shamanism and Shamanism dances, traditional dances and contemporary traditional dances. Finally, the relationship between the sensitiveness of “Dharma wheel” symbols and inevitability of Shamanism culture development will be confirmed.

For this purpose, the dancing college and the academy of traditional arts of Korea National University of Arts in Seoul of Korea will understand from the following levels on this basis.

First, classified from the angle of historical state, the traditional Korean dances can be roughly divided into three stages, i.e., the ancient stage (remote ancient-1910), modern stage (1910-1970) and contemporary stage (1970-). August 22, 1910, as a development node in the history of Korea, has been called “Gengxu National Humiliation” in the history (the merge of Japan and Korea), which drew an end to the earliest ruling of royalty of “Korean Empire” and started a path of perishing, colonization and pursuit of democracy. In 1970, in the pursuit of democracy, another development node of Korean society, made Korea enter a stage of rapid economic development to create a so-called “Han River Miracle” and make Korea referred to as “Newly Industrial Economics” together with Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan regions. From 1970 to date, Korea has been developing at a rapid pace.

Second, classified from the angle of dynamic characteristics again based on the historical state, traditional Korean dances can be roughly divided into four categories, i.e., palace dancing, folk custom dancing and religious ceremony dancing. The palace dancing was created in the ancient stage of Korea, which mainly refers to “the dances performed palace feasts and dinners entertaining VIP guests, most of which are praising the esteem and authority of the royal family. Typical palace dances include sword dance, crane dance and Cheoyong dance.”(Cui Hua, 2012) .Folk customs dancing: “With the improvement of agricultural productivity and development of industry and commerce among the folks, they not only directly express the life and feelings of the common folks, but also criticize the social realities.

The most typical dances include masque dance (탈춤, 假面舞), Sandaemasked dance (산대가면극, 山台假面劇), Buddhist dance (승무, 僧舞), Shamanism dance (무속춤, 巫俗舞), Dummy Play(괴뢰희, 傀儡戏), Dance of Peace (태평무, 太平舞), leisure dance (한량무, 閑良舞), etc.” Religious ceremony dancing: A sacrificial ceremony performed by Mou-dang to pray for the deities, generally in a background music of rural music (traditional Korean music performed by percussion instrument such as gong, long drum and drum). In the sacrificial ceremonies of Shamanism, precious foods are offered to the deities as sacrifices, and singing and dancing is performed to dispel bad luck. Shamanism dance, as a sacrificial activity for praying, varies in forms and characteristics from region to region. The purpose of sacrificial ceremonies is to express the enthusiasm and respect of villagers to the deities, which are held in the spring and the autumn. Sacrificial ceremonies are generally classified into two types, harvest sacrifice and fishery sacrifice, of which the Dragon Boat sacrifice, as a kind of fishery sacrifice, is mainly used to pray for safety of crew and harvest. At Wando Island of Jeollanam-do, at a sacrificial ceremony, Dragon Boat sacrifice, the Mou-dang praying dance and the performance of a rural band will generally be staged at the same time. On a boat filled with sacrificial offerings, the lively performance of the rural band and the dances and witchcraft of the Mou-dang show a spectacular scene together.

Third, integration and reconstruction are carried out from a contemporary perspective in the classification of historical state and dynamic characteristics. For example, the reconstruction of Korean contents of external dance language, the modern transformation by integrating multiple linguistic characteristics, and cross-culture reshaping focused on primitive identity, which is specifically reflected in the creativity development limiting the performance time and space based on the subjective elements of contemporary creators and introducing into the creation of new dance works.

Besides, the reason for the manifestation of “Dharma wheel” between Korean dances and Shamanism has been got by interviewing Professor Nam Jo-ho (남정호) from the creation department of dance school of Korea National University of Arts and Park Li-yon (박리영), a former dancing performance master of the school of Traditional Arts of Korea National University of Arts and a doctor of University of Singapore. Professor Nam has started from the contemporary traditional Korean dance created by her, “Washing”(빨래) (see Figure 11) and argued that Korean dances have become contemporary because of the influence of external

aesthetics on the society such as colonization by Japan, South-North War, the stationing of American troops...which have changed the tradition of Korean dances. Besides, she has also argued that Korean people returned from a study abroad and refreshed their reflection on the traditional culture. Therefore, following the concept, she has taught in the university and external teaching workshop (see Figure 12) with an aim to stimulate the reflection of dancers on the history and society and written a research monograph on dance creation and choreography, *Imagination of the Body* (몸의상상력) (see Figure 13). In the book, employing the body discipline theory of Foucault, she mentioned the relationship between body and society, clearly interpreted the three concepts, i.e., the contemporary nature of Korean dances, contemporary traditional Korean dances and contemporary Korean dances. The creation of contemporary traditional Korean dances is directly associated with the “faith”. However, the elaboration of Professor Nam on the association of “Shamanism, Dharma wheel, body and creation” is not deep enough, but only touches upon the return of imagination, which needs to return from a logic of thinking. This recognition has supported the legality to a certain extent for the current topic.

