

“Masking” and “Unmasking” Korean Adoptees—On Rick Shiomi’s *Mask Dance*

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Abstract

Rick Shiomi’s *Mask Dance* marked the beginning of Theater Mu, an Asian-American theater company established in Minneapolis in 1992. Shiomi had been searching for his identity as a dramatist of Asian descent, and as such much valued explorations of Asian-American issues in Minneapolis, a city with a relatively small Asian-American population. *Mask Dance* commemorates the birth of Theater Mu.

Reportedly, Minnesota has more than 1,000 Korean adoptees, and Shiomi portrays their complicated feelings for their white adoptive parents and their own identity crises, employing the form of a traditional Korean mask dance, “*Pongsan Talch’um*.” These Korean mask plays are colored with down-to-earth aspects, which often satirize the privileged class. Likewise, Shiomi’s mask drama, despite its serious topic, contains many satirical features. This paper, consequently, aims to explore how Shiomi portrays the problems of the Korean adoptees by employing this particular comedic style.

The use of masks is also quite pioneering in *Mask Dance*;

the play presents Spirit, wearing a mask, as its narrator. Spirit's role is innovative in the sense that it not only "masks" the consciousness of the Korean children, but also "unmasks" their buried feelings. While Shiomi's use of masks is set apart from their use in Greek theater, it follows the same fundamental nature. That is, it follows Peter Hall's extended definition of a mask, which posits that Greek theater, itself, is a "mask" in the way in which it keeps "all fundamental or violent action off stage." By outwardly cloaking and distancing the main characters' agony through the use of masks, Shiomi maintains an objective viewpoint and brings substantiality to this Asian-American performance. This play, consequently, can be marked as a revolutionary step in American theater as it established common ground among Asian-American issues, Korean traditional mask drama, and the classical use of masks on stage.

Key Words: Korean mask drama, Korean adoptees, masks on stage, Theater Mu, Asian-American Theater

I. Introduction

Rick Shiomi's *Mask Dance* (2001) marked the beginning of Theater Mu,¹ an Asian-American theater company and performing group established in Minneapolis in 1992. This work deals with the adoption of Korean children in the state of Minnesota. Shiomi portrays Korean adoptees' complicated feelings toward their white adoptive parents and their own identity crises, employing the form of a traditional Korean mask dance, "*Pongsan T'alch'um*." This traditional Korean mask dance is colored by its flamboyant costume, bold dancing style and dynamic actions. This style originally aimed to satirize corrupt privileged classes, particularly Korean monks and aristocrats, and therefore, the traditional mask drama can be defined as essentially comedy with a down-to-earth theatricality.

Shiomi exploits the comedic and satirical stylings of mask drama to mirror the problematical psychological state of Korean adoptees. It is quite significant that Shiomi creates this imaginative performing art in Minneapolis, a state which has a relatively small population of Asian-Americans, and yet is home to a great number of Korean adoptees. As it happens, Korean adoptees "tend to be forgotten in Korean immigrant stories" (Lo, 2006: 175), and are not quite clearly distinguished from Korean Americans who immigrated to the U.S. by their own choice, which makes their assimilation to the mainstream American culture all the more difficult and sometimes impossible. However, they need to be recognized as immigrants possessing backgrounds very different from those of other Korean Americans: In the first place, the adoptees' immigration to the U.S. is not undertaken of their own choice. Furthermore, their white adoptive parents often attempt to deny their children's cultural heritage and continuously underlining the importance of their assimilation to the mainstream

¹ For the details of Theater Mu's activities, please refer to About us (n.d.).

American culture (Lo, 2006: 173). Shiomi, accordingly, helps Korean adoptees regain their cultural heritage through the use of the traditional Korean mask dance. In this sense, this mask drama can be marked both as a cultural and social activity, as well as an artistic work.

This paper aims to analyze *Mask Dance's* (Shiomi, 2001) theatricality and dramatic strategy, which experimentally connect traditional Korean mask dance and the racial and social problems, especially those of Korean adoptees, in American society. It focuses on the play's use of masks by comparing it with that of a classical Western mask play, Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (premiered in 1926),² with the aim of articulating the relation between masks and the Korean-adoptee characters in the play.

II. Theater Mu and Rick Shiomi

Rick Shiomi, a third-generation Japanese-Canadian playwright, established Theater Mu along with Dong-il Lee, Martha Johnson, Dianne Espaldon, and Andrew Kim. Theater Mu's uniqueness as an Asian-American theatrical group originates from the backgrounds of these five artists. Shiomi has served as Mu's artistic director while Dong-il Lee, a doctoral student from Korea who studies Korean mask drama, has chiefly directed its performances. Martha Johnson is a scholar on Asian (mostly traditional Japanese) theater, and Diane Espaldon is a Korean adoptee with a marketing degree; Andrew Kim is a Korean-American scholar on Asian-American drama. The diverse backgrounds of these artists and co-founders have helped Theater Mu produce culturally diverse performances. Indeed, the list of Mu's performances includes traditional Asian theater arts such as Taiko drums, as well as major Asian-American dramatic pieces: David Henry Hwang's

² See O'Neill (1988: 469-535).

