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## The Shaman and the Epic Theatre: the Nature of Han in the Korean Theatre

The distinctively Korean concept of *Han* evokes a pervasive sense of sorrow, traditionally in need of shamanistic purging in the spirits of the dead, but also describing the sense of national trauma induced first by the Japanese occupation, then by the post-war division of the country. *Han* has also become an important feature of modern Korean drama, and in this article Jung-Soon Shim describes how Park Joh-Yeol's play *The Toenails of General Oh* (1974) revisits the concept, integrating indigenous cultural traditions – notably the shamanic ritual *Gut* – and how, in the production by Sohn Jin-Chaek, the director utilized a western style of epic theatre to create a 'distanced' style of *Gut* on the proscenium stage. Jung-Soon Shim is Professor of English at Soongsil University in Seoul, and a founding member of the Korean Association of Women in Theatre (KAWT), of which she is currently President. Her books include the two-volume *Globalization and Korean Theatre* (2003), which won the Best Book of the Year Award of the Korean Ministry of Culture. She also received the Best Critic Award for 2004 from the Korean Association of Theatre Critics. Her research for this article was supported by Soongsil University.

ONE WAY of approaching an understanding of the collective unconscious of the Korean people is to explore the concept of *Han*. For most Koreans, *Han* represents the core of their national ethos, and carries some five thousand years of the nation's historical and cultural memories. *Han* provides a window on the emotional landscape of the Korean people and indirectly helps to reveal their world view.

### The Concept of *Han*

The concept of *Han* is traditionally associated with a complex mix of rather negative emotions such as frustrated desire, resentment, regret, and a sense of loss and sorrow. The Korean ethnographer Kim Yol-Kyu succinctly explains this aspect of *Han*, perceived by the Korean people as 'the collective trauma and the memories of sufferings imposed upon them in the name of oppression over the course of the nation's five thousand-odd years of history'.<sup>1</sup> This collective trauma has been handed down, in the form of specific emotions, from generation to generation in Korea.

*Han* is a multi-layered and multifaceted mix of emotions, and is not easily under-

stood from any single perspective. Another Korean scholar, Eun Go, takes a comparative linguistic approach. He traces the etymology of the word *Han* back to the old Indian word *Upanaha*; however, in the course of its evolution, *Upanaha* came to mean extreme anger, and is therefore different from *Han*.<sup>2</sup> Similarly the Chinese word *Hen* carries the meaning of extreme anger, hatred, and cursing; and in Japanese *En* means vengeful hatred. All of these Asian concepts share some similarities with *Han* but are not quite identical with it.<sup>3</sup>

How then has the specific Korean historical and cultural context given *Han* its unique character? It is generally thought that the historical roots of the *Han* complex can be traced back to ancient times, when Korea was continually subject to political instability and territorial retrenchment. Specifically, this situation came about largely due to Korea's geographical position: situated as it is between China and Japan, Korea was exposed to recurring aggression from those larger neighbouring countries.

Korea's national sovereignty has often been jeopardized and usurped by foreign forces in the course of its history. In its recent history, one such tragic incident was Japan's

annexation of Korea (1909–45), and another was the nation's partitioning along the 38th parallel in 1945. This territorial division was imposed in accordance with decisions made by the US and USSR in the wake of Korean liberation from Japanese colonization by US military forces.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the long-lasting oppression and exploitation by the ruling classes of foreign conquerors subjected the Korean people to seemingly everlasting poverty, which resulted in a sense of hopelessness, resignation, and sorrow. In addition, the gender inequalities inherent in Korea's patriarchal, Confucian-based culture seem to have exacerbated this sense of *Han*. Consequently, *Han* has traditionally been associated with negative and defeatist attitudes born of a sense of powerlessness, sorrow, and destiny.

