



Evaluation of Divergence of Circus and Performing Arts

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The Introduction and Division of Circus on the Korean Peninsula

The Western-style modern circus was introduced to the Korean Peninsula through Japan, after which it grew in popularity and became a part of popular culture. However, after the Korean Peninsula was divided, the circus took different paths in the South and North Korea.

In South Korea, circuses were widely popular until the 1960s; however, after the spread of television in the 1980s, the circus lost its popularity. It was subsequently not recognized as a part of traditional culture. The circus bands, which had travelled the country to maintain their slender existence, were quickly pushed out of the public eye.

In contrast, in North Korea, the circus has been recognized as an art form enjoyed by the people. In North Korea, circus was renamed as *Kyo-ye*. *Kyo-ye* is an abbreviation for *Ki-Kyo-Ye-Sul*, which means technical art. The name was changed to show that it is a true art form. North Korea sees the Western circuses as capitalists' pursuit of curious and stimulating content. On the other hand, *Kyo-ye* aims to present the beauty of the healthy human body. North Korea argues that when people see a trained body, it inspires them to gain physical strength.

In North Korea, there is a separate specialized curriculum for the circus. Pyongyang Circus School selects talented children and teaches them professionally, and circus performers are highly esteemed by society. There is also the Pyongyang Circus Theater, which is used as a dedicated theater by the National Academy of Arts and Sciences. The theater is capable of showing circus performances in the

air, on land, in water, and on ice. There are also professions such as circus critics, directors, and producers. Moreover, there are amateur circus or magic performance groups within factories or corporations that engage in circus acts as a sociocultural activity.

South Korea: Circus, the lost traveling performance

In South Korea, the circus was called “circus,” “performing arts,” or “equestrian feats.” It was a kind of traveling performance that presented magic tricks and animals. When circuses were at the peak of their popularity, circus groups gave not only traditional performances but also sang, told stories, and presented comedic gags. Among various programs, the major entertainment they offered was their emulation of Western-style circus acts. Their initial popularity declined as time went by and mass media began to emerge. The public interest moved from circuses to dramas as radio shows and television became widespread. The government began preserving traditional culture after the 1960s, but the circus was not recognized as a cultural asset that should be protected by the law. Without the government’s protection and support, the circus quickly lost its popularity and became obsolete as other forms of popular culture flourished.

North Korea: *Kyo-ye*, the representative performing art

On the other hand, North Korea claims that *Kyo-ye* stemmed from the long history of its people. Unlike the circus which is a performing art introduced from the West, *Kyo-ye* is acknowledged as a true art form that has originated from its unique traditional art. As it was called “*Kyo-ye*” instead of “circus,” it became a traditional art that the people enjoyed, and was absorbed into North Korea’s cultural policy that states that *Kyo-ye* is a modern inheritor of folk art.

Kyo-ye is largely divided into three categories. The first is physical *Kyo-ye*, which requires physical strength. The second is magic shows which are different from the Western versions that typically show people being stabbed in the head and cut with saws. According to North Koreans, Western magic shows cater to the tastes of the upper class to please them, whereas North Korean magic shows are based on science and use craftsmanship and apparatuses to stimulate the imagination of spectators. The last category is *entr’acte*, which are short acts usually given while stage settings are being changed. The acts call the audience onto the stage and are comedic.

Kyo-ye could be acknowledged as an art and develop in North Korea on account of it being a

physical activity. *Kyo-ye* is an art that requires performers to use their bodies. *Kyo-ye* is an art where stamina and physical training are essential while also closely related to art to create an artful physical activity that encompasses various artistic components such as form, rhythm, and nimbleness. Through physical activity, *Kyo-ye* reflects the experiences, emotions, and tendencies of people to fulfill its role as social culture. In other words, it teaches people to train their bodies and become interested in becoming healthier by improving their physical strength.

In North Korea where *Kyo-ye* is acknowledged as a traditional art form, there are circus acts specially called “national *Kyo-ye* or technical art” that use the traditional games of the Korean people. There are acts where performers stand, spin, or shoot arrows from atop a running horse. North Korea claims these acts originate from the traditional games of the ancient Goguryeo Kingdom (B.C. 37 – A.D. 668) called “*Masangjae*,” or equestrian acrobatics. There are also acts that use *neolttwigi*, which is a Korean jumping game, or *geunettwigi*, which is a Korean swing. Performers wear traditional outfits during folk art performances to emphasize that the games are traditional. North Korea propagates that it is thanks to the Great Leader that the traditional games could be developed into and performed as circus acts. According to North Korea, it is because of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jung Il that the traditional games, which are a part of national culture that almost disappeared during the Japanese colonial rule, could be proudly developed into its culture.

Kyo-ye is also important in North Korea because it is used for foreign exchange and to improve North Korea’s national prestige. North Korea has always actively pursued foreign exchange through culture since the beginning of its regime. *Kyo-ye* is an important means of diplomatic exchange with not only socialist states but also nonaligned nations. *Kyo-ye* is a nonverbal performance that only uses the body. Unlike music, opera, and other art forms used in North Korea, *Kyo-ye* has fewer elements that can be considered ideological, making it suitable to be used to interact with various countries, including socialist states. In fact, in June 2000, shortly before the first inter-Korean summit, North Korea’s Pyongyang Circus Troupe performed in Seoul, and North Korean circus performances were included in the Mount Geumgang tourism program.

Kyo-ye plays a big role in enhancing North Korea’s status in the international community. There are few competitors when it comes to circuses. North Korea’s *Kyo-ye* is able to maintain its world-class position not only because North Korea systematically trains performers and has facilities where performances can be held but also because there are not many countries that support circuses on a national level. The *Rodong Shinmun* and other North Korean media outlets never fail to report when North Korean performers are successful in circus championships. ■

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