FOB (premiered in 1980)³ and Philip Kan Gotanda’s *Yankee Dawg, You Die* (premiered in 1986).⁴

One prominent feature of Theater Mu among Asian-American theater companies, as Esther Kim Lee indicates, has been “the original shows created by the local artists with their own formula of intercultural theatre” (2006: 214). *Mask Dance* (Shiomi, 2001), for instance, is based on the experiences of Korean adoptees participating in workshops conducted by Dong-il Lee, who attempted to teach them about “traditional Korean cultural practices” (Lee, 2006: 213). In the beginning of the 1990s, when Theater Mu was established, Asian-American plays had already received considerable national recognition. In the 1970s and earlier 1980s, Asian-American plays were relatively unknown despite the establishment and artistic achievements of the East West Players (Los Angeles, established in 1967), Asian-American Theater Company (San Francisco, established in 1973), Northwest Asian-American Theatre (initially called Theatrical Ensemble of Asians, Seattle, established in 1974), and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre (New York, established in 1977). According to Roberta Uno, the productions of Asian-American drama came to prominence in regional and commercial theaters by the late 1980s (1993: 8). The Broadway production of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* winner of a Tony Award for Best Play in 1988 made mainstream American theatrical audiences recognize the presence of Asian-American theatre.

Esther Kim Lee categorized Shiomi, along with such playwrights as David Henry Hwang, Philip Kan Gotanda and Velina Hasu Houston, as part of a “second wave” (the second-generation) of Asian-American theatrical artists who were in their twenties and thirties during the 1980s, and had received “professional training” as playwrights (2006: 126). However, in contrast to the majority of the artists, the second wave artists do

³ See Hwang (1990).

⁴ See Gotanda (1991).

not limit their creative sources to Asian-American experiences, nor do they attempt to contrast themselves with mainstream American theatrical artists. Asian-American theatrical artists in the 1990s, or the second wave artists, attempted to broaden the concept of Asian-American theater, connecting it with international and transnational issues and theatrical cultures. As Lee points out, Asian-American theatrical companies in the 1990s took the “Asian Diaspora” as “their main agenda” (211). “Asian Diaspora” bore a new meaning in the 1990s: Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa conceptualize the Asian Diaspora as existing in “a relationship” which holds in tension the origins and present locations of Asian-American experiences (2001: 6).

Shiomi certainly serves the Asian-American theater of today as one of these second wave theater artists. Consistent with Lee’s definition, Shiomi started his creative career as a short-story writer, and began writing plays when Philip Kan Gotanda advised him to adopt one of Shiomi’s short stories into a full-length play. His career as a dramatist then flourished with the commercial success of *Yellow Fever* (premiered in 1982),⁵ which was performed by the East West Players in Los Angeles and the Pan Asian Repertory Company in New York. Another masterpiece, *Rosie’s Café* (premiered in 1985),⁶ written as the prequel to *Yellow Fever*, deals more explicitly with the issues of Japanese-Canadians’ internment experience. Even though this play has been critically acclaimed, the public favoured *Yellow Fever*, which presents a Colombo-like Japanese-Canadian detective with an ironical twist. This play also embraces the serious issues of the internment experiences, but the play’s commercial success is probably due to its humorous portrait of the Colombo-like detective. These plays basically follow the convention of realism on American theater, while *Mask Dance* (Shiomi, 2001), employing the techniques of the traditional Korean mask drama, has cultivated an experimental field within Shiomi’s

⁵ See Shiomi (1984).

⁶ See Shiomi (1986).

dramatic career.

As Shiomi moved the setting of his creative activity from Toronto to Minneapolis, he began to focus on the problems and psychological states of Korean adoptees in Minneapolis, after having continuously dealt with Japanese-Canadian and Japanese-American historical issues as his chief subject matters. Moreover, the Asian-American audience in Minneapolis obviously differs from that in more established Asian-American locations, such as New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. For one, in Minnesota, two-thirds of the population was drawn from not entirely voluntary immigrants, being either former refugees or Korean adoptees, at the time of Shiomi's arrival in 1992 (Zia, 2000: 264). When he founded Theater Mu, Shiomi reportedly was astounded to learn that there were a great number of Korean adoptees among its actors, staff members, and students of its workshops, and this formed the basis of *Mask Dance* (2001). This play also served to commemorate the foundation of Theater Mu, experimentally and effectively mingling theater, dance and musical performances in one collective art piece. In that sense, *Mask Dance* precisely corresponds to Theater Mu's artistic purpose to apply traditional Asian performing arts to modern American theater.

III. *Mask Dance* and Pongsan T'alch'um

Mask Dance, a “mask” play with two acts and fourteen scenes, is set in a small town in Minnesota. The play's protagonists are three Korean adoptees Karen, Lisa, Carl, their foster parents, and Carl's girlfriend, P. K. As the three children were close growing up in the same orphanage in Korea, they treat each other as if they were blood relations, but find themselves unable to cultivate such strong family bonds with their foster parents in the States. The opening scene shows that Lisa is agitated because Karen will soon leave her hometown for college. Carl, who hardly gets along with his adoptive parents, lives apart from his family, even though he

does not have a steady job to support himself. He seems to have already given up cultivating a warm family relationship with his parents, though the play does not clarify why this is. Yet his meeting with another Korean adoptee and performer, P. K., gradually helps him open up to his parents and accept his identity as a Korean-American. Karen, recognizing Lisa's agony, asks her mother to allow the children to live together in the city. Instead, the foster parents decide to move to the city with their children, and at the end of the play, the adoptees attempt to trace their own histories in Korea. Thus, Mask Dance and Spirit, who function as characters, stage assistants, and commentators, help them to accept their identity as Korean-Americans.

