Toward a Modern Society: History of the Korean Theatre in the Modern Period 1919∼1940

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Introduction

Two main features of Korean theatre history during the 1920s and 1930s were the occurrence of a modern theatre movement and the development of the commercial theatre. These two phenomena had a significant influence on one another throughout this period: The modern theatre movement stimulated commercial theatre in its performance conventions and in its sensationalism while the commercial theatre influenced the modern theatre in terms of acting skills and practical knowledge of theatre production.

Korean theatre conventions were rapidly modernized during this period. All Korean theatre companies that planned to perform in urban areas had to prepare their performances with a fixed written text and a realistic acting style. The so-called guchidade style performance, meaning improvised actions, was no longer accepted by the urban audience, which led to an establishment of a new theatre convention in both the modern and the commercial theatre. This is why the 1920s and the 1930s is referred to as the Modern Era of the Korean theatre movement.¹

The crucial moment in the modernisation of Korea was the March First Movement in 1919 and its resultant failure. This movement consisted of a series of demonstrations, which began from 1 March 1919, following the

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On 1 March 1919, the 33 representatives of the Korean people met at Taehwagwan restaurant near Jongro Intersection, formally promulgated a Declaration of Independence, and proclaimed that Korea now had become an independent nation. At the same time, students gathered at Pagoda Park to hear the Declaration read out loud, after which they marched through the streets in peaceful procession, shouting “Long live Korean independence!” The March First Movement, the greatest mass movement of the Korean people in all their history, had begun. ... Not only the students, but also shopkeepers, farmers, laborers, and other citizens joined in, while Koreans employed by the Government-General also found ways of showing their support. The demonstrations for independence gradually spread to the countryside, and the cries for Korean independence could be heard all over the country. … These demonstrations for independence on such a vast scale surprised the Japanese authorities. More than two million Koreans participated in more than 1,500 separate gatherings, and in all but seven of the country’s 218 county administrations. The demonstrations quickly spread to Manchuria, to the Russian Maritime Territory, and to other overseas areas. (Lee, 1984: 341-344)

However, the March First Movement failed to gain the international support Koreans expected. Many European countries did not give it an official recognition but continued to respect the Japanese position in international politics, as Japan was one of the victorious allies in World
War I. Hence, the Korean people could not achieve their main purpose, i.e. independence from Japan, through peaceful demonstrations of the March First Movement.

Despite its failure, there are many reasons the March First Movement is considered a historic turning point in Korean history. Firstly, it was an opportunity not only the leaders of the movement, but also the demonstrators, to realize the importance of international politics and recognised that Korean independence was an international matter as well as a domestic concern.5

Secondly, it was the first mass socio-political movement, which was organised and progressed with a modern spirit. The demonstrations were deliberately pre-planned political activity against Japanese colonial rule rather than spontaneous events. To organise these nation-wide demonstrations, almost all socio-political groups, including student organisations, participated in the preparations with such passion that reflected their political power and desire for independence. Considering that the movement was the crystallisation of Koreans’ desire for independence, it was natural that the spirit of the March First Movement determined the future direction of the socio-political development in Korea.

The March First Movement strongly influenced both Koreans and the Japanese Colonial Government. The socio-political and socio-cultural changes after the March First Movement were as follows: Firstly, the Japanese Colonial Government changed their colonial policy of military administration to a so-called ‘cultural and civilised’ administration.6 There were to be changes in the appointment procedures for officials, the military police system was to be replaced, the education system expanded and improved, and restrictions over the media were to relax so that Korean newspapers could print in hangeul.

Regarding the Korean political system, new trends were introduced, which became mainstream political and socio-cultural activities in Korea after the March First Movement. Before the Movement, several different provisional governments with various political opinions existed. After the
movement, the need for unification of political parties was increased. Subsequently, the Provisional Government of the Republic, formed in accordance with the principles of democracy for the first time in Korean history, was established in Shanghai in April 1919 as the headquarters for further activities of the independence movement.