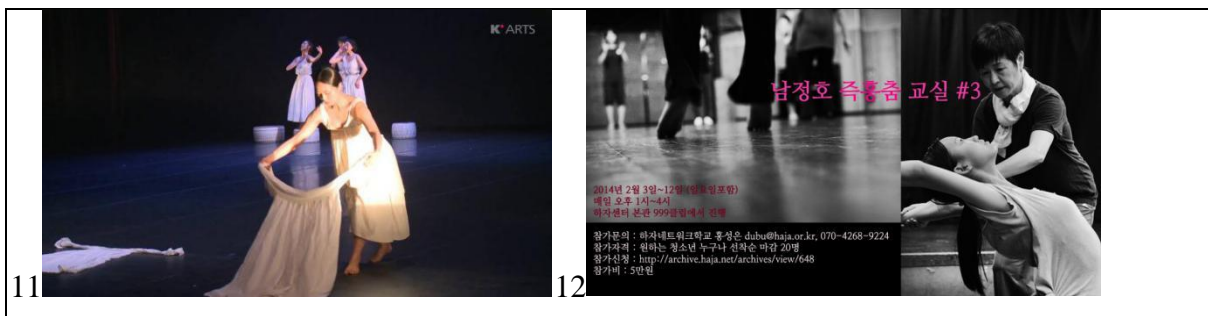


Figure 11: Typical Dancing Work “Washing”

Figure 12: “Modern Aesthetic Traditional Creation with body” of Dance Creation Education Workshop



Figure 13: *Imagination of the Body*, an academic monograph of Professor Nam (Fig. 11 to 13 are provided by Professor Nam of the dancing college of Korea National University of Arts.2016)

Doctor Park Li-yon is currently studying the sociology of art. Actually she is a native of Chinese Korean ethnic group who has lived and resided in Korea for a long time and she now concentrates on reflecting on the objective cultural association between Korean people and Chinese Korean people beyond the ties of blood from the perspectives of anthropology, historical studies and sociology. She argues that as a “cultural landscape”, Shamanism is associated with cultural recognition between Korean people. Shamanism dance is an important linguistic behavior and has established a way for the spiritual exchange between human and the nature. As the economy of Korea keeps growing, the performance of Shamanism has become increasingly “easy and simple”. The “ease and simpleness” has taken deep root in the life of all Koreans. Of course dancing is also no exception, though many creators have not found the causal relationship completely. Yet something has remained unchanged in the changes, which may be habits, behaviors and psychological activities. Based on this feedback, the author reflects on the association and logic through the above analysis based on the feedback, which echoes with the current research. “Dharma wheel” remains unchanged in changes to achieve a naturalness of Koreans in the contemporary creation of traditional dances. This concept has also been experimented and demonstrated by Park Li-yon through creation practices. For example, Figure 14 shows the “Flow” (流), a theme related with Shamanism created by Park Li-yon based on the concept to express the connection with her own feelings with the “Flow” and express the cherishing of life, praying for the heaven and the yearning for the future. It conveys a cycle relationship between self and life, with an expectation to “decompose” the ceremonies of traditional Shamanism before the audience reconstruct and imagine the meaning of Shamanism. Figure 15 shows that the work has received a lot of attention and become an important publicity poster, conveying the meaning of the “faith”. The works of Park Li-yon in fact has returned to the reflection on faith system, which is a relationship with “Dharma wheel”.

