

Book Review

Hyunjung Lee, *Performing the Nation in Global Korea: Transnational Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. xi, 159.

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The overriding question that organizes Hyunjung Lee’s collection of essays on contemporary South Korean performance is whether or not these productions challenge, extend, or negotiate the East-West or global-local binaries that have become lodged, for good or for ill, within the discussion of transnational theatre. In pursuing this question through her close and critical analyses of performances (which include those made specifically for cultural export such as the lavish musicals and non-verbal performances aimed at Broadway, Korean Shakespeares and Korean ballet), Lee explores an intricate network of imagery, tropes, styles, skills, and genres that reveal the performance of nationalism as a complex process that cannot be simply represented as a “one-way street” between the “hegemony” of the global and the “purity” of the local, the “neutrality” of the West as opposed to the “exoticism” of the East, or even the modern as opposed to the traditional or indigenous. Lee’s argument is that because the performance of nationalism is not a monotone rhetoric of cultural purity or patriotic fervor but, instead, a layered and shifting zone of ideologies, attitudes, and feelings, the very idea of “transnational” has been shaped and reshaped by the performance of nationalism itself. In her introduction and at points throughout the text, Lee clearly positions herself as a border-traversing, international scholar who nonetheless retains strong ties to her South Korean heritage, and she unapologetically allows her discussion of the performance of nationalism to overlap with criticism of South Korean attitudes toward the relationship between ethnic and national identity. Although academic standards usually push scholars away from personal

identification with their material, in this case Lee's forthright stance and expression of personal feeling productively complicates the question of representing the South Korean subject who, by extension, represents the complexity of South Korea's position within urban Asia and international flows of cultural and economic power. She envisions "finding alternative ways to speculate about and to question the predominant notion of Korean identity, which remains largely tied into a fixed conception that allows little room for imagining individual diversity or differences."¹ Lee's term "Global Korea" takes on a critical as well as celebratory hue in this respect—as a marker of nationalistic pride to be deconstructed and examined, but also as a more inclusive and fluid notion of nation and a "better politics" toward which to strive.

Although each chapter functions as a stand-alone analysis, Lee's historical introduction is imperative for understanding each performance's political and ideological context, and it should be read first. As outlined in the introduction, the conceptual framework of the book often returns to the idea of "contradiction," especially in the way that the global success of South Korean cultural exports is often upheld as a display of nationalistic strength. In other words, South Koreans may contradictorily imagine themselves as a global nation *because* Korea has unique attributes and products with which to dazzle as "bearers of world culture."² Such masculinist attitudes of an already-achieved global authority can mainly be found in the early attempts of the 1990s during *seggyehwa* (a period of intensive globalization) to both meet the demands of modernization and globalization and reclaim and justify tradition and Korean national identity. However, the 1997-1998 economic crisis, which led to IMF intervention, and its aftermath, or post-*seggyehwa*, was identified by some as the result of the encroachment of globalization; domestically, the development of the culture industry, following the crisis, was regarded as a strategy for recovering and reinvigorating the flagging nationalist spirit. Lee's second chapter on *The Last Empress*, a musical based on the 1895 Japanese assassination of the last empress of Korea's Chosun Dynasty, well illustrates a Korean director's contradictory and simultaneous resistance to and adoption of the "the West" in response to the demand for globalization. For director

Yoon Ho Jin, who is often credited as the creator of the so-called “Korean Musical,” “aspiration for globalization and modernization intertwine[d] with loyalty for the nation and its conservative traditions”³ meant setting his artistic sights on Broadway. Performing *The Last Empress* on Broadway (and whether this actually happened is a matter of some debate) signified to the Korean public the achievement of global status, even while Broadway remained “a model to imitate [as well as] a rival to be conquered.”⁴ Arranging a global tour that left Yoon’s production company in the red seemed a small price to pay for the domestic approval garnered. Lee’s concluding discussion of the portrayal of the queen as the woman (“mother of the nation”⁵) who sacrifices her body rather than as the monarch who actively shaped national policy and history could be read as reflecting back on the previously-introduced idea of “global fetishism,”⁶ wherein the performance of nationalistic sentiment is offered as glamorous participation in global cultural productions, even as the queen’s death/sacrifice is “fetishized” as pure expression of nationalist fortitude and cultural integrity.

Lee juxtaposes the “self-orientalization” of *The Last Empress* to the inter-Asian and Broadway success of *Nanta* (known in English-speaking countries as *Cookin’*), which embarks on “the global” according to a very different trajectory. While *The Last Empress* might be seen to exult in its global acclaim with a high degree of exclusionism and isolationism, *Nanta*’s transnational tactics bring together pan-Asian performance traditions that signify not only inter-Asian partnerships but also playfully create relationships with Western styles of performance. Developed in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the Korean response to *Stomp* and other high-energy non-verbal performances, *Nanta*’s approach and accompanying success can be read as a marker of shifting attitudes toward transnationalism and globalization in Korea. A cast of four fashion a show of pots, pans, knives, plates, and food, in order to cook a wedding banquet—in only one hour! The show’s director and producer, Song, adapts the traditional Korean percussion ensemble, *samulnori* (two gong players and two drummers), to kitchenware. The revisions of the show for Western viewers include references to recognizable Asian cultural icons: Japanese *benihaha* cuisine, Jackie Chan, and Bruce Lee.