Interestingly, from the mid-1970s, *Han* began to be redefined in a more positive and dynamic sense. This change was initiated by people involved in human rights, labour, and nationalist movements as a part of their struggles against both the prevailing military regimes of the time and foreign intervention. The concept of *Han* was thus revisited from the perspective of the oppressed masses, expressing their vision for overcoming social and political inequalities, and creating a new social structure:

*Han* is the consciousness of social injustice, un-righteousness, un-freedom, and inequalities. . . . On individual as well as social levels, *Han* is the deep-seated sense that one is not living the decent life that one rightfully deserves as a human being. This is the psychology of *Han* and the politics of *Han*.<sup>5</sup>

The politics of *Han* further emphasized that Korea's position as a small nation in world politics was a major cause of the nation's *Han*. The sense of *Han* now came to focus primarily on the historical reality of the nation's partition and the politics of partition imposed by foreign forces. This nationalistic tendency embraced anti-oppression and anti-imperialism as causes. It also promoted a strong desire among the Korean people to purge *Han* through the achievement of the reunification of their divided nation.

The Korean shamanic ritual *Gut* was rediscovered as part of the increasing nationalistic tendency of the early 1970s. *Gut* was now seen as an indigenous cultural form which represented the Korean ethos *Han*, and hence Korean cultural identity. A modernized form of *Gut* began to be performed, and functioned as an underground forum for the masses. In effect, it created a liminal space beyond the official culture, where a collective resistance was generated against oppressive military regimes and imperialistic foreign intervention in Korean affairs. Such a revival of the communal function of *Gut* was possible because shamanism had traditionally been the religion of the masses, whereas the practice of both Buddhism and Confucianism were associated with the ruling classes.

In the community shaman ritual *Daedong-Gut* the Korean people had found a source of communal bonding, and purging of their shared *Han*. Thus, the scholar Eun Go asserts the inter-connectedness of the shaman ritual and *Han*: 'If the ethos of the Korean people is represented in *Han*, their consciousness is manifested in shamanism.'<sup>6</sup>

### *Han* as an Aesthetic Principle

Koreans say: '*Han* is knotted deeply in our bosoms, and should be disentangled.' The Korean sense of *Han*, however, does not seek to be purged through acts of revenge, but through ethical and artistic transcendence. The psychological desire to disentangle the knottedness of *Han* translates into the artistic organizing principle called *Sinmyung-puri* in the performance of *Gut*. The *Sinmyung-puri* principle means 'purging *Han* in a free and comic spirit', and embraces the aesthetics of both the tragic and the comic; ultimately it is aimed at achieving the transcendence of these extremes.

This unique Korean tragi-comic principle is also well exemplified in such traditional performing arts as the Korean mask-dance drama *Gamyon-guk* and the traditional opera or drama-song sung by one person, *Pansori*. In such performances, many basically tragic stories are rendered in a comic spirit through satire, puns, and playfulness.

Of the many different shamanic rituals, one form of *Gut* that is adopted in the production of the play *The Toenails of General Oh* is *Nuk-Gut*, or 'spirit *Gut*'. The ritual is performed to enable dead spirits to enter the other world through purging *Han*. It is believed that the spirits of dead persons who have not purged themselves of *Han* cannot make a peaceful transition from this world to the other world, forcing them to linger in the sphere between the two. These lingering spirits are known in the Korean language as *Yongsan*, 'ghosts'.

In *Nuk-Gut*, a shaman goes into a trance and calls forth the dead spirits. The spirits of the dead descend upon the body of the shaman, who acts as a vehicle for the telling of their stories of *Han*. The telling includes individual stories of unfulfilled desires, regrets, longings, and so on.

Through this impersonation process, the living come to relive the moments of death, and are then freed from their past emotional attachment to the dead. Finally *Han* is purged from both dead and living. The *Gut* is complete when the shaman cuts a long white cloth in lengthwise halves, signifying a separation of this and the other world.

This form of *Nuk-Gut* is most often appropriated in play productions in Korea today, and reflects the fact that many Korean dramatic narratives deal with stories of individual *Han* as well as collective *Han*. The two major historical incidents of *Han* in this century which have not been purged from the national psyche and which constantly haunt the creative psyche of Korean writers are, as we have seen, the partition of the nation in 1945 and the Korean War of 1950–53. The former is regarded as *Han* by Koreans because it was imposed by outside powers against the will of the Korean people. The latter entails many tragic individual and social ramifications such as the separation and disintegration of families following the separation between South and North Korea.