Mask Dance is based on the interviews conducted by Shiomi with Korean adoptees participating in Theater Mu's workshops. The playwright, however, does not only adopt these interviews to the characters' lines but also weaves them into a highly provocative drama with the visual effects and satirical spirit often seen in the Korean mask drama, Pongsan Talch'um. Shiomi's primary aim lies in establishing a political-cultural movement of a hybrid nature that reflects Asian-Americans' own story (as cited in Zia, 2000: 265). Minneapolis was probably an ideal place for locating this "political-cultural" movement because, as Marlina Gonzalez, the executive director of Asian-American Renaissance in Minneapolis, points out, Asian-Americans in Minnesota "were starving for" ways to "see" and "express" their own history and culture (as cited in Zia, 2000: 264). More to the point, Minneapolis is a place that can give Korean adoptees, whose voices have been silenced for a long time, a chance to vocalize their own histories and identities.

The ritualistic nature of Pongsan Talch'um gives *Mask Dance* (Shiomi, 2001) a mystical quality which might possibly induce spiritual growth in the adoptees. Korean mask drama originated for the purpose of worshiping King Dongmyeong the founder of the monarchy of Goguryeo (37 B.C. - 668 A.D.), the northernmost of the three Kingdoms of Korea and his mother, Yuhwa. People enshrined the king and his mother, carving their figures out of

wood and praying for successful harvests. Such carvings gradually transformed into wooden masks, which then took on a functional role as elements of mask dances performed at the harvest festivals (Den, 2004: 13-14). These masks, at that time, symbolized deities or functioned as substitutes for deities, and were supposed to repel all sorts of disasters from the Earth (Kim, 1987: 110). Korean mask drama originally developed from such ancient rituals, but gradually its ritualistic aspect faded away, and further emphasis was given to expanding its dramatic quality. As Dennis Kennedy points out, villagers traditionally housed the masks in the shrines nearby regarding them as protective gods (2003: 665). Originally, these masks were expressive of farmers' strategies to avoid various natural disasters through the invocation of magical and supernatural powers. But, over time, the mask drama became an implement to help find mundane solutions to various problems rather than depending on magic. This transformation recast the ritualistic masks into a more humane and artistic dimension (Den, 2004: 11). Yet Shiomi's play retains both the ritualistic and supernatural aspects of the masks in the characters Mask Dancer and Spirit.

Korean masks deal with the human world, and reveal its earthy, somewhat coarse qualities, on stage. Therefore, these mask plays, while having supernatural elements, are usually set in the mundane world of the everyday (Kim, 1987: 56). Furthermore, the Pongsan T'alch'um style, on which *Mask Dance* is based, often aims to satirize and ridicule privileged people, particularly monks and yangban (a well-educated class of male intellectuals who belonged to the ruling elite in Korea during the republican period of Korean history) (Kim, 1987: 18). By targeting and ridiculing these elites, who are supposed to embody every moral virtue of the human world, the Korean mask dance paradoxically exposes worldly corruption.

The essence of Korean mask drama, however, is not necessarily aimed at criticism of a degraded society. As Kim indicates, the “irony” of Korean mask drama lies in its refusal to

emphasize the misery and sorrow of human corruption (1987: 5) while satirizing the corrupted state of society. This detachment, or objectivity, can also be seen in its comedic spirit. Thus, Kim reveals that the monks and yangbans, who appear in these Korean mask dramas, while trying to correct the vices and corruptions of the human world make themselves targets of ridicule and openly abandon their sacred, privileged status (1987: 5). Korean mask drama does not necessarily present the mysterious profundity of, for example, Japanese *Noh* theater. Instead, it often distracts, or detracts itself from the static unity derived from the sophisticated beauty of art (Aizawa, 2002: 136).

Korean mask drama, or Pongsan T'alch'um, as adopted in *Mask Dance* is "fast, bold, and free in spirit, emphasizing expression and energy over tight choreography" (Shiomi, 2001: 351). While Shiomi fully exercises the "freedom" of this dramatic convention, he brings his own, original insights to it. For instance, this play presents Spirit, who functions partly as the narrator and guide, along with Mask Dancer. Spirit's role is quite pioneering in the sense that it often speaks on behalf of the other characters. In a way, this character does not only "mask" the character's will and consciousness but also "unmasks" them by speaking for the characters who hesitate to reveal their feelings. That is to say, Shiomi productively employs the essence of Korean mask drama, which aims to relieve the repressed anger of the under class through witty satire and meticulous deformation.