Although *Nanta* seems to step into a more inclusive transnationalism, Lee is quick to point out the “contradictions” embedded in the show’s rhetoric. The depiction of Asian solidarity based on cultural affinity and mutually beneficial economic goals could be read as “a euphemism for South Korea’s cultural/economic dominance in Asia,” especially if the key is to turn the Korean culture industry into a sub-entity of Broadway “rather than an alternative, collaborative cultural ground within the Asian region.”⁷ For a truly alternative performance with roots in modernization but also growth and expression “that works as an antithesis to the global assertion of hegemonic cultural entities,”⁸ Lee turns to *Musical Seoul Line 1*, an originally German script and score that director Kim Min-Ki (well known as a folk singer and former political activist) has continuously revised over the course of almost two decades. Kim creates an empowering performance of nation-ness based on a humanistic understanding of diversity and community, bravely using satire as well as popular performance to challenge dominant ideas of ethnic purity and patriotism. The episodic musical revue revolves around Angel, an ethnic Korean woman who returns to Seoul from China and searches for her lost lover in the older and poorer neighborhoods along subway line 1. The performance continues to raise issues of urbanization, industrialization, environmental pollution, and the wealth gap in Korea, while addressing historical issues relevant to the division of North and South and the long struggle for South Korean democratization. While other transnational performances address global audiences from a relatively high status, *Line 1* delivers a story from the bottom up. The crown of this chapter is Lee’s interview with Kim, whose comments on how *Line 1*’s reception in Japan and China influenced producers are truly enlightening as to the current situation of transnational theatre in Asia today.

The final two chapters deal with the way the most influential signifiers of Western cultural hegemony—Shakespeare and ballet—have been used in South Korean theatre. Chapter Five explores how Korean directors nationalistically orient and translate “Shakespeare” as both a signifier of Western sophistication and a vehicle for the traditional Korean performing arts. Lee’s historical review of Shakespeare in Korea

is a must-read, especially as it differs so greatly from the more well-known histories of Shakespeare in China and Japan. The performance analyzed is the Street Theatre Troupe's *Hamlet*, directed by the renowned and controversial Lee Yun-taek. Tired of essentialist academic readings of this performance that either assert nationalistic sentiment or self-orientalize, Lee seeks to unpack the multidimensional interactions between the global and the local that lurk beneath the play's use of Korean traditional performance devices. She argues that the performance is actually an expression of the director and actors' personal subjectivity and artistic/choreographic choices rather than any attempt to perform an "authentic" Shakespeare, whether essentially Western or essentially Korean. In this chapter, Lee is at her most subtle as well as her most challenging. She contends that Lee Yun-taek's *Hamlet* has nothing to do with either "Koreanization" or reacting against the Western canon, but instead "shatters the idea of theatricality"⁹ in a way that consumes and apolitically appropriates Shakespeare. How does this apolitical appropriation/consumption challenge or refashion our understanding of the global, the transnational, and the intercultural? The end of this chapter left this reader wishing for deeper discussion, but also feeling on the cusp of discovery and looking forward to the next developments in Lee's work.

Lee's rather brief conclusion is an examination of the evolution of the (somewhat oxymoronic, or at least paradoxical) concept of "Korean ballet" through two versions of *Prince Hodong* (1988, 2009). Is it possible to create a national ballet that also carries uniquely Korean traits? If so, it is perhaps in the politicization of the dancers' bodies "as [sites] upon which national subjectivity is negotiated and refigured under the gaze of modernization/globalization" and which "function as hardware to prove the nation's cultural capacity."¹⁰ While in the 1988 performance the Korean elements remained aloof from the ballet itself, the 2009 performance blends many forms of traditional Korean choreography, from martial arts to acrobatics, and popular motifs from K-pop music videos, demonstrating that the "Korean-ness" of Korean ballet can be expressed via a flexible rather than rigid display of cultural nationalism.

Performing the Nation in Global Korea is essential reading for any

scholar invested in transnational theatre, intercultural theatre, or the impact and expression of globalization in theatre. But perhaps most importantly is the gap that Lee's book begins to fill. For too long, English-language scholarship on transnational performance in Asia has focused heavily on Japan and China to the relative exclusion of other Asian countries. South Korea's vibrant contemporary performance scene and the important history of modern Korean theatre, with its very different relationship to colonialism and globalization, are blind spots that jeopardize an accurate understanding of contemporary Asian performance altogether. This reviewer hopes that Lee's fascinating collection of essays is one of the many new torches that will illuminate this area for theatre scholars around the world.

Notes

¹ Hyunjung Lee, *Performing the Nation in Global Korea: Transnational Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 142.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-38.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128, 129.