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Mythologizing the Global with the 'Korean Original Musical'[1]

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Because South Korea's national sovereignty is a matter of cultural production, Seoul boasts an energetic programme of world-class performances that educate both foreigners and Koreans about the nation's struggle to assert its subjectivity throughout centuries of invasion, colonization and displacement. Three musicals re-present episodes from Korea's mythical past in ways that demonstrate a 'primordial' uniqueness of Korean global presence. The Celestial Clock *addresses a Korean audience, unfolding outdoors against the backdrop of Gyeonghuigung Palace.* Miso: The Original Korean Musical – Love Songs from Chunhyang, *a showcase for traditional performing arts, uses pantomime and subtitles to guide an international audience through a popular legend; and* Miso II: Land of the Gods *stages Korean mythical history in breathtaking spectacle. The musicals, by arguing for the 'always already' global viability of Korean national sovereignty, also work to destabilize current 'mythologies' of what it means for a state to achieve 'global' status.*

'What are the preconditions for creating interest in what audiences do not understand?' asks performance ethnographer Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett. She suggests that 'pleasurable confusion' arises when audiences encounter the unknown in performance, specifically 'ethnic' or 'international' performances. When such performances eschew the mediating frame of ethnographic demonstration and explanation, audiences may be able to experience the performance in authentic moments of aesthetic reception, rather than as consumer products.[2] Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's careful qualification of this idea by questioning the possibility of totally escaping 'labels' when putting 'others' on display rings just as true for performances that are created by indigenous people or nationals for foreign consumption. South Korea's auto-ethnographic 'original Korean musicals' seek to educate both global and national audiences about Korea's cultural heritage, and their pleasurable aim is not only discovery but also rediscovery. The concept that dominates my readings of the three musicals explored below is that of 'originality' – both in the sense of being newly conceived and different from others, and also as existing first and at the beginning. To argue for Korea's originality, these performances re-present (make present again) episodes from Korea's past as dynamic aspects of its contemporary national identity. These performances destabilize the 'myth' of globalization as a new process with roots in Western trade and colonial expansion when audiences *re*discover the global as an already present reality inherent to Korea's history, culture *and* contemporary international presence in the global public sphere. As a scholar of Anglo heritage living abroad in Seoul, I acknowledge the pitfalls, the foibles and ultimately the impossibility

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of describing a unified performance of national culture; and despite the 'pleasure' of my initial 'confusions', I also mark my uneasiness with the privilege with which I outline this 'portrait' of a nation within which some may regard me as interloper. Nevertheless, I offer this sketch as an exercise in the service of deeper understanding. While acknowledging my own 'pleasurable confusion', this essay will trace a portrait of a Korea that understands itself as asserting its rightful place among the global order – a place that it not only deserves now but to which it has always been privileged.

In a nation whose identity comprises as much what Korea *was* as what Korea *will be*, Korean cultural performances, especially those aimed at foreigners and tourists, mobilize a carefully selected past in a way that not only globalizes the myth of Korean-ness, but also works to mythologize the notion of 'the global' itself, since, rather than homogenizing national culture, Korean cultural performance seeks to specify and strengthen it. On one level these performances may seem simply auto-exotic,[3] but Korean culture, by performing itself as 'already' global, challenges current theories of globalization[4] by suggesting that to 'be global' is more to tell a story about a nation's regard for itself in the world than (or as well as) to participate in global networks of circulation and consumption. Although some cultural theories decry the loss of cultural authenticity through the diluting effects of globalization, others argue that cultures 'contaminate' one another through what philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls an 'endless process of imitation and revision'.[5] To this effect, Korean cultural performance is made as much for self-consumption as for foreign consumption. Musical performances stage transhistorical retellings of traditional stories that transmogrify the violent destruction of Korean mythological figures and places into images of self-birth, mirroring the reconstruction and reunification of Korea for which many contemporary Koreans hope, and also affirming its global position as primordial and natural.

Present-day Seoul survived the ravages of the Korean War, which devastated the city and flooded it with refugees from the North, swelling the city's population to 1.5 million by 1955.[6] Following the war, Seoul's reconstruction became the focus of Korea's modernization efforts. Under the government of President Park Chung-hee (the cost and the benefit of whose leadership is still hotly debated), Seoul achieved rapid economic growth and standards of living rose considerably during the 1960s and 1970s. But while providing the world a new global hub,[7] and despite the massive changes to its cityscape, Seoul also retains its cosmological composition: rising above the ancient palace grounds (next to which stands the modern presidential residence) are the sacred mountains, which are the focal point for, rather than being simply tangential to, the city.