IV. Rick Shiomi's New Approach to the Use of Masks

This chapter aims at clarifying how Shiomi's use of masks in his play is innovative within the history of American theater, and compares it with Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* (1988: 469-535), a classic representative of American mask drama that deals with masks as though they were a part of the characters, just

as Shiomi personifies masks on the stage. However, O’Neill employs masks to stage the mysterious “force behind” the characters. In brief, O’Neill’s masks diminish individual feelings to a minimum, and largely embody the fundamental state of human self-division. O’Neill regards the use of masks as “a necessary, dramatically revealing new convention” of American theater and “a symbol of inner reality upon all intelligent people of today” (1965: 503). The fact that this mask drama achieved an eight-month long run on Broadway, speaks to the audience’s appreciation of this play as a new, experimental form of artistic achievement at that time. The play was produced by Experimental Theatre Inc. of Greenwich Village, managed by O’Neill, Kenneth MacGowan, and the director Robert Edmond Jones, and intended to “fight the dominant American mode of psychological realism” (Wiles, 2007: 84).

What makes O’Neill’s mask drama problematical is that he does not distinguish between the consciousness of the masked and unmasked characters. As John Howard Lawson points out, O’Neill’s intention primarily lies in showing the audience “what is mystically within and behind” his characters. When the characters take off their masks, the audience can see their concealed “conscious desires,” but nothing else (1960: 133). In this play, unlike *Mask Dance* (Shiomi, 2001), the masks (and the unmasked characters) do not really function as characters’ alter egos, but each character/actor’s continuous act of wearing, or taking off, the mask stages the universal condition of every person possessing, or being possessed by, dual personalities. But Shiomi’s masks, worn by characters other than the adoptees, are presented as extensions of the mind of each.

The main character of *The Great God Brown* (O’Neill, 1988: 469-535), Dion Anthony, wears a “defiant and mocking” mask marked by a “forced and bitter” sneer. His mask seems more worldly and vulgar than his own “selfless and ascetic” face, which shows a “resolute withdrawal from life” (484). Margaret, his wife, locates herself in a merciless world and depends on “the mask of the pretty young matron” with “a naively innocent and bravely

hopeful attitude toward things” (488-489), and thus attempts to diminish her inner struggle. Dion’s lover, Cybel, the symbol of the “Earth Mother,” hides her sacredness and generosity behind the mask of “the hardened prostitute” (493). Accordingly, the characters build relationships with the others’ masks, not with their real selves. So thoroughly do the other characters identify with the mask, that Dion’s death is acknowledged while they face his mask, not his body. Margaret kisses his mask, screaming: “My lover! My husband! My boy!” (532) revealing that her relationship was not with her husband, but his “mask.” The play’s ending indicates that this orientation will not be altered, even by his death. O’Neill’s method of employing masks, consequently, suggests “the breakdown of individuation,” destroying one character and creating another (Wiles, 2007: 86). In O’Neill’s mask drama, the audience sees the playwright exercise dramatic license to control his characters.

Compared with O’Neill’s use of masks, Shiomi’s dramatic use of masks aims to more spectacularly uncover the characters’ cloaked consciousness. In short, the audience is persuaded to see both the masked and unmasked characters of *Mask Dancer, Spirit*, and the three Korean adoptees. A masked character and Korean adoptee, even if presented separately, together embody the consciousness of a single character. Furthermore, the playwright, through the use of masks, individualizes each adoptee’s inner struggle. That is, while O’Neill’s masks attempt to obscure characters’ individuality, Shiomi’s masks crystallize the individuality of each character and develops it into a more convincing dramatic persona.

Shiomi’s *Mask Dance* (2001) also connotes elements of social criticism, derived from Korean mask drama. From the Korean adoptees’ viewpoint, the white adopters, Mother and Father, belong to a privileged class. The children’s inferiority complex originates from their difficulties assimilating into mainstream American culture, which causes a rift between the parents and the adoptees, and, consequently, leaves them unable to cultivate healthy family relationships. In the end, however, the parents are able to show their children that they have adopted them out of

affection, not to cultivate feelings of self-satisfaction. To reach a state of mutual understanding, the three adoptees decide to travel to their native country, and the parents make up their mind to move to the city with their children. It is noteworthy that the playwright includes the adoptees’ episode of visiting Korea, as many Korean adoptees in the United States actually have been back to their home country to trace their background.⁷ If transnational/racial adoptees cannot afford to trace their roots, theaters might provide another means for them to identify with their roots. The social benefits of having such roots seem obvious, as are the harms associated with lacking the same; thus, Kim Diehl points out, if they cannot find their “ancestral roots,” transnational/racial adoptees have no choice but to “look to other marginalized and displaced people for guidance and wisdom” (2006: 31).

Shiomi thus deals with the problematic issue of transnational/racial adoption by employing Korean theatrical devices on his American stage. Moreover, the fusion of Western and Korean dramatic styles can be closely connected to the theme of the union between American parents and Korean children. By mingling traditional Asian and Western dramatic elements in both style and theme, Shiomi conceives of an imaginative theatricality and an artistic occasion to give marginalized adoptees a means to voice their histories.