**Birth of the Modern Korean Theatre**

**Theatre Movement as A Socio-cultural Movement**

In some respects, the March First Movement provided the motivation for the modern Korean theatre movement. After the failure of the March First Movement, the methods used by the independence movement diversified while the cultural movement and struggle emerged among the Korean intelligentsia.

In the first three years of the 1920s, modern Korean theatre movement, which centered on university students, became part of the mainstream. This movement was regarded as the socio-cultural duty of intellectuals. In 1923, more than 190 articles on student theatre performances were printed in *Joseon Ilbo*.

There were two major trends in last year’s Korean theatre. The majority of commercial theatre companies faced financial crisis and some of them were dissolved. On the other hand, the social demand for theatre increased among the common people. Amateur theatre groups dominated Korean theatre during the 1923 season. They performed more times than professional theatre companies and the content of their performance were far better than that of the commercial theatre companies. Religious groups and schools also organised many student theatre clubs in order to use the theatre performance as an instructive cultural tool. There is no doubt that this movement was derived from the sincere desire of
Korean society to improve and change everyday life. (J. Kim, 1923: 56)

Under these circumstances, the outlook of the institutional theatre was established in the early 1920s and its socio-cultural authority was hardly challenged (institutional theatre는 누구인가요?). This point was made clear and repeated by the leaders of the modern Korean theatre movement and by many other socio-cultural supporters of the movement such as those in the media.

Your theatre companies and your activities are similar to the sacrifice of a military division when protecting their country. Whenever a soldier takes part in a war, it is natural that he returns home as a dead soldier if he fails to achieve victory. ... Your duty and responsibility toward our country is not smaller than that of the soldier’s. Nobody looks upon your theatre merely as a form of entertainment. (Hyeon, 1921)

The leaders of the modern Korean theatre movement gave their activities the name singeuk, new drama, following the Japanese modern theatre movement, singeki.10 Singeuk was the cultural phenomenon that represented the new disposition in Korean society from the 1920s onward and the socio-cultural concept of the modern Korean theatre distinguished it from traditional Korean theatre and sinpa. From the viewpoint of cultural history, singeuk took the role of a cultural doorway to the importation of western culture. The leaders of singeuk tried to import European and American modern drama to realise their socio-political ambition of modernising Korea and liberation from Japan.

From the viewpoint of theatre history, the pioneers of singeuk were the first group to introduce the dramatic text as part of the modern literary genre and compulsory basis of performance. The leaders of the singeuk movement regarded plays as the most essential element of their theatre movement with which to represent their ‘advanced and civilised’ ideas. From the beginning they took their studies of modern European and
American drama seriously and translated plays with a similar attitude. Many modern European and American plays were performed on Korean stage under the name of singeuk. Furthermore, singeuk leaders supported the creation of original modern Korean drama, which was expected to develop modern Korean theatre to be comparable to that of Europe. These principles were essential to singeuk pioneers whose ultimate goal was to establish modern Korean theatre.

From the viewpoint of social history, singeuk was the first theatrical activity organised and run by intellectuals. Unlike sinpa and commercial theatres, singeuk first emerged around major Japanese universities and was introduced by Korean students. They shunned commercialism and worked predominantly outside the Korean professional entertainment world. Most singeuk leaders regarded themselves as cultural activists rather than as artists.

The performance of the theatre and music can appeal to a mass audience at one and the same time and can make people excited by stimulating their emotions. This is not a power to be neglected. ... Drama utilises and combines all kinds of art and represents the emotion, ideology and sense of the people. To put it more simply, it provokes a strong will within people’s spirit and body by directly touching their ears, eyes and heart. Therefore, drama could be more universal and influential than any other art forms. … The great function of drama that it is instructive. It can educate a person without him being conscious of it. ... Definitely, drama is the most influential and effective instructive method. (Yoon, 1920)

Modern drama should be created by the hands of talented and suitably trained artists. Consequently, the major function of modern drama is to save and liberate the human spirit [from social convention]. Its major purpose is to educate and entertain the people. The social meaning of modern drama is entirely in its contribution to human life and its community. (W. Ji. Kim, 1921:
They supported themselves through work outside their company, especially in journalism and in teaching jobs, since it was difficult to earn a regular income through the singeuk theatre. For the majority of those involved in singeuk their years of hard work in the theatre were an act of faith in political and patriotic ideals with minimal financial reward. In fact, the leaders and actors were in the habit of contributing their earnings and potential income to the company so as to produce plays.