### *The Toenails of General Oh*

*The Toenails of General Oh* deals primarily with the Korean War, a historical incident which epitomizes *Han*. The play's central character

is a naive young man named General Oh who lives in a remote village in an unnamed country divided into two parts, East and West. He makes his living and supports his old mother through farming. One day he receives a military draft notice which actually was intended for another person of the same name. Being illiterate and so unaware of the error, the young General Oh joins the army to fight in the war and serve his nation.

However, unbecoming both his name and his unusually large body size, he turns out to be a cowardly and incompetent soldier. He is fit only for the job of massaging the commander-in-chief – who one day hits upon the idea of using General Oh's naivety in a counter-operation against the enemy. And so, fed with inaccurate information, General Oh is deployed alone in a deep forest where he is later arrested by enemy troops.

As a result of the inaccurate information divulged by General Oh, the enemy withdraws its planned attack, and the enemy commander-in-chief pays his respects to General Oh for his brilliant spying capacity, before ordering his execution. Unable to retrieve General Oh's body, his own army delivers only his fingernails to his mother and fiancée, these having previously been clipped when he was in a training camp.

Written in 1974 by Park Joh-Yeol, who is a defector from North Korea and a victim of a separated family, *The Toenails of General Oh* was banned by the South Korean censorship committee under the military regime of the 1970s on account of its anti-war and anti-military themes, which were then politically taboo. Consequently, the playwright had to abandon his literary career, and the ban on his play lasted for fourteen years until 1988. In that year, Korea hosted the Summer Olympics, which provided a historic impetus for Korean society to open up, leading to the change in political atmosphere formalized by the Declaration of Democratization issued in 1997.

In 1988, *The Toenails of General Oh* was first produced by the Michoo Theatre Company under the direction of Sohn Jin-Chaek. It was received with popular acclaim, and won the prestigious Paeksang Arts Grand Prix, spon-

sored annually by *Hankuk Daily News*, a major Korean national newspaper.

The anti-war and anti-military themes of the play are universal, reminiscent of works as various as Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, Constantin Georg's *The Twenty-Fifth Hour*, and the Chinese writer Lu Xun's *Biography of AQ*, to name only a few. Park Joh-Yeol, however, creates his historical vision of being Korean based on *Han* in a specific way in *The Toenails of General Oh*, modernizing its traditional tragi-comic aesthetic principles. Specifically, he achieves this through constructing a non-realistic Korean play by integrating such western dramatic devices as irony, metaphor, and allegory for distancing effects.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he makes use of irony and satire for comic purposes to highlight the tragic *Han* story. By all these means his aim is to give the play a critical dimension capable of addressing the Korean political situation.

In the context of 1974, when *The Toenails of General Oh* was written, the non-realistic form of a play employing distancing effects differed radically from most current Korean realistic plays, whose emotional appeal was based on empathy and the *Shinpa*-originated sentimentalism which has prevailed in the Korean theatre since the emergence of a modern realist drama in the early twentieth century. It is no wonder, then, that Park's new dramatic efforts were received as 'a shock' by the Korean theatre milieu.<sup>8</sup>

A brief explanation of the background of *Shinpa*-originated sentimentalism is necessary here. Modernism in Korean drama began with the introduction of western realism during Japanese colonial rule from 1909 to 1945. Korean *Shinpa* plays, influenced by Japanese *Shinpa* plays, began to be performed in the 1910s in the capital, Seoul. They were a modified Korean version of melodrama, characterized by exchanges of dialogue as the main form of communication, flat characters, stories with a tragic ending, and strong emotionalism. Tearful stories in the *Shinpa* plays seemed to have a strong appeal to the collective *Han* of the Korean people under Japanese colonial rule. Despite the much-advertised aims of social edification and enlightenment of *Shinpa* plays,

