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CULTURAL HERITAGE

- Jinju Sword Dance

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Jinju Sword Dance

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1. Dance Loved by the People of Jinju

Jinju Geommu (Jinju Sword Dance) is the most representative dance among Korea's sword dances performed at the Gyobang, a government-supported institution that was in charge of the singing and dancing of gisaeng (female professional entertainers) during the Joseon dynasty. Although various traditional dances have been transmitted in Jinju, the people of Jinju consider Jinju Geommu as the most valuable. When Jinju's people learn to dance, Jinju Geommu is usually the first dance to be learned. It is also the most performed dance at various festivals and events held in Jinju.

It was the first dance that Jinju City introduced to its citizens when they began promoting Jinju folk dances as part of the grassroots cultural project for the joining of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) in 2017. Although there were difficulties in disseminating Jinju Geommu due to Covid-19 this year, the dance has still been actively promoted by the city. As a result, over 2,000 citizens of Jinju have now learned to dance Jinju Geommu.



Jinju Geommu (photo courtesy of the Jinju Sword Dance Preservation Society)



2. Historical and Cultural Backgrounds

Historically, the origin of sword dance is as old as that of Korean history. The dance can be traced back to the hunting, ritual or combat dances of ancient Korea. This dance is one of Korea's most representative traditional dances that have continued from the periods dating back to the Three Kingdoms, and throughout the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties.

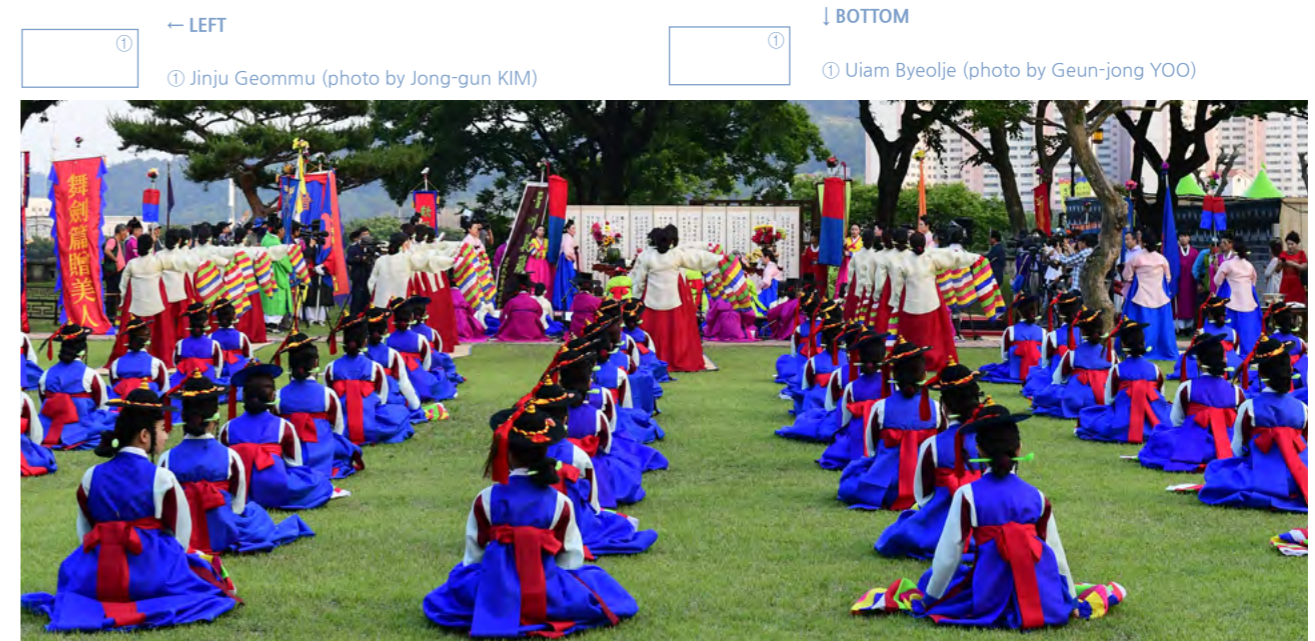
Gyobang sword dance was established as one of the royal court dances in the late Joseon dynasty. It was artistically refined, becoming an essential performance at royal banquets. Whenever a large banquet was held inside the court, gisaeng of the Gyobangcheong (an institution that used to train the signing and dancing for gisaeng) from each local government office were sent to practice and perform together at the banquet. Sword dances were also performed at provincial government offices and private events throughout the country, leading to the development of unique styles and characteristics of the dance in different regions in Korea. As can be seen from the record that the gisaeng of Jinju had excellent skills in sword dance, the dance has been actively performed in Jinju since ancient times, and therefore, it was much more artistic than sword dances of other regions.

