

Adam Glassman

Fulbright Interview Essay

South Korea, Theatre Studies

In many ways Korea's history and culture have influenced the theatre. The country has roots in both artistry and beauty from the scholars of the jade hall and traditional mask theatre as well as a painful past in isolation and civil war. Korean culture draws from many different sources as the country uniquely developed individual traits as well as borrowed many parts from India, China and Japan. South Korea's relation with the US is one of extremes, where positive influence leftover from the Korean war clashes with modern disdain for the military presence, all mixed together with a desire by the country's youth to be better known around the world. In tandem with South Korea's economic development, the quality of the country's universities are skyrocketing although high school practices remain controversial. The institution I will attend, Chung Ang University, is one of the oldest and most prestigious in the country, hailing as the first college theatre program in the country. These various elements come together in a way that not only shows the feasibility and importance of my project, but the need for this exchange at a turning point of the country's history.

South Korean history bears back to the country's beginnings in the three kingdom period as the Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla dynasties. Under the Silla period South Korea flourished as a country of art and spiritual connection to ancestors, visible in Gyeongju's historical burial mounds. During this historical period, Buddhism flourished in the country due to missionaries from India, giving way to ritual and mask theatre that connected with Buddhist rituals. After this period Korea entered the Joseon dynasty, characterized by the leader Sejong the Great. This king strengthened relations within the country and with outside nations like Japan, strengthened the military and promoted scientific advancement by gathering Korea's greatest scholars. Sejong also created the Korean alphabet called Hangeul, which he based on the ancient relations between man, heaven and Earth. Even in Korea's

language the presence of the body is important, and in Hangul we can see that the imagery of the body has more significance to the culture than meets the eye.

Korea flourished for several centuries after Sejong's great influence, but was colonized by imperial Japan in the year 1910. The next several decades created a difficult lifestyle for the Korean populace, as their culture was consistently destroyed around them and replaced with Japanese infrastructure. Even Japanese words still pervade the Korean language today, for example the word for bag, "Gaban." Japanese occupation clashed with constant opposition and the practice of Korean culture itself soon became a punishable offence. men were drafted into the army and women into sexual slavery, wounds that have still not healed between Japan and Korea. After World War 2 when the Japanese left, Korea was left with the broken pieces of a thousand year old civilization, with no time to rebuild as communist and capitalist regimes forced North and South Korea against each other. Decimated by the Korean war, South Korea found the "Miracle of the Gangnam River" to rebuild itself economically over an extremely short period of forty years. A sign of the resilience and optimism of the Korean population, its citizens are now looking to rebuild the culture the pieces of culture and identity that were lost during Japanese occupation and separation between North and South Korea.

Korean culture has both incorporated and nurtured performance in a number of ways, oftentimes for the purpose of spirituality rather than entertainment. The most significant part of Korea's cultural performance comes from the country's traditional mask theatre, called Tals. Throughout history Korean artists and shaman have used masks to perform a dance called Talchum, which mixes speech, dance and visual aspects to enact a tale from folklore or recreate a ritual. Traditionally Talchum were used to reconnect a community with their ancestors, restore balance to the natural world or remove bad luck and evil spirits. While the roots of these performances are in spiritual healing, they also developed into important issues of cultural identity and social issues. Oftentimes the mask dramas would tell folktales that dealt with class imbalance and issues, where a member of the

lower caste was ignored or mistreated by the upper class. One of the most unique and beautiful aspects of the Talchum is that it often breaks the line between actor and audience as the two groups come together in unison for song and dance at the end. This ancient image based theatre breaks lines and boundaries that Western avant-garde theatre has pushed for decades, and in it we can see a direct influence on the productions of Korean artists today.

The relationship between the United States and South Korea has been both positive and tumultuous. During the Korean war, the support from the United States for South Korea garnered much appreciation from the older generation. Moreover, when South Korea's economy and productivity were in a low point, the United States accounted for ninety percent of the imported goods that kept the country afloat through the harder years. In the public eye this has created a positive relationship with the United States, but because of the constant threat of war with South Korea, military presence draws contention. One of the most glaring and negative things to happen in recent years to US-Korea relations happened when in a bar bathroom in Seoul, a US soldier stabbed a young Korean man to death with no plausible reasoning. The soldier's only punishment was discharge and a return back to the States, something Korean youth still regard as an unfair and unjust conclusion. Furthermore American military soldiers have created a bad reputation where they are not allowed in certain parts of cities in large groups to avoid confrontations. What this shows is a once healthy relationship between our countries that has deteriorated, but can be rebuilt in a number of ways. However, there is little to no artistic exchange between the US and South Korea, save for Korean pop music, an annoyance to more serious artists who seek international recognition. This displays both a need and an opportunity for American artists to form a symbiotic relationship by building relationships and opening these artists to the world while reconstructing the assumptions Korean citizens have about Americans.

The University I will attend on the Fulbright, Chung Ang University, is one of the oldest and most prestigious higher learning institutions in Korea, established in 1918. Chung Ang was founded on the

basis of Truth and Justice in response to the cultural changes that occurred during Japanese occupation. The founders of Chung Ang based it not only as a higher learning institution, but as a gift to the nation and the advancement of civilization. Even in Chung Ang's history the university placed great emphasis on defining Korean culture in a constantly changing society.

Chung Ang's theatre department has produced leading artists since its inception who have successful careers in directing, design, acting and film. Influential artists like Hong Sang-Soo, a Korean film director, have pushed the envelope of Korean art through controversial pieces that address social issues. Moreover through contacts with friends in South Korea I have learned that a restructuring in 2008 pushed Chung Ang towards a more research based direction. Though focused in science, this influenced the arts departments as well to focus more on research than technique. Many of the small image-based theatre companies starting up come from Chung Ang University graduates, and the experimental work on the campus has been a major part of Korean theatre's development. The theatre program also takes a liberal arts approach that allows its students to design their own education, including performance therapy or theatre and law. This will give me a campus of varied artists who push boundaries in Korea's avant-garde performance, an essential component for my project.

The city that the Chung Ang arts campus is located, Anseong, is often hailed with the title "The City of Masters." As a city known for its production of not only performance and theatre, but physical crafts and design, the city will provide me with many artists to collaborate with. Always full of both traditional and modern theatre festivals, Anseong will provide an excellent environment to learn where theatre stands in the country. The city has the annual Namsaedung Baudeogi festival, a celebration of traditional mask theatre and contemporary takes on tradition. For modern theatre, the university and town have hosted numerous international festivals over the past several years, including the International Conference on Culture and the Arts in 2006 and University Theatre Festival of Korea-China-Japan and in 2008, IFTR 2008 Conference: Annual Conference of International Federation for Theatre

Research. The role the town has as an artistic center makes my project feasible and will help me find success in my exchange with other artists in addition to classroom work.

From my research into South Korea's history, cultural roots, US relations and Chung Ang University, I have found that my project is both timely and feasible. South Korea currently stands at a cultural crossroads, and the environment is one that will healthily support my research into how their image based performance develops. These various elements will shape my interactions with faculty and students and Chung Ang, and my understanding will help me be both a successful researcher and positive diplomat for US-Korea relations in the arts and in general.