they ended up offering an 'entertainment of tears'.<sup>9</sup>

The deterioration of Korean *Shinpa* plays into pure sentimentalism was mainly due to the cultural milieu of the times, in that the assimilation policy of Japanese colonial rule and its censorship prevented the production of any play that carried a message of resistance against its power. Thus, over the course of time, the word *Shinpa* came to denote plays 'creating flood of tears'.<sup>10</sup> The *Shinpa* stereotype continued to influence many of the Korean *Shinguk* (new drama) plays in the 1920s and 1930s, and until Korea's liberation from Japanese rule in 1945.

In the 1950s came the tragedies of the Korean War and the division of the country into South and North. Reflecting the nation's history of *Han*, many Korean realist plays in the 1950s and 1960s continued to appeal to the tearful mode of sentimentalism with its strong popular following. In the 1970s, emergence from the trauma of war was accompanied by a national awareness of the need to reclaim the cultural sovereignty and integrity of lost indigenous traditions – *Han* included. Park Joh-Yeol's efforts to renew and revitalize the tragi-comic principle of *Han* in his play through the appropriation of western dramatic influences can be viewed as an integral part of the general cultural orientation of the 1970s.

### The Structure of the Play

The short episodic scenes of *The Toenails of General Oh* are given titles, and dramatic action proceeds quickly in a seemingly linear manner, generally following a chronological order. The play does not have a subplot and/or the complications usually to be found in many modern Korean realist plays based on western climactic plot structures. The sketchy simplicity of the plot, dialogue, and character development resembles the shaman's mode of storytelling in a shamanic ritual, where he delivers the *Han* stories of dead spirits in a sketchy, mono-dramatic manner while moving in a state of trance.

To examine more specifically how Park creates distancing effects in his play, one

could look at his use of metaphor, irony, and dramatic contrast. The context of *The Toenails of General Oh*, in which the country is divided into East and West, is a metaphor and a major irony referring to the continuing South-North divide and the conflict in the Korean peninsula. The main character's name of 'General Oh' means 'five stars' – the name reflecting Korean parents' desire for a son's worldly success and highlighting the irony of the character's actual downtrodden life.

By the same token, the peaceful fairytale world in which General Oh, his elderly mother, his fiancée Kotbun ('flower lass'), and his cow Mukshae talk to one another and cohabit as harmonious elements of nature constitutes an allegory which sharply contrasts with the internecine war ravaging the country. It is clear that it is 'civilization', as distinct from nature, that is full of absurdities. For instance, when General Oh's mother discovers that her son has mistakenly been drafted and appeals to the military authorities to release him, the authorities respond that 'No pertinent procedure is stipulated in the current regulations of the army, regarding a soldier mistakenly drafted.'<sup>11</sup>

### **Irony and the Sense of 'Jung'**

One of the most powerful ironies can be found in the scene where soldiers deliver the box supposed to contain General Oh's skeletal remains to his mother. Peering inside to look for her dear son's remains, she finds nothing but tiny bits of his fingernails. The word 'toenails' rather than 'fingernails' in the play's title poignantly satirizes the situation in this last scene.

While maintaining a biting sense of irony and satire, Park never fails to replenish his play with Korean-specific emotional warmth and an overriding sense of longing known as *Jung* – an aspect of *Han* familiar to the Korean people. The following dialogue gives a sense of *Jung* instantly recognizable to Koreans:

*General Oh appears in his mother's dream.*

GENERAL OH (*looking hard at her*) Mom, you look so much older since I saw you last time.

MOTHER A day feels like a year, after you've gone.

GENERAL OH Mom, you should live long.

MOTHER I should live long until you come back . . . but my dear son, how wonderful it would be if I could trade a few years of my life to make yours that much longer. If only heaven permitted, I would willingly die on the spot.

Another scene conveying a deep sense of *Jung* occurs at the end of the play when General Oh, a naive young farmer and a victim of ideology and war, is killed not knowing why. His last moments are as follows:

MILITARY POLICEMAN Speak your last words.