The construction of Korean national identity today both draws from and reframes the past in a way that, like Seoul's cityscape, also synthesizes the cultural and the cosmological. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai offers a useful definition of this process under the heading 'culturism' that, as opposed to 'bi-' or 'multiculturalism', describes 'the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics. It is frequently associated with ... struggles for stronger recognition from existing nation-states or from various transnational bodies'.[8] Because Korea's national identity argues for a global primordial status, it resists the 'modern' narratives of national identity that relegate cosmology to a mythic past. Korea actively

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takes up self-mythologization in order to secure its status as a global contender. Korean national identity positions itself within a future into which it *will* live, spurred on by a past that affirms its 'always already' status as a global participant. The occupation by Japanese forces and the subsequent military occupation by the Soviets and the Americans during and after the Second World War resulted in the division of the country (which allows for an American occupation that some Koreans might argue continues to this day). The thirty-eighth parallel, or DMZ, is not a sore scar but an open wound that is painfully maintained by the opposing politics of North and South, despite the hope for reunification. Korean national identity performs itself as *already* living in a significant global participation that was only temporarily subverted and diverted by the unfortunate circumstances of its recent history.[9] This essay discusses three 'original Korean musicals' that re-present episodes from Korea's past in ways that demonstrate a 'primordial' uniqueness of Korean global presence. *The Celestial Clock*, *Miso*: *The Original Korean Musical – Love Songs from Chunhyang*, and *Miso II: Land of the Gods* all draw from Korean history and mythology but also argue for the 'always already' global viability of Korean national sovereignty, which works to destabilize current 'mythologies' of what it means for a state to achieve 'global' status.

The Celestial Clock (*Chun Sang Si Gye*, 천상시계) by Kim Nam Chae (김남채)

Like the protagonist of his original musical, *The Celestial Clock*, Kim Nam Chae left home at a young age in order to pursue a career as an inventor and scientist.[10] He considers Jang Young-sil a spiritual mentor of sorts, despite the centuries that separate them. *The Celestial Clock* chronicles Young-sil's journey from his childhood village to the court of King Sejong as a royally appointed scientist, inventor and craftsman. Young-sil's lowly peasant status would have inhibited him from gaining the recognition that he deserved for his early-exhibited talent as an inventor, but a time of peace coincides with the rule of the progressive King Sejong, who famously declares that all of his subjects should be recognized by their individual talents and virtues rather than be limited by their class, which models Confucian meritocracy. Sejong sends Young-sil to China to study science and technology. Meanwhile, Sejong negotiates for Chosun's (or Korea's) independence from the Ming Dynasty. Young-sil befriends a Chinese scientist named Juha, and their friendship develops tenuously alongside the political unrest between their respective countries. Upon Young-sil's return to Chosun, he produces many new and impressive inventions, and Sejong in return frees him from his lowly peasant status and grants him a public post – an act that angers the king's ministers and gains Young-sil enemies at court. Despite the ministers' protests, Young-sil takes the government post and returns to his home village once more as a free man. He is reunited with his mother, but his lover, Ye-sung, is nowhere to be seen. Later he finds that she has been sent to another town as a public *gisaeng* (courtesan).

Saddened by this loss, Young-sil returns to the palace to begin work on his famous astronomical observatory, the celestial clock. At a royal banquet to mark his success, Young-sil recognizes Ye-sung, who has become a court *gisaeng* as a way to get closer to Young-sil. But because Young-sil is free and Ye-sung is not, their social statuses prohibit

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marriage; they tearfully part. As tensions rise with the Ming, Sejong orders Young-sil to head a new secret project to advance Chosun's weapons technology. When the Ming catch on, they send envoys to force Sejong to desist. When the envoys retreat back to China, Sejong strengthens his resolve and declares the unity of Chosun and its independence from the Ming. As an act of goodwill, Sejong frees Ye-sung from her social status and allows her to marry Young-sil. Their celebration is interrupted by an attack of assassins from the Ming, sent to kill Young-sil. Ye-sung shields him with her body, and is stabbed to death. Ye-sung dies in Young-sil's arms as the Ming storm the grounds, in perhaps the most impressive scene in the musical. Chosun is victorious, and a tentative peace returns. However, all is not peaceful for Young-sil, whose grief impels him to work feverishly. The king orders Young-sil to make him a sedan chair for a royal procession, but this chair breaks during its journey, injuring the king, and Young-sil is charged with treason. Instead of allowing him to be sentenced to death, Sejong banishes Young-sil from the palace. Young-sil journeys home one last time with nothing to show for his years at the palace, leaving just as empty-handed as when he had first arrived. The musical's ending number is one of hope, as Young-sil's mother greets him tenderly and the spirit of Ye-Sung sings to him.[11]