Woo-Jin Kim the Man of Idea and Geukyesulhyephoe (Theatre Arts Association 1920~1921)

The establishment of Geukyesulhyephoe (The Theatre Arts Association; TAA 1920) by Woo-Jin Kim at Waseda University is usually considered by historians as the cornerstone of singeuk.

The Theatre Arts Association was the very first Korean theatre-company to define their concept on the modern theatre movement and perform modern theatre. It was organized by Korean students in Tokyo who returned to Korea in 1920. … Their repertories included Lord Dunsany’s *The Glittering Gate* and Myeong-Hi Jo’s *Kim Young-Il eui Sa (The Death of Young-Il Kim)*. (Im, 1931: 4)

At first, the TAA, which consisted of a group of Korean students who were studying at Japanese universities, focused on play-reading and detailed study of theatre production. In the summer of 1921, the TAA organised a tour in Korea to awake Korean people through the theatre. Woo-Jin Kim took the key role in preparing the programmes. He paid all the costs of the production as well as the travel expenses, and also selected the repertory: *Kim Young-Il-eui aa (Death of Kim Young-Il)* written by Myeong-Hi Jo, *Choehu-eui aksu (The Last Handshake)*, an adaptation of Nan-Pa Hong’s novel, and Lord Dunsany’s *The Glittering Gate*.
He also directed *Choehu-eui aksu* and *The Glittering Gate*. The tour started on 8 July 1921 from Busan, and visited twenty-five Korean cities in over forty days. This tour was also the first contact between modern drama and Korean audiences. The TAA established a good reputation and was supported by the audiences and the media, with exceptional quality of the performances.

On 28 July 1921, Dongwuhoe theatre company had their first performance in Seoul at Danseongsa Theatre. The audience came out to the theatre for the opening in spite of heavy rain, many were prompted by curiosity (about Dongwuhoe’s style of performance). The theatre was full well before the curtain went up, and the best achievement of Dongwuhoe was gathering the intelligentsia who normally never came to the theatre.

The TAA’s performances not only changed the social concept of theatre but also ignited the desire of other Korean intelligentsia.

Since they toured all over the country, the passion toward the new trend of the theatre movement, which was different from the *sinpa* style of performance, rode on the crest of a wave throughout the country. Several Christian organisations and local youth parties organised amateur theatre companies and regularly performed for local audiences. Whenever the students who were studying in the city returned to their hometown during summer and winter holidays, they also organised theatre performances as a gift for the people in their native town. (Im, 1931: 5)

The TAA became a founder and cornerstone of the modern Korean theatre movement, and provided both substance and direction for many similar experimental theatre companies that were organized in the following year. After their tour, several student theatre companies were organized and produced modern theatre repertories following the TAA productions.
Sung-Hi Bak the Action Planner and the Towolhoe Theatre Company (Earth-Moon Society: EMS 1921-1931)

After the TAA’s tour in 1921, a number of singeuk companies were created and subsequently dissolved without any noteworthy achievements. Sung-Hi Bak, who also studied at a university in Japan, took over Woo-Jin Kim’s spirit toward the modern European drama. A number of Korean students who studied foreign literature and fine art including Sung-Hi Bak, Bok-Jin Kim, Gi-Jin Kim, and Seo-Goo Yi, organized Towolhoe (Earth-Moon Society: EMS) in spring 1922 in order to have meetings for joint criticism. The members of EMS were inspired by the success of the TAA in the previous summer. Hence, they also decided to tour Korea during summer as the TAA and other student theatre companies had done. The first EMS production, which included Sung-Hi Bak’s Gilsik, Chekhov’s The Bear and Shaw’s How He Lied to Her Husband, lasted only five days, from 4 to 8 July 1923.