GENERAL OH (*cries out at the top of his voice towards the sky*) Mamma, Kotbun-a, Mukshae-ya!

MILITARY POLICEMAN Ready!

GENERAL OH (*again at the top of his voice*) Mamma, Kotbun-a, Mukshae-ya!

MILITARY POLICEMAN Fire!

*The sound of firing in unison. General Oh's head drops. A Military Policeman shoots again to confirm his death.*

ENEMY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF (*turning to his staff*) He acted perfectly even in his death. (*Mimicking.*) Mamma, Kotbun-a, Mukshae-ya. . . . The most ignorant country bumpkin couldn't have acted more like a bumpkin than he did.

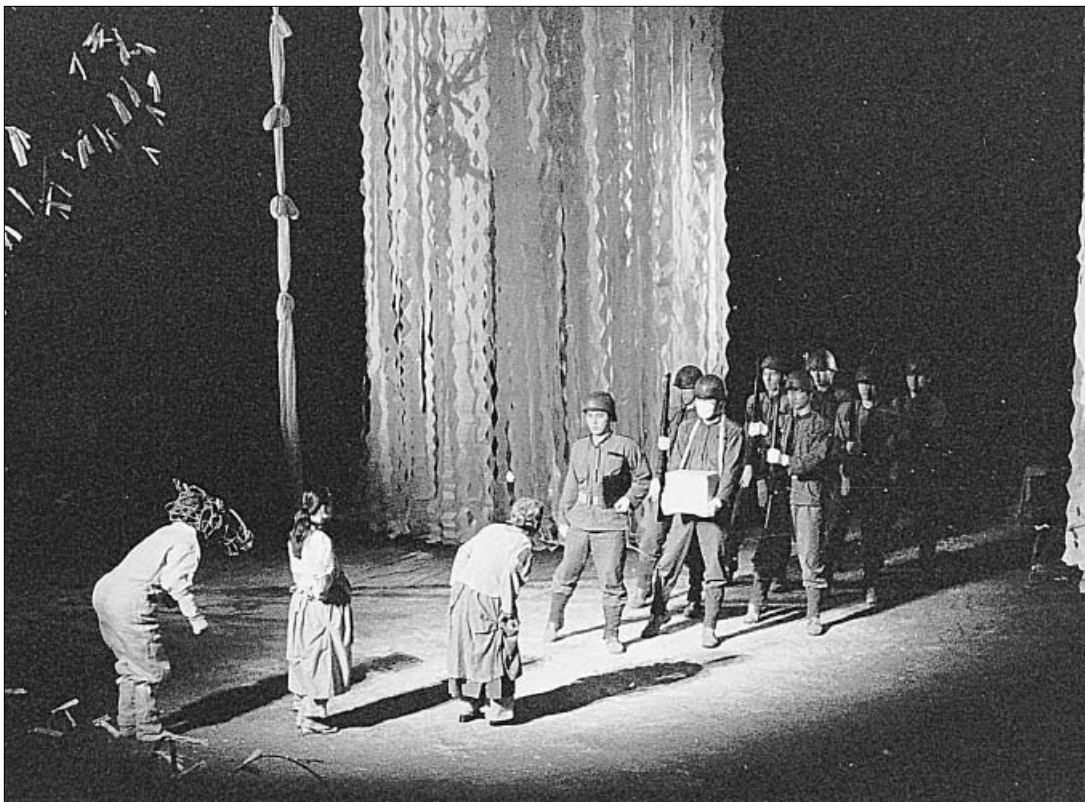
*The Commander-in-Chief salutes General Oh's dead body. The rest of the army follows suit.*

This scene generates compellingly powerful levels of emotion in the actors as well as the audience, since it strikes a familiar chord of *Han* in the minds and hearts of Koreans.