The most distinctive trait of *The Celestial Clock* was its setting, outdoors on the grounds of Gyeonghuigung Palace, with the palace's facade as the backdrop for the set. The programme informs English-speaking visitors that 'the ancient palaces of Chosun Dynasty, the most historical and cultural landmarks in the heart of Seoul, thrive again by embracing not only Seoul citizens but also increasing numbers of foreign tourists to experience the wondrous world of musical performance created by acknowledged performing artists of Korea'. By welcoming foreign tourists into this ancient landmark mobilized as a marker of global participation, the ancient palaces of the Chosun Dynasty thrive again today. Further, foreigners' presence confirms Seoul's status as a world city and Korea as a global nation, which mobilizes a proud past. The programme continues,

> The musical aims at providing all its audiences an opportunity to enjoy the architectural and spatial beauty and uniqueness of Korean palaces and bring to them a live experience of current Korean musical trends that are gradually becoming important cultural resources of Korea. The musical is expected to become a cultural and tourist product that will represent the night culture of Seoul.[12]

As a cultural resource representing Korea to the world, the musical makes past traditions contemporary, while also asking foreigners to recognize the already important meaning of Korean tradition and culture.

The primordial 'always and already' of Korea's cultural significance was emphatically demonstrated at the climax of the musical, when, just after Ye-sung sacrifices herself for Young-sil, the Ming soldiers invade Sejong's palace and set it on fire. The theatrical effects for this were truly breathtaking: giant projections thrown onto the walls of the actual palace simulated flames. During a complex battle sequence, the palace seemed to be actually burning and the stones of the palace appeared to crumble. At the height of this devastation, however, the actual outline of the *real* palace stood clearly

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against Seoul's night city sky, as though to say: throughout the experience of traumatic invasion, subjugation and oppression, Korea's identity stands strong, and has always endured.

During our interview, I asked playwright Kim Nam Chae if he considered *The Celestial Clock* political theatre. I asked because the progressive politics of Sejong were met at the time with adversity by the noble classes. Many of Sejong's liberal campaigns were dropped by later rulers, who had to contend with invasions by both the Japanese and the Manchus throughout the seventeenth century. An ensuing two centuries of peace came at the price of relative isolationism as Korea warded off Western imperialism, earning it the name 'the Hermit Kingdom'.[13] The annexation of Korea by the Japanese around the turn of the twentieth century was the beginning of the end of unified Korea. It seemed to me that Sejong's progressive recognition of a commoner's talents could be a contemporary comment on the status of the Korean nation today, at least in a broad sense: like Jang Young-sil, Korea is a country with tremendous cultural resources and intellectual wealth, which had been shackled by an imposed 'status' as a developing nation. However, the world eventually took notice of Korea's undeniable talent, and recognized its rightful place as a global nation. When I presented this idea to Kim Nam Chae he said no, that had not been his intention. About an hour after we ended our interview, however, I received a message from him saying that he had reconsidered my reading, and realized that in focusing on Jang Young-sil, perhaps his play did have political significance for everyday Koreans, who should be able to pursue their dreams despite any setbacks they may encounter. Kim Nam Chae himself recently went back to school to gain a bachelor's degree in literature and writing in order to support his new career as a playwright, graduating in 2013. This is a very unusual thing for an adult Korean to do. Kim Nam Chae's response politicized the agency of the individual and my reading politicized the myth of the genius individual who, through trials, claims rightful recognition. His response invites consideration of Korean national identity with regard to autonomy and sovereignty on both personal and national levels.

A broad sketch of the myth of Jang Young-sil goes something like this: a young person of noble birth, through circumstances beyond her own control, is separated from her rightful parents and brought up instead in a humble household. Unaware of her heritage, the child nevertheless exhibits the talents and predilections appropriate to her inherited status – wisdom and wit beyond her years, enduring loyalty, an irrepressible drive to achieve greatness and especially magnanimousness and concern for others. Such behaviour gains enemies among those envious of her goodness and pure talent but deep friendships among those humble enough to appreciate her true virtues. Eventually hard work, dedication and loyalty reveal the rightful status of the protagonist. This basic outline valorizes the Confucian ideal that status should be an indication of merit and virtue (Confucius himself was born into an aristocratic family who fell into poverty). But it can also be argued that it reinforces rigid social hierarchies since it emphasizes inherent traits. Although to a Westerner like myself Korean society seems staunchly hierarchical, I must recognize that there is more mobility than might be readily apparent. The story of Jang Young-sil alludes to this, both reinforcing a Confucian cultural background and also resisting it.

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An early scene challenges Confucian predetermination. Sejong has changed out of his royal robes and plans to go drinking with his closest friends of the court. On their way through the palace gardens, they come across Young-sil gazing at the stars and drawing in the dirt. Sejong approaches Young-sil, who does not recognize him as the king.