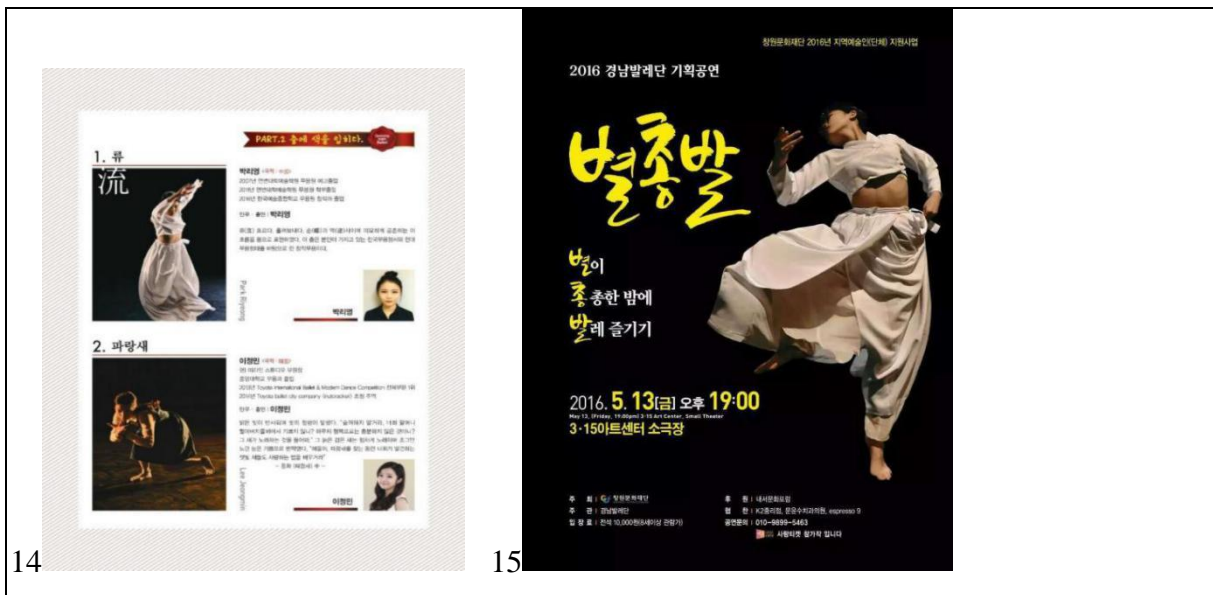


Figure 14: Text of the performance programs of “Flow”
Figure 15: Publicity poster based on the main image of “Flow”
(Fig. 14 and 15 are provided by Park Li-yon)

From what has been mentioned above, we know it indicates that the contemporary Koreans believe that there is a close relationship between the traditional dances of Korea and the faith of Shamanism. In spite of the reform and influence of social system and historical factors, Korean traditional dances still maintain a traditional origin. For example, the faith of Shamanism indicates that through various rituals of Shamanism, people can communicate with all creatures in the world to fulfill their purposes such as divination, medical treatment and asking about the weather. In fact however different the style of dances is, we have never got away from the performance feelings from “faith” when we feel the forms in traditional dances of Korea from their external forms. Another example, in a ceremony of Shamanism, people communicate with deities in the faith of Shamanism through a series of primitive dances, including gestures, songs and dedicated devices. Through production of costumes and facial masks, the spectacular scene is decorated to achieve a strong and shocking effect. This law has always been maintained in the contemporary creation of traditional dances. In fact, this is also an extension of the recognition of “established rules” or “creation rules” mentioned in the introduction part.

Friedrich Engels said, “Dance is a major component of all religious rituals”. (Origin of Family, Private Property and State, Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1999). It indicates that Shamanism dances play an important role in the rituals of Shamanism, which has always accompanied a ritual. The procedure of Korean Shamanism sacrificial ceremony is the creation and performance process of Shamanism dance. Korean Shamanism dances are the dances performed in a sacrificial ceremony, which are mainly used to “pray for blessing from the

deities, driving out illness and disasters, turning calamities into blessings, thriving of people and livestock, harvest of grains, or expressing gratitude to the deities”. (Li Xiaopeng, 2010). The performance procedure of this ceremony is “inviting deities, welcoming deities, entertaining deities and seeing off deities”. The original purpose in the fishing and hunting era was to entertain the deities. Ancestors of Korean people underwent a shift from a people of fishing and hunting to an agricultural people. Their religious faith has also shifted from worshiping of the nature to worshiping of ancestors, shifted from personification of deities to deification of human and the functions of natural Shamanism dances has also shifted from entertaining deities to entertaining people. The crossed and overlaid development trend has not only promoted the aesthetic exploration in the contemporary creation of traditional Korean dances, but also enhanced the emphasis on Shamanism in the social field, particularly in the current urban Shamanism.

5. Conclusion

So far, Korean dances have not only formed a recognition of dance culture among all people in Korea to a certain extent, but also established a certain cultural recognition of ethnic dance in Asia and other countries and regions worldwide. The development paths of many countries and regions in dance culture have also learned many advantages from the development model of Korean dances. But through the macroscopic elaboration on “Dharma wheel”, viewed from the path of “contemporary creation of traditional dances”, the author is not only more deeply convinced that the manifestation of “Dharma” has been blended by Korean people into their dances, and the blending is based on the faith system of Shamanism itself and keeps generating new forms of dances in different times. Meanwhile, the author also finds that in the constant optimization of dance culture inheritance in the field of Korean dances, in fact worries and reflection on different aspects have also been manifested, which have not simply originated from the re-thinking of the relationship between dance movements and history, but are more associated with the mutual dialogue among dances, dancers, dance aesthetics and other kinds of performance arts under the multi-dimensional factors of the society.

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