The first production of EMS failed to obtain the mass support the leaders had expected. This bitter experience and the subsequent debts resulting from the financial failure of their first production forced EMS to produce another program within three months. The second production, consisted of Tolstoy’s The Resurrection, W. M. Foerster’s Alt-Heidelberg, Creditors, a one act play by Strindberg, and Shaw’s How He Lied to Her Husband. It received wide support from the Korean audience, who viewed the plays as ‘new and realistic,’ a response the leaders were hoping for. It was true that the acting skills of EMS still had not reached those of professional theatre companies but their realistically trained acting style impressed the Korean audience. After the social and financial success of the second production of EMS, Sung-Hi Bak re-organised EMS as a permanent theatre company. In 1924, the EMS made more than ten theatre productions on a regular basis throughout the year. Alongside the previously mentioned repertories, EMS performed some Korean originals and other European dramas such as The Living Corpse by Tolstoy, The Gods of the Mountain by Lord Dunsany and In the Shadow.
of the Glen by Synge. In March 1925, Sung-Hi Bak made a one-year contract with Gwangmudae Theatre for ongoing performances for a year and turned professional, believing that it was the best way to improve the quality of performance. He was also confident that if he improved the quality of performance, it would not be difficult to appeal to a larger audience and increase the revenue at the box-office. However, his plan soon proved to be an ideal. The frequently changing programs and daily performances made it difficult for the actors to concentrate on their roles. In addition, there were not enough members of the audience who were ‘civilized and intellectual’ enough to watch the EMS performances on a regular basis. EMS soon faced financial crisis. They no longer used the Gwangmudae Theatre for their major shows because it was not financially possible to produce an expensive play for such a small audience. Therefore, in order to survive, EMS had to give up modern European drama and performed Korean original plays instead, which represented commercialism and sentimentalism. However, although EMS lacked in many respects, this cannot undervalue their cultural contribution to the modern Korean theatre movement. Firstly, EMS was the first modern theatre company to provide modern drama to the Korean audience on a regular basis. Before EMS, all singeuk theatre companies were organised on a temporary basis for special occasions and performed over a relatively short period. Secondly, EMS provided direct motivation for the organisation of student theatre clubs. Thirdly, EMS was the first singeuk company to pay attention to the visual aspects of theatre such as costumes and stage sets.

A professional painter, Sung-Man Yi, and a sculptor, Bok-Jin Kim, prepared stage sets and scene paintings. Sung-Man Yi spent more than a week only on imitating the palace fresco for the performance of Alt-Heidelberg. Towolhoe spent sixty percent of their production costs on making the visual elements of the performance, such as sets and costumes. Concerning these visual elements, Towolhoe was the best Korean theatre company of the
period and even considerably better than many of the Japanese modern theatre companies. Some critics called Towolhoe’s productions ‘porridge on silver tableware.’ This meant ‘poor acting using luxurious stage sets and costumes.’ (D. Yi, 1985: 265)

One of Sung-Hi Bak’s main goals was to reproduce the stage sets and props of the modern theatre on the Korean stage. In his opinion, it was comparatively easy to construct the visual elements of the modern theatre than achieving a high standard of acting skills or effective lighting systems. Furthermore, he also insisted that visual elements were one of the major components of modern theatre and that they could be forms of communication with the audience. To Bak, the main goal of EMS was not only to provide messages through modern drama, but also to represent the life and culture of the modern European countries. From this viewpoint, Sung-Hi Bak was a pioneer of the modern Korean theatre movement. After EMS, no singeuk company considered the visual elements of the modern theatre.

Conclusion: Establishment of Modern Korean Theatre and Geukyesul Yeonguho (Theatre Arts Research Association: TARA 1931~1939)

In July 1931, 12 young scholars who had completed their degrees at Japanese universities organized Gukyesool Yeongoohoi (Theatre Arts Research Association: TARA) in order to ‘deepen the interest toward the modern theatre among the people, to correct the convention of the commercial theatre companies, and finally to establish a modern Korean theatre with real meaning.’