SEJONG: (*getting closer to Yeong sil*) Why are you drawing all this stuff on the ground?
YEONG SIL: I'm drawing the night sky.
SEJONG: The night sky? Ha-ha! Then I am standing in the sky!
YEONG SIL: Everything on the ground is in the sky as well.
SEJONG: Is there a king?
YEONG SIL: Yes, there is. (*Pointing to the North Star.*[14]) When that king star is bright it will bring good luck.
SEJONG: The king will like this when he hears this (*walking around, observing the drawings.*)
. . .
SEJONG: (*surprising Yeong sil*) Hey! What are you doing?
YEONG SIL: What?
SEJONG: (*exaggerating*) You're in big trouble! You just stepped on the King star. Not just once but three times.
YEONG SIL: (*drawing King star again*) My lord I am sorry, so sorry.
SEJONG: I will pretend that I didn't see anything
. . .
SEJONG: Why do you have so much interest in the sky?
YEONG SIL: Each year, on a full moon, the king gives the calendar from the Ming Empire to the people of Chosun. By this calendar the people farm, pray, and go fishing out at sea. But the Ming calendar is not correct. If you study the stars, you will see the same cycle repeat every 365 days, but the Ming calendar doesn't account for this.
SEJONG: Are you saying that the king is stupid?
YEONG SIL: Shhhh! Are you new here? Don't say that! I'm just saying that if I can investigate the sky, I can make a more precise calendar.
SEJONG: (*laughing very loudly*) Hahaha you!
PARK YEON/LEE CHUN/COURT GUARD: (*running to Sejong's aid*) What is the matter, my king?
SEJONG: I'm the stupid king.
YEONG SIL: (*realizing his mistake and falling to his knees*) My king! I have committed a serious crime.
SEJONG: No, you didn't. The only crime I can see is that Chosun does not have its own calendar.[15]

Through the representative Jang Young-sil, this scene performs Korean culture as innate talent that achieves rightful recognition by those wise enough to understand. Significantly, Sejong is *persuaded* by Young-sil to create a Korean calendar; his use of

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reason reinforces his kingly status. In this myth, one gains access to all levels of human society by demonstrating one's undeniable natural talent. In the broad scheme of Korean cultural performance, one becomes part of the world by virtue of being Korean. In this performance of national identity, to be Korean is *already* to be a global citizen.

Miso [미소]: *The Original Korean Musical – Love Songs from Chunhyang*

The Celestial Clock was performed entirely in Korean with no foreign-language subtitles; it aimed to reach a tourist audience among foreigners and Korean nationals alike. In contrast, *Miso: The Original Korean Musical* has been in production at the Chongdong Theatre in downtown Seoul since 1997 and draws a primarily foreign audience. Beginning as a showcase of the traditional Korean performing arts (such as *samulnori*, the traditional Korean percussion quartet; *p'ansori*, traditional narrative song; a fusion performance of *gugak*, Korean traditional music and orchestral music; a fan dance; and *ogomu*, the 'five drums dance'), it has been revised and transformed under several different directors. The current incarnation[16] is structured around the well-known love story of Chunhyang, or 'The Song of the Faithful Wife', one of the oldest surviving *p'ansori* songs. *Clock* seems to aim itself at a Korean audience that welcomes a foreign audience *along with them* into the theatre; *Miso*, on the other hand, explicitly markets itself to a foreign tourist as well as to a global audience. The prelude to the performance is a sung summary of the story of Chunhyang in the style of traditional *p'ansori* by the mother of Chunhyang, Wolmae. She stands before a large projection screen centre stage, where audiences can read along in Korean, Japanese, Chinese and English. After this point, despite being billed as a 'musical', there is no more singing until the very end of the performance, and then also only by one singer – again the mother, Wolmae. As the projection screen flies up, the audience is greeted with a breathtaking spectacle – a traditional *Dano* festival that marks the transition between spring and summer. The solemn shamanic ritual led by Hakdo, the governor, gives way to merry dancing, and the young Chunhyang is wooed by Mongryong, the son of the local magistrate. Hakdo, jealous for Chunhyang's attention, tries to separate the two, but Chunhyang rejects him and Mongryong persuades Hakdo to leave. The couple resume their flirtations; they eventually end up back at Mongryong's house where they spend the night together to the delight of the servants, who peep at them until Chunhyang's mother, who is pleased at the match, shoos them away. This happy and titillating moment gives way to celebrations in the village, where the audience is treated to demonstrations of plate-spinning, juggling, gymnastics and dancing. Some audience members are even invited onstage to try their hand at plate-spinning.