V. Korean Adoptees and the Roles of Masks in *Mask Dance*

Mask Dance deals with the problems of Korean adoptees in the U.S.—a group that increased from 1950s through the 1980s. The U.S. received approximately 15,000 adoptees between 1953 and 1962, and 32,000 adoptees between 1963 and 1976, with 65 percent coming from Asian countries, and Koreans making up the

⁷ For the detailed information of transracial adoptees returning Korea to find their roots, see Nafzger (2006: 242-247); Objective/vision (n.d.).

largest portion of those adoptees. Between 1984 and 1987 alone, 60 percent of the 38,000 adoptees from foreign countries came from Korea (Simon, Altstein, & Melli, 1994: 9). Although the number of international adoptions has been dropping since the 1980s, approximately 2,000 Korean children are still involved each year (Hübinette, 2006: 147). The situation of the transnational/racial adoptees undeniably presents challenging predicaments. White adopters whose children come from Asian countries are aware that there are still a great number of American-born orphans who have not been placed with adoptive parents, but adoption within the U.S. is a comparatively longer, more expensive and difficult, process, and overseas adoption carries the additional satisfaction of being able to provide foreign-born children with an affluent life unattainable in their birth countries. Additionally, adoptions between Americans and foreign-born orphans also fulfill the parent's desire to raise children from their very early childhood (Simon et al., 1997: 11). In this process, the adoptive parents, even if unintentionally, tend to assimilate their adoptees into mainstream American culture and dissimilate their own heritage.

Accordingly, *Mask Dance* seems to present an emotional chasm between the adoptees and their parents. In Act II, Scene 4, the parents quarrel over their parental attitudes toward their adopted children. In that scene, the father reveals his inner turmoil:

I don't know all about this Korean stuff . . . and what's good for them . . . I just tried to give them a roof over their heads and somebody to love them . . . and maybe I didn't even do a decent job of that (Shiomi, 2001: 380)

He hesitates to face his children's struggles directly and resists the efforts of his wife to seek out the cause of the children's suffering. The adopters strongly wish to "save" the orphans from their predicament, but the father expresses a sense of failure in his efforts to be an ideal parent. The play, however, sarcastically

exposes how the parents’ seemingly sympathetic attitude can sometimes seem mendacious and self-centered. The parents are named simply “Mother” and “Father,” and the avoidance of giving them personal names is indicative of Shiomi’s intention to present the prevalent situation of transnational/racial adoptions in the United States.

Karen and Lisa maintain a “family” relationship, at least on the surface, yet they never fully disclose their feelings towards their parents. The dialogue between Karen and Carl thus reveals their complex feelings:

CARL: Getting dumped here wasn’t my choice.

KAREN: This is better than any orphanage.

CARL: Is that what’s important to you? All this fake happiness . . . You wanna be a Barbie doll? Go ahead . . . but don’t suck me into that game, okay?

KAREN: Maybe we’re lucky ones . . . You know what it’d be like for us, back in Korea? (Shiomi, 2001: 356)

While Karen shows a strong sense of obligation toward their parents, Carl is totally dismissive of the family relationship as a less than genuine. His refusal to accept Mother and Father as part of his family appears unreasonable, and even self-centered, given the efforts of all the other family members. But his inner suffering is revealed through the Korean mask and he develops into a more convincing character over the course of the play.

Significantly, Mask Dancer and Spirit, as the play’s narrators and commentators, often control the adoptees’ actions and speeches. The stage direction introduces Mask Dancer as an “Asian Movement Character wearing Chwibari mask” (Shiomi, 2001: 351), and Spirit as an “Asian Spiritual character with half-white face” (351). This “Chwibari mask” stands for a debauched monk with grotesquely disfigured features, which might symbolize Carl’s contingent way of life. On the other hand, Spirit’s half-white mask represents a child with “two fathers,” that is, a child whose birth conceals some dark secrets (Kim, 2000: 72). Spirit thus stands for

the three Korean adoptees with natural and adoptive parents. Mask Dancer and Spirit, when they first enter, occupy the stage with “*a short duet that is playful yet reflects the darker emotional tones of the next scene*” (Shiomi, 2001: 352). Their dance, a comical and lighthearted “duet” mingled with gloomy feelings, is a prelude to the main characters’ inner struggle and self-division. This “duet,” conceived as Shiomi’s original device, embellishes the opening of this unique fusion of Asian and Western theater.

As discussed earlier, Lisa, Karen, and Carl were unable to cultivate a genuine family relationship with their adopters. Lisa and Karen show a feeling of filial obligation toward Mother and Father in response to their “kindness” to provide “a roof over their heads and somebody to love them” (Shiomi, 2001: 380). Notably, it is Mask Dancer and Spirit who lead the children to independence and thus give them a chance to reconcile with their parents. The fusion of Korean and Western theaters is thus representative of the main characters’ dual Korean and American backgrounds. The play also renders the adoptees’ journey to trace their roots through their encounters with the Korean masks.