The illustrations of sword dance can be found in the Gyobang gayo 教坊歌謠, which accurately describes Jinju Geommu. According to the book, four gisaeng performers dance with swords in their hand and various dance movements are depicted: bowing, raising hands up and down, dancing in pairs while facing each other, dancing while swinging the swords, rotating while holding the swords under the arm, and forming a circle while swinging the swords. The sword was used with its neck not bent. These movements are still performed today, although there are now eight dancers who normally perform in Jinju Geommu.

3. Connection to Uiam Byeolje

Jinjuseong Fortress was a fierce battleground during the Japanese Invasion of Korea (Imjin War), which took place between 1592 and 1598. After the Jinjuseong Fortress finally fell, the Japanese army held a celebratory banquet at Chokseongnu Pavilion inside the fortress. During this banquet, Nongae, a gisaeng of Jinju, lured the Japanese general to throw herself into the Namgang River with him, thus killing herself and the general. Afterwards, Nongae was honored by the people in Jinju area, and is still remembered today as a symbolic figure of Jinju. The traditional art festival held every spring in Jinju is called the "Jinju Nongae Festival." Jeong Hyeon-seok, who was appointed as magistrate in Jinju, rebuilt the Uigisa shrine to commemorate Nongae and held Uiam Byeolje 義菴別祭, a ritual to pay respect to her. Jinju Geommu was performed as a dance dedicated to Nongae at the ritual. Since then, the Uiam Byeolje had been held every year, but its tradition was suspended during the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula between 1910 and 1945.

In the 1990s, Jeong Hyeon-seok's Gyobang gayo, which details the performances by gisaeng of Jinju and the songs and dances of Uiam Byeolje, was discovered. Based on this record, the Jinju Folk Art Preservation Society restored Uiam Byeolje in 1992, the year of which marked the 400th anniversary of the Imjin War. Uiam Byeolje is led by a female officiant and the entire procedure is conducted by women. Women perform Jinju Geommu at this annual ritual, honoring the virtue and loyalty of Nongae.



← LEFT

①

① Jinju Geommu (photo by Jong-gun KIM)

↓ BOTTOM

①

① Uiam Byeolje (photo by Geun-jong YOO)

4. Transmission and Creative Industry

The person who played a major role in transmitting and preserving sword dance in Jinju was Choe Sun-i (Wanja, 1884-1969), a gisaeng of the Gyobangcheong under Jinju magistrate's office. She learned to sing and dance from the age of eight, received training in court dance at the government agency Jangagwon 掌樂院 at the age of 13. She was also known for dancing in front of Emperor Gojong in 1906. She returned home with the Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 and laid the foundation for today's Jinju folk arts by educating her disciples at the Jinju Gwonbeon, an institution set up for the training of gisaeng and other entertainers. The restoration of Uiam Byeolje depended strongly on her oral statements.

Jinju Geommu was designated as Korea's National Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 12 in 1967. According to the report on the intangible cultural properties at the time, "Jinju Geommu has the longest history and tradition in the history of dance and is also highly appreciated from an artistic viewpoint." This is because Choe Sun-i had preserved perfectly the original form of sword dance handed down from the royal court, and her disciples Yi Yun-rye, Kim Ja-jin and Kim Su-ak continued to perform for over 50 years after learning the sword dance under Choe Sun-i. And then Seong Gye-ok, Kim Tae-yeon and Yu Yeong-hui was designated as holders of intangible cultural heritage.



Jinju Sword Dance Preservation Society (Yu Yeong-hui, President) that transmits Jinju Geommu has held annual performances, and continues to train students as a way to support the transmission and the reproduction of the dance suitable for the modern era. For example, regular performances are held at Jinjuseong Fortress for citizens and tourists every Saturday. The society's efforts were particularly praised at this year's Jinju Nongae Festival, where it showcased an experimental performance of the sword dance with 200 dancers. Every Fall, the Society also provides courses and events on sword dance for the general public and holds a presentation of the Jinju Geommu Club. In 2019, as part of the UNESCO Creative City project to revitalize the performing arts industry, a new fusion artwork was produced by combining Jinju Geommu and media arts.