Thus in *The Toenails of General Oh* Park creates his own peculiar version of a cross-cultural hybrid form of drama through the integration of western dramatic devices in the Korean ethos of *Han*. By means of this new form of drama, which simultaneously

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Opposite page, top: with General Oh's mother and his cow listening, his fiancée Kotbun (centre) happily reads a letter sent from him in the military camp. Bottom: soldiers deliver the box of skeletal remains of General Oh to his mother. A rope of white cloth with knots of *Han* on it is descending from above. (Photos: Michoo Theatre Company.)



appeals to the sense of *Han* and the critical perceptions of the audience, he indicts irresponsible bureaucracy, totalitarian hierarchy, and the cruelty of war.

### Rationalizing the Shamanic Ritual

*The Toenails of General Oh* was first performed by the Michoo Theatre Company, directed by Sohn Jin-Chaek, in 1988, after the fourteen-year ban was lifted. This first production closely followed the dramatic text, but for his second production, in 1992, Sohn Jin-Chaek reframed the text by staging the shamanic ritual *Nuk-Gut* in order to 'call forth the spirits of the soldiers who were sacrificed in the Korean War, have them tell their stories, and send them away to the other world'.<sup>12</sup> Sohn introduced the *Nuk-Gut* ritual not so much as 'a play within a play', but – to appropriate Richard Hornby's term for this reframed performance structure – to make the story of General Oh function as 'inner play',<sup>13</sup> with the opening and closing scenes based on the shaman ritual becoming the 'outer play'.<sup>14</sup> In this production, the inner play is primary, with the outer play the framing device.

In the opening scene of this highly stylized production, the stage is almost bare, but for a small tree upstage right and an altar upstage centre. This latter is set up symbolically, with long multiple strings of white cloth hanging down from the ceiling to the stage floor creating an image of a shaman's altar. A string with several knots in it hangs conspicuously down the side, visually signifying the knots of *Han* of the characters in the play.

A female shaman-actor, played by the well-known actress Kim Sung-Nyo, enters this sparse ritual site, singing in a modernized *Pansori* style. While praying that all the dead spirits may go to the other world peacefully, she unfolds a bundle of white cloth and lays it down as a bridge connecting this world and the other world. She then makes an invocation, in response to which the dead spirits slowly appear on the stage. This scene fades into a semi-blackout, thus ending the opening scene of the outer play.

The inner play follows. It is instantly clear to Korean audiences that all the characters in

the inner play, including General Oh, his mother, his fiancée, and the soldiers, are already dead and that the shaman-actor is now telling the stories of the unpurged *Han* of the dead spirits. Episodic scenes proceed with short blackouts intervening, during which the *Pansori* tune sung by the shaman-actor is heard as a voice-over, reminding the audience that the purging process of the shaman ritual *Gut* continues.