The jealous Hakdo plans to oust Mongryong from the village and take Chunhyang for himself. He forges a letter from the king calling Mongryong to the palace. Mongryong has no choice but to go, and bids a sad farewell to Chunhyang. A traditional drumming sequence in celebration of Hakdo's birthday builds the tension, as Hakdo ruthlessly pursues Chunhyang, becoming increasingly frustrated with her constant rejection. Eventually he gives her an ultimatum: either marriage or prison. Chunhyang chooses the

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latter during a complex sword dance performed by female dancers. Hakdo gives her one last chance to change her mind, and at her final refusal he declares that she shall be put to death by beating. Meanwhile, Mongryong has returned to the village, but in disguise as a beggar-scholar because he actually has been appointed a secret royal inspector, an officer of the king who is sent to uncover corrupt officials. He quickly finds out the fate of Chunhyang and, with the help of her mother and the servants, devises a plan. The executioners are now upon Chunhyang, and Wolmae takes up the *p'ansori* song again at a famous point in the tale – the song of twenty lashes. After each lash that sends Chunhyang to her knees, the faithful, strong, proud woman rises again to her feet and cries out another reason why she rejects Hakdo and remains faithful to her love. Just as she is about to perish, Mongryong appears in another disguise – this time as a masked *tal-chum* dancer – along with his officers, who rescue Chunhyang and capture the evil Hakdo in a full ensemble dance/battle sequence. Chunhyang's battered body is carried offstage by the mournful Mongryong. Soon enough, order is restored, signified by a peaceful flower dance. The denouement of the story is the wedding between Chunhyang and Mongryong. At the end of the show, the cast processes through the audience to the courtyard outside the theatre, where the audience can join the actors in a circle dance and pose together for photographs.

According to the Chongdong Theatre, more than 130,000 people per year on average have attended this performance since 1997,[17] and *Miso* has travelled extensively in its promotion of Korean culture. The programme notes for the most recent performance outline plans for a *Miso* show in residence in Las Vegas, Nevada. According to *Miso*'s general director, Choi Jeong Im, *Miso*'s production has been a 'battle for prestige, globalization, and popularization'. Choi believes that *Miso* has been successful because 'it has now solidified its position as a leading brand of traditional Korean performance, gaining greater status ... By featuring in numerous overseas events ... it also is at the vanguard of globalization as a prestigious, traditional Korean performance'.[18] Indeed, the overarching mission and vision of *Miso*'s production is: 'Promotion, popularization, and globalization of the Korean traditional arts.'[19]

Drawing out some parallels between *Love Songs from Chunhyang* and *Clock* may help solidify my notion that Korean cultural performance sometimes seeks to demonstrate the primordial uniqueness of Korean global presence. Like Jang Young-sil's story, Chunhyang's can be read as a celebration of Confucian merit-based recognition of the superiority or nobility of a person due not to high birth but to the manifestation of human virtues. Chunhyang is also a lowly commoner who is raised in status through marriage because of her extraordinary traits (love, beauty and loyalty). The traditional story celebrates the Confucian virtues of fidelity and loyalty, while at the same time challenging the rigidity of the class system. Chunhyang can be read as an index for the national desire for unity and integrity. Her undying loyalty to her husband stages Korea's undying strength in the face of adversity. Her beaten body signifies the Korean landscape, scarred as it has been by centuries of conflict, invasion and colonization. By way of this reading, the most remarkable thing about the performance is not Chunhyang's faithful love for her husband, but her refusal to allow Hakdo to manipulate her. The love story between Mongryong and Chunhyang then becomes a backdrop to Chunhyang's

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unwavering commitment to her own integrity, and the song of twenty lashes is not so much a celebration of loyalty as it is an assertion of her subjectivity and agency. As scholar of East Asian studies Sheila Miyoshi Jager writes, 'The raped and wounded female body in contemporary Korean nationalist discourse figures widely in representations of division',[20] especially considering the recent outcry against the hushing-up of the history of 'comfort women' – women conscripted as sexual slaves for the imperial Japanese military[21] – as well as the women who entertained the American soldiers stationed at the DMZ immediately after the Second World War in programmes sanctioned by the Korean government. Chunhyang's beaten female body, healed and whole while also scarred and bruised, standing for the Korean nation, asserts inalienable and primary rights of autonomy and agency against hostile states. Her resistance to Hakdo's manipulation of both her body and her mind is Korea's resistance to assimilation into other empires – be they Chinese, Japanese or American. Most importantly, this resistance signifies the 'always and already' nature of those rights and integrity. Further, Chunhyang's loyalty to her husband can be understood as analogous to a citizen's loyalty to her state. In a written account of the tale, Chunhyang replies to Hakdo, 'Don't you know, sir, that a *patriot* never serves two kings and a faithful wife never serves two husbands?'[22] Chunhyang's personal sovereignty parallels Korea's own resilient sovereignty; she is not subject to the rules of outsiders' demands. Her very being is reason enough.