Richard Schechner defines Masks as “second beings” who “interact with the human actors.” The masks possess “a life force” which can transform “those who play with and through them” (2002: 171). This definition of masks as performing objects can be accurately applied to Mask Dancer and Spirit. These performers, co-starring and coexisting with the adoptees, are constantly defining and reforming each other’s roles. In this way, they productively urge the children to pursue their own spiritual growth, and, in this way, form their identities. Mask Dancer and Spirit literally watch over the children as stagehands, and as commentators on their lines and actions, speaking for the adoptees when they hesitate to convey their feelings, and sometimes function as their alter egos. By playing these various roles, Mask Dancer and Spirit spectacularly stage the adoptees’ transformation.

P. K., a Korean-American performer, plays another significant role in inducing Carl’s spiritual development. She seemingly

accepts, calmly, her lot as a Korean adoptee. She even parodies her own problematical background in her performance titled, “Life behind the Mask.” Interestingly, she does not wear the mask all the time but often *plays* with it, treating it as if her partner on stage. Her first entrance defines the character of this play as a fusion of Asian and Western theater, which reflects her own status as a Korean-American adoptee suffering from an identity crisis:

A spotlight comes up on the riser where P. K. enters wearing a Pongsan mask and hansam. She makes a few dance moves and stops, taking off her mask and hansam. She turns to the audience, still holding the mask. She plays with the mask during the first part of the monologue. (Shiomi, 2001: 358)

P. K.’s performance indicates that she sees the mask as her alter ego. She defines the “hansam,” the costume of Korean mask drama, and the mask itself as the “extensions of our bodies . . . that connect us to nature” (Shiomi, 2001: 372). She also insists that, by wearing them, Carl can accept his own identity as a Korean-American adoptee and purify himself by tracing his roots. In short, P. K.’s “masked” performance is marked as both entertainment and therapy; indeed, she declares it is “like getting paid for going to therapy” (369); she “masks” her inner self in an appearance of self-parody, and simultaneously, by transforms her emotions during her “masked” performance by paradoxically “unmasking” her inner self. Shiomi thus crystallizes these adoptees’ identity crisis, adopting the theatrical devices of Korean mask drama. The masks play significant roles in allowing the characters to realize this aim because they, based on the caricatured Korean masks, are closer to the characters’ “human” suffering and hence effectively function as their aides.

Of the adoptees, Carl undergoes the most radical transformation. His rejection of the parents triggers discordances throughout the family, but he also rejects his own Korean heritage, and thus casts himself adrift. His relationship with P. K.,

nevertheless, gradually leads him to accept his ethnic background. Significantly, his spiritual development owes much to the masks in this play. In other words, the masks help Carl open up to his girlfriend, and eventually, his parents. In Act II, Scene 1, Carl stares at P. K. dancing with Mask Dancer and Spirit. At their first meeting, he dismisses her performance as “masochistic” when she explains “you just opened your veins, and showed them your blood” (Shiomi, 2001: 370). In the same scene, however, he begins to feel attached to the mask, finding “a family resemblance” between P. K. and her mask (371). Additionally, at the end of this scene, Spirit urges Carl to wear the mask of Chwibari, and he finally begins to dance with the mask:

SPIRIT takes the mask and puts it on Carl while MASK DANCER dances in front of Carl, who is facing upstage. The MASK DANCER and SPIRIT lead Carl through a series of dance moves. Carl goes from being hesitant to being confident but in the end he falters and falls to his knees. The MASK DANCER and SPIRIT exit. Carl takes off the mask and looks dazed and yet exhilarated. (Shiomi, 2001: 374)

Immediately after this incident, Carl suddenly feels closer to Lisa, although she supposedly remains at a distance from him. He calls her name; “Lisa? . . . Lisa!” (Shiomi, 2001: 374), but the stagehands try to block his view of Lisa, facing downstage. Carl pushes them away to embrace her, but the stagehands’ movements suggest that this is all a hallucination. Yet Lisa suffers from a profound feeling of isolation because of Karen’s departure, and in desperation, she tries to reach Carl on the phone, but, unable to speak to him, she finally attempts to commit suicide.

In this scene, Lisa’s crisis is dramatized by the movement of the Chwibari mask. Lisa, unlike Karen and Carl, cannot easily reveal her emotions to her foster parents. Karen is able to confide her worries to her foster mother more straightforwardly than Lisa, while Carl can openly show his emotions in defiance of his foster

father. But Lisa, being more reserved than her sister and brother, is unable to find any means to openly express her feelings. Her only emotional support has been Karen, but now her elder sister is leaving for college. As a result, feeling completely alone, Lisa's inner turmoil leads her to attempt suicide. This incident, however, helps Karl open up to his parents, and thus unites all the members of the family. This results in saving Lisa from her emotional crisis. In fact, the Chwibari mask, being a part of his Korean cultural heritage, reminds Carl of the days he spent with his sisters in Korea, and it causes him to notice that Lisa's feeling of isolation has been as profound as Carl's. This remainder makes him aware of his formerly self-centered attitude. Although Lisa has not been protected and guided by the masked characters, like Carl and Karen, she comes closer to the masked characters by placing herself in the world between life and death. Like the masked characters, Lisa hence functions as a vehicle between Carl and the other family members.