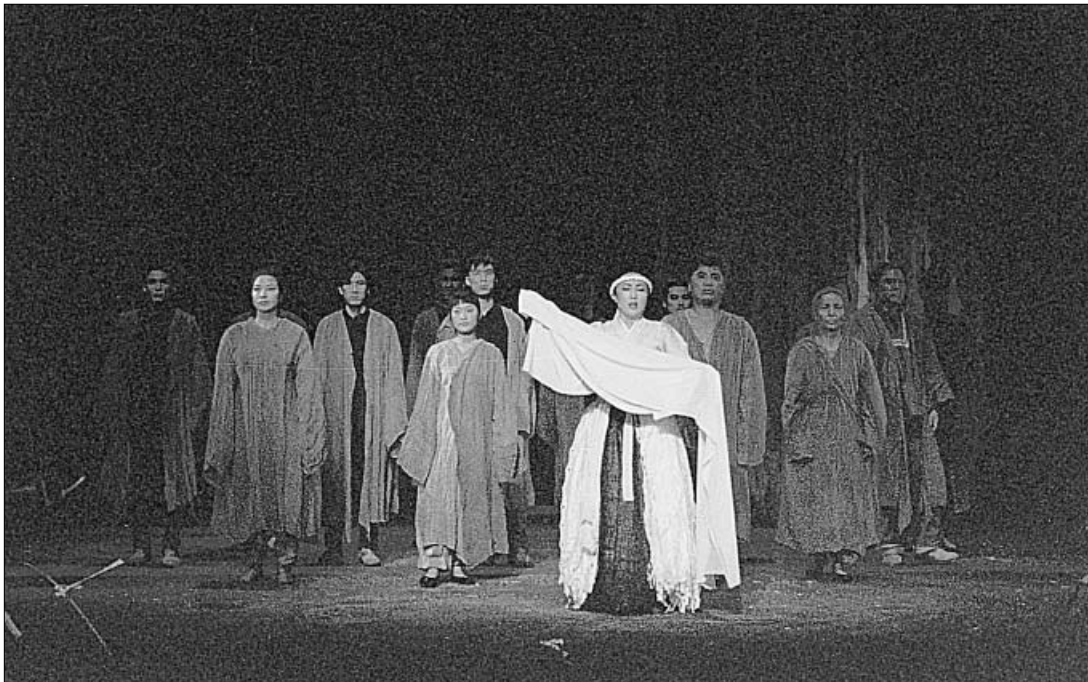
The main difference a Korean audience would perceive between this production and an authentic shamanic ritual concerns the transition of the performing space from an authentic village court to a make-believe proscenium stage space, borrowed from the West. On the proscenium stage, General Oh's story is enacted by several actors rather than narrated by a single shaman through multiple impersonations. And on the stage the state of trance that a real shaman is supposed to enter to impersonate the dead spirits does not occur literally in front of the audience's eyes, but is merely assumed to be there.

This transition of performing space from traditional to the modern/western brings about certain modifications in the audience's emotional response. A crucial consequence is the diminished emotional energy which in an authentic shamanic ritual is experienced with almost primal intensity by its audience-participants. The moments of high emotion usually prompt certain *Han*-purging psychological effects among Korean audience-participants which help to reinforce communal bonding in the village. However, upon the artificial and 'rationalized' space of the proscenium stage, Sohn seems to have intended to create a balance between the effects of primal emotion and those of rational distancing, thereby helping to bring into sharp relief Park Joh-Yeol's creative efforts to look at the history of *Han* with critical distance.

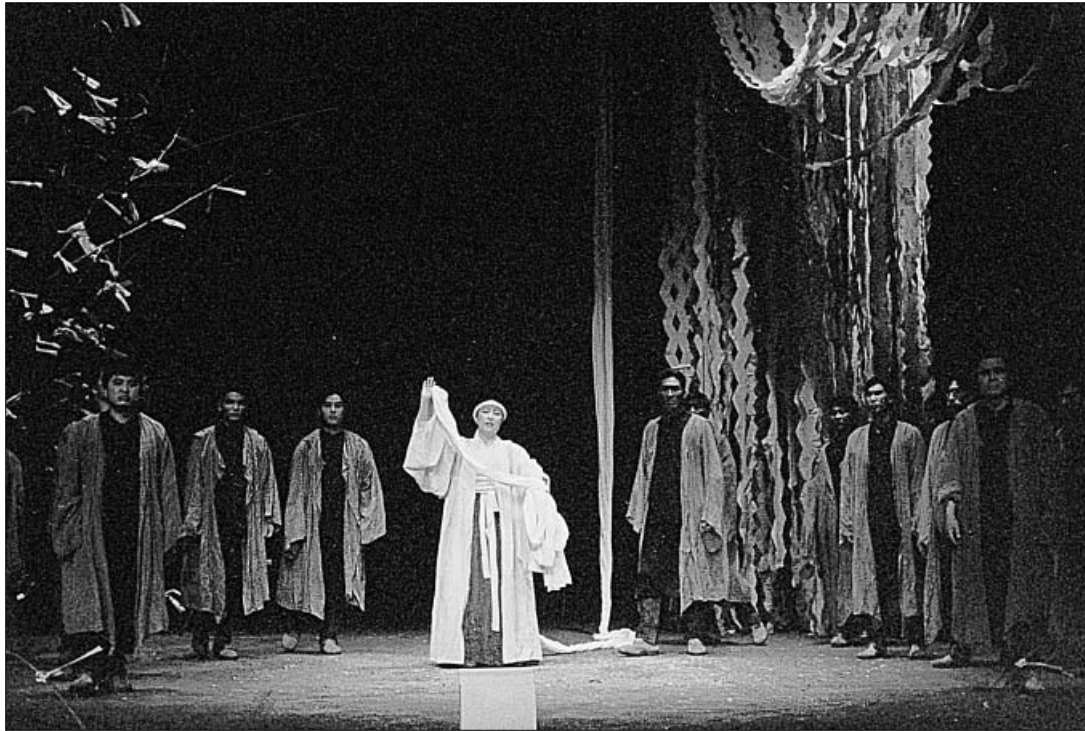
In the closing scene of Sohn's second production of *The Toenails of General Oh*, the shaman-actor re-enters the stage to complete her ritual and close the outer play structure. Singing of how General Oh's *Han* is purged, she pulls the string of white cloth with several knots on it down from the altar. This act symbolically completes the disentangle-