There is much about the sexual politics of *Chunhyang* that demands discussion, but at least one additional dimension of her beating needs attention: the necessity of her body being female in order to serve as a sacrificial medium for the nation. Although we might read Chunhyang as a strong woman, her position as sacrificial victim reinforces the fact of her femaleness as a marker of otherness and deviation and, despite her resistance, her body remains a docile one, reincorporated into the peaceful but patriarchal order at the end of the play. This is more significant if we read Chunhyang's femininity also as a marker of raw bio-power. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues, 'the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible ... without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak created the "docile bodies" that it needed'.[23] What Agamben terms 'capitalism' is also the force that sets the stage for the kind of globalism described by first-wave globalization theory, which demands that docile states work and consume on behalf of other, more sovereign states who house the corporations that control the terms of exchange. Perhaps Korean cultural performance works to distance itself from that yoke of docility. Today, Korea asserts its global independence while working to heal from the trauma of living as an enforced docile state, annexed by the Japanese and then occupied by the American armed forces. If *Chunhyang* puts on stage Korea's bare life, it is a bare life that has already been politicized – but by Koreans. The intellectual talent of Jang Young-sil also stands analogously to bare life – a force that can be killed and manipulated, but not sacrificed. If the greatest indication of sovereignty is the politicization of bare life, then Korea has to be the one to manifest its own bio-power, whether physically, intellectually or culturally. As Agamben further writes, 'in the 'politicization of bare life ... the humanity of living man is decided'.[24] Korean cultural performance insists that Koreans need to make that decision for themselves.

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Miso II: Silla, Land of the Gods

If Korean cultural performance imagines Korean national identity as a primordial presence, then that presence is also a sacred one. Like Agamben's *homo sacer* that can be killed with impunity but not sacrificed, Korean cultural performance deploys a mythical past that can be renarrated and reshaped but never totally forgotten. As political theorist Benedict Anderson writes at the very end of his now classic *Imagined Communities*, the violent deaths of those who have been consumed by martyrdom, assassination, holocaust, war or execution, in order to serve the 'narrative purpose' of a cultural identity, 'must be remembered as "our own"'.[25] Mythologizing the past is the perpetuation of the economy of national memory. Korean cultural performance offers myths that take on the stature of heroes, functioning as saints and martyrs who are remembered as prototypical of today's Korea.

The second major incarnation of the *Miso* performances is *Miso II: Silla, Land of the Gods*. Performed at the World Culture Expo Park in the coastal town of Gyeongju, *Miso II* brings to life the complex history of Korea's origins in order to construct a sweeping story spanning the birth and rise of the Silla Dynasty's thousand-year reign (57 BCE–935 CE) and the unification of the Three Kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla) under Silla queen Seondeok in the seventh century CE. The denouement of the show, according to the English-language programme, is the development of Silla culture as it advances 'toward the world through the Silla Road'.[26] In the words of one reviewer, the performance 'takes the glory that was Silla out of the museums and brings it back to life, if only for an evening'.[27] Gyeongju is the historic capital of the Silla Kingdom, pitted with numerous archeological sites and bursting with cultural properties and treasures,[28] as well as host to the National Museum of Korea. The Chongdong Theatre launched *Miso II* in 2011 in an effort to boost tourism to Gyeongju and the surrounding area. The performance incorporates famous artefacts and landmarks into its *mise en scène*. An interested audience member can attend the performance, and then go to the National Museum and see, for example, the ancient roof tile design in the shape of a human face that inspired the masks for the shaman dancers, or the ancient golden jewels of the Silla nobility that served as patterns for the chief priestess's staff. Key points of the plot are set at historical sites and involve theatrical reproductions of Korean national treasures that have great significance for Korea's national identity today.

As with *Love Songs from Chunhyang, Miso II* is billed as a 'musical' but includes no singing, relying instead on dance, music, drumming, mime, elaborate costume and spectacle to tell its story. At the top of the show, a single laser suddenly pierces a darkened auditorium that has been infused with special-effect fog, beaming out over the heads of audience members. This single beam spreads into a plane, which then undulates in three dimensions. The fog swirls in the laser's light, indicating clouds, waves and the primordial beginnings of life on Earth. The undulating plane then wraps itself into a circle, symbolizing the marriage of the Sun and the Moon. The stage lights rise, and the founders of the lands of the gods, Bak Hyeokgeose (who emerges from a giant egg) and Princess Aleyong, perform a dance of conception, passing a silver orb between them and, as the programme informs, 'praying for the prosperity of the leaders and people of