As Kim points out, in Korean mask drama, masks contain features like “humanity,” “comicality,” “caricature,” and “deformity” (1987: 54). Shiomi employs these features in staging P. K.'s performance and other mask dances during the play. In adopting the comicality, irony, and deformity of the masks and their caricatured movement, Shiomi attempts to present *Mask Dance* as an entertainment piece rather than a political drama. Shiomi also personifies his masks in an attempt to provide the adoptees with possible solutions to their struggles. In this sense, Mask Dancer and Spirit do not really function as a negative model, as originally intended in traditional Korean mask dramas, but as an effective theatrical device capable of bringing about catharses on stage. As previously stated, it is significant that Shiomi connects the traditional Korean cultural performance and the reality of Korean adoptees' situation in the U.S., and that this “hybrid” makes the audience aware of the Korean adoptees' predicament in the U.S.

VI. The Role of Spirit in *Mask Dance*

As discussed earlier, even though *Mask Dance* (Shiomi, 2001) offers caricatured masks with down-to-earth aspects, it also includes Spirit, a messenger from the “spiritual world.” This character, like Mask Dancer, is similarly unsanctified, but a caricature, in keeping with the tradition of Korean mask drama. Yet in a distorted manner, Spirit induces and stages Karen’s spiritual growth as the narrator of Karen’s struggle and agony. Spirit also employs his mask in several scenes, but the mask itself does not necessarily aim at ridiculing or satirizing the other characters. Rather, his mask functions as a mirror in which Karen’s feelings are reflected. In this sense, Spirit can be defined as an extended, or revised, version of the traditional Korean mask.

In fact, Karen’s inner struggle is subdued because of her obligation to act as an obedient child. Spirit plays the part of Karen’s alter ego and gradually dissolves her self-division by exposing, on screen, her suppressed feelings. In Act I, Scene 5, Spirit moves her like a puppet when she dons a traditional Korean gown she found in an old trunk. Karen, guided by Spirit, consequently exposes her long-hidden feelings to Carl and Lisa:

Don’t you think I’m pretty? Don’t you think I’m lovely?
Look at my wonderful gown . . . and my smooth skin . . .
my rich black hair . . . Don’t you wish you could be like
me? . . . Don’t you wish you had all these wonderful
things? (Shiomi, 2001: 364)

Karen has been trying harder to assimilate to life with her white adoptive parents by distancing herself from her Korean heritage. Nevertheless, in this scene, she treasures the traditional Korean robe and her “Korean” features, describing them as “pretty.” Even though she feels it necessary to adapt to the lifestyle of her white parents, her inner self tries to persuade her not to abandon her Korean heritage. In the sense that it exposes her self-division, Spirit

functions as another “mask” and a therapist for Karen, as it does for Carl, Lisa and P. K.

In Act II, Scene 1, Spirit again supports Karen when she reveals her feelings toward her mother while, in a split scene, Carl is introduced into the world of the mask with the aid of P. K. In this scene, Karen frankly confides in Mother how she has struggled with life in the U.S., and insists on her need to live with Lisa and Carl: “Mom . . . Mom . . . you don’t understand . . . this thing with Carl and Lisa and me . . . It’s special . . . It’s what gave us hope . . . more than anything else . . .” (Shiomi, 2001: 373). Her plea to re-unite with her Korean brother and sister discloses her profound sense of isolation, which is based on her unstable status as a Korean adoptee in mainstream, white American life. Spirit elaborates on Karen’s speech with a more direct disclosure of her mind, speaking “her lines”:

The SPIRIT speaks Karen’s lines as Karen, Carl and Lisa walk around center stage as if young children exploring the space.

SPIRIT: You see . . . when I got to the orphanage, there were all these kids . . . coming and going . . . you couldn’t get close to anyone . . . But with Lisa and Carl . . . we just connected. (Shiomi, 2001: 373)

This confession functions as a bridge connecting the emotions of Mother and Karen, with Spirit serving as Karen’s narrator and alter ego. Thus, Shiomi effectively stages the divided emotional state of his characters. Additionally, during his/Karen’s speech, the three children walk around the stage, as if exploring . . . as if looking for a place to which they might belong. In this sense, masked Spirit functions paradoxically as a device to “unmask” the characters’ feelings.

Spirit is more closely related to Karen than the other characters, mainly because she is supposed to bridge the divide between the adopters and the adoptees. That is, Karen’s confession gradually exposes the other characters’ inner suffering. Simultaneously, Spirit induces Mother to talk about her desperate

efforts to be an ideal parent, and compares her decision to adopt Korean children to “a two-year pregnancy,” which required her to “understand Korean culture” and endure a long period of waiting (Shiomi, 2001: 367). Her efforts originate from a mysterious experience: She decided to adopt a child because, on the trip to visit her mother, she suddenly heard “these voices . . . of all the unborn babies inside” her, “singing sweet songs of sorrow.” The babies, explains, cried out to her: “Mommy I need you . . . Hold me . . . rock me . . .” (368).

Mother’s confession makes Karen aware that her motivation to adopt a foreign-born child derives from desperate emotional need to heal her own emptiness, which results in bridging the gap between the mother and daughter. In a different light, however, the mother’s episode her hearing the voices of “unborn children” reveals that she still retains a superior attitude as a white adopter toward displaced and marginalized children. Yet, importantly, the adopter and the adopted at least share their family’s loneliness and depression for the first time in this scene. In that sense, Spirit plays a role of a stage manager, or director, helping the characters resolve their struggles.