Abpve: General Oh's mother peers earnestly into the empty box for the remains of her son, as Kotbun and the cow weep together. Below: the shaman, played by the well-known Korean actress Kim Sung-Nyo, pulls down the white cloth string to disentangle the knots of Han. The dead spirits are looking on beside her. (Photos: Michoo Theatre Company.)







The shaman (Kim Sung-Nyo) calls forth the dead spirits to the stage, the ritual site. (Photo: Michoo Theatre Company.)

ment of the knots of *Han* for all the characters in the play. The ending also shows that all the spirits of the dead soldiers are returning to the other world.

It must be noted, however, that, although General Oh's drama is completed because his *Han* is assumed to have been purged on the stage, the production reminds the Korean audience that the historical reality of the nation's partition remains unresolved. The character General Oh, who is trapped by the contingencies of history and war because of his naivety, is a character type – a Korean Everyman trapped into *Han* because of the place of his nation in world history. In showing this, the play and Sohn's production heighten Koreans' collective awareness of their history.

## Notes and References

1. Kim Yol-Kyu, *Two Questions in Korean Literature (Hanguk Munhak ui Du Munje)* (Seoul: Hakyonsa, 1985), p. 16.

2. Eun Go, 'Transcending Han' (*Han ui Gukbok ul Wihayuh*), in *Stories of Han (Han ui Iyagi)*, ed. Kwang-Sun Suh (Seoul: Borhee Press, 1988), p. 33.

3. Ibid.

4. For further information on the 38th parallel, refer to <http://www.geocities.com/mokkim/koreahistory.html> and/or [http://www.click2history.com/korean\\_war/korean\\_war\\_chi.htm](http://www.click2history.com/korean_war/korean_war_chi.htm).

5. Go Eun, op. cit., p. 6.

6. Ibid., p. 29.

7. In an interview on 2 July 2003, Park Joh-Yeol acknowledged that at the time of his writing *The Toenails of General Oh* he was aware of such western theatre forms as epic theatre through books, but he denied any direct influence by any one particular theatre form. He further asserted that the dramatic form of the play was uniquely his own creation.

8. Ibid.

9. Suh Yon-Ho, *A Study of the History of Early Modern Korean Drama (Hanguk Geundae Huigoksa Yongu)* (Seoul: Minjok Munwha Yonguso, Korea University, 1982), p. 62.

10. Ibid., p. 58.

11. Park Joh-Yeol, *The Toenails of General Oh*, in *Anthology of Long Plays by Park Joh-Yeol* (Seoul: Gonggan Media, 1994), p. 95.

12. Interview with the director Sohn Jin-Chaek on 30 June 2003. The second production was also seen at the Chamber Drama Theatre in Vladivostok, Russia, during the First Asia-Pacific Theatre Festival, 23–30 August 1992.

13. Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1986), p. 33.

14. Ibid.