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Silla, the splendid land of gods'. The people of the first villages emerge and the act ends with a ritual in honour of the gods. The priestesses who perform the ritual wear masks designed to evoke the famous image of the face-shaped roof-end tile, known as 'the smile of Silla', which stands as a symbol for Gyeongju and Korean culture and history. Act II takes place at Poseokjeong Pavilion, Korea's Historic Site Number One. The people of Silla celebrate in the forest, pleasantly interrupted by Yongchun, a brave warrior, who arrives on the back of a horse made to look like a giant reproduction of a famous piece of Silla-era earthenware, Korean National Treasure Number 275, 'Earthenware Mounted Warrior with Horn-Shaped Cups'. Here, Yongchun and Princess Deokman fall in love but soon learn their separate fates. The gods name Princess Deokman Queen Seondeok, and Yongchun her general. On Woljeongyo Bridge, the queen ties her sash to her general's sword. The set design split the bridge in the centre, so that as the general marches away, the two halves of the bridge recede stage right and left. After a rousing battle sequence involving laser light arrows, the queen receives news that Yongchun is dead. In great sorrow, the queen processes back stage, where a shadowy figure looms: the three-metre-tall Buddha of Seokguram Grotto, now a designated UNESCO Cultural Heritage site, emerges. When the queen vows to unify the Korean peninsula under the Silla name, the eye *chakra* of the Buddha blazes, and the same laser beam that began the show again shoots out over the audience. The final act, titled 'Brilliant Light of the East: The Silla Road', is a dance showcase with the entire large cast costumed in white, and the rainbow-coloured light emitting from Buddha's *chakra* bouncing off the reflective flooring on the stage.

Focusing on the use of one artefact will demonstrate how this musical performs a primordial Korean national identity: the Seokgoram Buddha. The laser light that initiated life in the first act becomes the light of Buddhist enlightenment assisting Queen Seondeok and her people in the unification of the Silla Empire. The Seokgoram Buddha depicts the moment Sakyamuni attained enlightenment, which parallels Silla's revelation of Buddhism to the terrestrial world.[29] The Silla Kingdom is said to have been the weakest of the three, so this 'underdog' story of triumph may have special appeal. Furthermore, the Seokgoram Buddha's *chakra* itself has contemporary significance. Apparently, the original statue's *chakra* had been adorned with a precious clear gem. Set upon the side of a mountain at the end of a winding path, the Buddha gazes serenely from his grotto out toward the sea, facing east. Pilgrims today still climb this path early in the morning to witness the sunrise and the early morning light infiltrating the beautiful grotto. In the past, the rising sun would strike the gem of the Buddha's *chakra*, and it was said to throw a reflection so powerful that it could be seen from across the water, thereby illuminating the entire East. However, during the early colonial period of Japanese rule when government officials attempted to preserve the grotto (to incredibly dire effect), the *chakra* gem was either lost or stolen. In the early twentieth century, the gem was found in a colonial government office, only to be lost again. In the 1960s, the South Korean government renewed preservation and maintenance efforts. Resigned to the permanent loss of the *chakra* gem, experts covered the inside of the *chakra*'s concave dimple with gold, then fashioned a smooth, rounded, clear crystal to set inside. Today the Seokgoram Buddha's *chakra* no longer literally illuminates the entire East, but the beauty and serenity of the

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grotto attracts hundreds of visitors yearly.[30] A foreigner like myself can only imagine the emotional impact that seeing the illumination of the lost *chakra* might have for a patriotic Korean attending *Miso II*. In the performance, the absence of the original *chakra* only underscores the full presence of Korea's illustrious past as signifying today the originality and strength of a unified Korean national culture. *Miso II*'s performance of a primordial past *is* the unification under the Silla, *is* the unique strength of Korean culture today, and *will be* the global recognition of Korea's long-standing significance.

Mythologizing the 'global'

Anderson argued that imagining the nation is a modern phenomenon resulting from the 'slow, uneven decline' of certainties – such as the transparency of language, the divine right of kings to rule and the indistinguishability of cosmology and history. With this 'harsh wedge' driven between cosmology and history, communities seek a 'new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together'.[31] But Korean cultural performance seems to reverse Anderson's scheme; Korean cultural identity pulls at the wedge driving apart fraternity, power and time. Here I by no means suggest that Koreans' cultural performance is backward or unmodern – quite the contrary. By re-presenting the past in a way that mythologizes Korea's global participation *now*, perhaps Korean cultural performance has something to teach the rest of the world about healing that break between cosmology and history – something that, perhaps, is never totally absent from even the most neoliberal of national identities. There is honesty and humour in the willingness of these Korean directors, designers and playwrights to redeploy an (often uncertain) past in order to actively mythologize a national identity today. This kind of 'mythologization' should not be thought of pejoratively as clinging blindly to fictions, but rather as an ongoing discursive process by which Korean nationals continue to negotiate their relationship with the world at large through performance, storytelling and traditional arts. These myths or stories blend the past and the present to affirm an always and already globally viable Korea. Globalization is discursive, involving 'the continuation and transformation of existing structures'. What I am suggesting is really very simple: that globalization itself is a kind of myth, a cosmos-making story – or, one could also say, a performative hermeneutic. *The Celestial Clock*, *Love Songs from Chunhyang* and *Silla: Land of the Gods* perform the already global identity of Korean national culture in a way that exposes the anachronism of current trends in global studies that would conceive of nations as 'becoming global'; these trends fail to consider that the globe does not exist in fragments but has always already been a whole. These Korean cultural performances mythologize the 'global' through performances that emphasize the primordial presence, originality and always already global identity of Korean culture and national integrity.