Shiomi visualizes the characters’ inner struggles by employing Mask Dancer and Spirit as their alter egos. The masks they wear eventually drive away the “evil” spirit that has been residing within. Shiomi utilizes the ironical, caricatured aspect of the Korean masks, yet he also equips them with compassion, which enables them to support and develop other characters. In this way, the playwright makes theatrically effective use of the Korean masks’ “human” characteristics.

VII. Conclusion

While Shiomi uses masks in a manner different from the tradition of Greek theater, his use is nonetheless consistent with the fundamental nature of a Greek mask. As John Bell indicates, a

mask is “an object totally external to the performer, a sculptural expression imposed from without” which “doesn’t alter the actor’s center of gravity” but “re-contours her surface” (2001: 23). Because Spirit and Mask Dancer locate themselves as extensions of the characters, they can be applied to Bell’s definition of a mask’s principal role. As discussed earlier, the masks also function as the characters’ alter egos, that is, as “the second beings,” in *Mask Dance*, yet because the masked characters appear on the stage as visually separate beings, they also function as assistants helping the children to develop into new beings, and the audience witnesses the process of their development on the stage. In this sense, the masked characters are placed in a position external to the Korean adoptees, or the actors who play them, on the stage. Peter Hall, the director of the 1981 performance of *Oresteia* in Britain’s National Theatre, extends the definition of a mask on stage, stating that Greek theater itself is a “mask” in the sense that it keeps “all fundamental or violent action off stage” (2000: 24). In other words, Greek theater “permits control while it prevents indulgence” by “telling us about the emotion rather than parading it” (26). Also in *Mask Dance*, by cloaking and distancing the main characters’ agony and emotional crisis through the masks, Shiomi maintains an objective viewpoint and offers plausibility and substantiality to this performing art. Moreover, considering that the act of wearing a mask was fundamentally “no negative act of concealment” but “a positive act of becoming” in the age of “Sophocles” (Wiles, 2007: 1), Shiomi’s use of masks partly embodies the roles of a Greek mask. *Mask Dance*, consequently, can be marked as a revolutionary step in American theater since it established common ground between Korean traditional mask drama and classic Greek theater.

Shiomi, unlike O’Neill, employs theatrical masks not to universalize certain human problems but to individualize the problems of a certain group of people: Korean-American adoptees. The masks in this play shed light on the adoptees, displaced in their adoptive country, and their inner struggles. By bringing

traditional Korean mask drama to American theater, Shiomi underlines the importance of the Korean adoptees' own heritage. The playwright also presents the importance of American regional theaters the problems of Korean adoptees can be accurately reflected chiefly because the theater is located in a state, Minnesota, with a number of Korean adoptees. In this sense, Shiomi expands and develops the possibility of American regional theaters, which have been long dominated and marginalized by commercial theaters on Broadway. Theater Mu has also succeeded in functioning as the bridge between Asian traditional performing arts and Asian-American creative arts by connecting the traditional Korean mask dance with the theme of Korean adoptees in the States. As the next step, we hope that Theater Mu's activities will promote Asian-American drama outside of Asian-American communities in the United States.

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「遮蔽」與「揭露」韓裔養子女： 談汐見瑞克的《面具舞》

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摘要

巫劇場是汐見瑞克在一九九二年於美國明尼亞波里斯市建立的亞裔美人劇團，《面具舞》是第一部戲。汐見一直在尋找一個亞裔美國劇作家的身份，並探索明尼亞波里斯的亞美議題，儘管該市的亞美人口只占少數。不過，明尼蘇達州有逾千名的韓裔養子女，汐見想透過傳統韓國面具舞的形式來描繪他們對白人收養父母的複雜情感及自身的認同危機。韓國的面具舞十分質樸，但一向對優勢階級多所嘲諷；汐見的面具劇場雖然討論嚴肅的話題，同樣充滿嘲諷特質。本文想探究汐見如何藉由這種喜劇風格來描繪韓裔養子女所遭遇的問題。

在《面具舞》裡，面具的使用亦是獨樹一幟。該劇以一個戴著面具的靈魂為敘述者。靈魂的角色頗具創新，它不僅遮蔽了韓裔養子女的意識，也吐露了他們深埋心中的情感。儘管汐見對面具的使用不同於希臘劇場的做法，他卻追隨其基本原則，用法符合彼得霍爾對於面具的定義，即「希臘劇場本身就是一個面具，用以遮蔽劇場外所有根本的或暴力的行動」。藉著面具向外遮掩並與主要角色的忿恨保持距離，汐見維繫了一個客觀的視角，並使亞美劇場有了不同的內涵。這齣戲因此可以被視為亞美劇場革命性的一步，因為它建立起一個表演的平台，將亞美議題、韓國傳統的面具戲以及古典劇場串連起來。

關鍵詞：韓國面具舞、韓裔養子女、舞台上的面具、巫劇場、亞美劇場