NOTES

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2 Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Confusing Pleasures', in Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 203–48, here p. 203.
3 See Marta Sivigliano's discussion of auto-exotification in 'Evita: The Globalization of a National Myth', *Latin American Perspectives*, 24, 6 (November 1997), pp. 156–72.
4 See Luke Martell, 'The Third Wave in Globalization Theory', *International Studies Review*, 9, 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 173–96, for a succinct summary of globalist, sceptical and transformationalist theories of globalization.
5 Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Cosmopolitan Contamination', in Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), pp. 101–13, here pp. 112-–13.
6 Seong-Kyu Ha, 'Seoul as a World City: The Challenge of Balanced Development', in Stephen Hamnett and Dean Forbes, eds., *Planning Asian Cities: Risks and Resilience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 158–79, here p. 159.
7 Ibid., p. 167.
8 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 15.
9 For a discussion of the lingering effects of the Cold War on Korean national consciousness and economy see John Lie and Myoungkyu Park, 'South Korea in 2005: Economic Dynamism, Generational Conflicts, and Social Transformations', *Asian Survey*, 46, 1 (January/February 2006), pp. 56–62.
10 Kim Nam Chae, interview with Claire Maria Chambers, translated by Joanne Ku, 14 June 2013.
11 This summary is compiled from my attendance of the performance, reading the Korean script with the assistance of Joanne Ku, and the performance programme, which provided a synopsis in English.
12 Performance programme, 'Musical the Celestial Watch, 고궁뮤지글 찬상시계', printed by Museum Play theatre company, unnumbered pages.
13 Bruce Cummings, 'The Interests, 1860-–1904', in Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), pp. 86–138.
14 I believe that Chae is referencing an excerpt from *The Analects of Confucius*: 'A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.' Mary Pat Fisher and Lee W. Bailey, eds., *An Anthology of Living Religions* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2008), p. 143.
15 Kim Nam Chae, *The Celestial Watch*, trans. Joanne Ku, unpublished playscript. Courtesy of Kim Nam Chae and History Play Theatre Company.
16 As this article goes to press, the Chongdong Theatre opens its 2014 production, 'MISO: Baebijang-jeong', based on a late Joseon-era satirical novel.
17 Seoul.go.kr, 'Hallyu Style: Miso', at http://english.seoul.go.kr/cav/ena/hallyu_view.php?idx=8118&, accessed 29 November 2013.
18 Jeongim Choi, 'Production Goals', programme for *Miso II: Silla, Land of the Gods*, printed by the Chongdong Theatre, p. 6.
19 Ibid., p. 38.
20 Sheila Miyoshi Jager, 'Woman and the Promise of Modernity: Signs of Love for the Nation in Korea', *New Literary History*, 28, 1 (1998), pp. 121–34, here p. 129.
21 For a provocative approach to this history that challenges the dominant narrative see C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
22 Richard Rutt, *The Song of a Faithful Wife: Ch'un-hyang* (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1999), p. 42, my emphasis.
23 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 3.
24 Ibid., p. 8.
25 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), p. 154.

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26 *Miso II* programme book, p. 22.

27 Robert Koehler, 'Reliving Silla's Greatness with Miso II', *Seoul Magazine*, 12 February 2013, at http://magazine.seoulselection.com/2013/02/12/reliving-sillas-greatness-with-miso-ii, accessed 27 November 2013.

28 The area is so rich with artefacts that farmers and townspeople are afraid to dig because the probable discovery of a valuable artefact would interrupt work and life and end up costing the landowner millions of won. See Robert Oppenheimer, *Kyŏngju Things: Assembling Place* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

29 UNESCO, http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/736, accessed 29 November 2013.

30 Ak Ju Sung, *Light of a Century: Seokguram Stone Grotto* (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 2009) pp. 105–9 (성낙주, 석굴암 백년의 빛: 사진으로 읽는 수난과 영광의 한 세기 (서울: 동국대학교출판부, 2009)). Many thanks to Cho Yu Jung, who assisted me in reading this text.

31 Anderson, p. 36.

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