TARA soon became a central organization of the Korean theatre and it exercised major influence throughout the 1930s. For their ultimate goal of improving Koreans’ understanding of modern theatre, the members of
TARA tried to introduce several aspects of modern theatre to the Korean audience in as many ways as they could. They delivered the cultural background, the social meaning and the values of modern drama not only through performance, but also through public lectures and in the form of written text. TARA first published the journal *Geukyesul* (Theatre Arts), thus expanding the function of theatre as an institution. The journal also provided a space for theatre criticism throughout the 1930s. Secondly, the members opened a theatre academy class for two weeks in August 1931, which focused on attracting potential members of the company.

The most important activity of TARA was stage production, which was conducted under the name of *Silheom mudae* (the Experimental Stage). In their early days, TARA mainly performed modern Western drama. However, different social standards and an unfamiliar subject matter between Korea and Europe hindered understanding. To change this situation and to make their performance more communicable, the members of TARA published introductions and explanations about the repertories as the first step of their strategy. In addition, the translated text was also published for some performances. The performance itself was the next step and criticism of the performance followed as the last stage of the process. Despite using sophisticated ideas and activities, TARA lost its spirit and was finally dissolved in 1939. The main reason was that while TARA appealed to the intelligentsia, it failed to obtain the support from the mass audience, which led to a financial crisis. Political suppression by the Japanese colonial government was another fundamental problem. In some respects, the Japanese colonial government regarded TARA as a political organisation promoting cultural nationalism rather than a pure theatre company. In addition to suffering from strict censorship, the members of TARA were frequently jailed on charges of promoting public disorder.

Apart from the modern Korean theatre movement, commercial theatre developed as another major sector of the Korean theatre during the modern theatre era. A group of commercial theatre companies began to organize themselves as business enterprises and the 1930s became known
as the ‘golden age’ of commercial theatre in Korea. Some companies performed many popular repertories each day,\(^\text{27}\) and toured all around Korea and Manchuria.\(^\text{28}\)

A minor trend in the 1930s was the proletarian theatre. Its performances propounded a Bolshevik theory of popularization, and investigated different methods of producing theatre. Although the proletarian theatre evolved into a theatrical movement with small group theatres, it failed because of the unfavorable political situation and its inner powerlessness.\(^\text{29}\)

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1 The modern spirit in theatre art emerged with the modernization of the concept self-consciousness. Such change of the time was a major trend of the overall Korean society rather than a phenomenon in the Korean theatre alone. In fact, the 1920s are also considered to be the starting point of the modern era in Korea. At this time, the Korean people began to organise various social activities and movements as their self-awareness of the socio-political situation grew in Korea regarding international politics. The ultimate goal of these social movements, including the modern theatre movement, was to establish a modern society and to liberate Korea from Japan.

2 The main motivation for this nation-wide political movement emerged from a similar event which had been organised a month earlier. A group of Korean students in Tokyo formed Joseon Cheongnyeon Donglipadan (the Korean Youth Independence Corps) and laid out a course of action. Consequently, some six hundred students met at the Y.M.C.A. Hall in Kanda, Tokyo on February 8, 1919 to demand independence for their country. This event gave immense encouragement to those in Korea who had been seeking methods to bring the independence movement into the open and to the public.

3 This could be interpreted as a display to the international community of Koreans’ desire for independence. The March First Movement was a momentum for the establishment of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai in 1919. 1 March is a national holiday in Korea today.

4 The funeral rite for the former king, Gojong, was scheduled for 3\(^{\text{rd}}\) March,
which meant that a massive number of people offering condolences was coming to Seoul from all over the country. Therefore, the leading group decided to act two days before the ritual.

5 Under the harsh colonial rule of imperial Japan, the spirit of resistance had grown and spread throughout Korean society. Before 1919, it had almost reached the point of explosion. ‘The Korean people had been waiting for an opportunity to rise, and the turn of international events led to the inevitable eruption.’ (Lee, 1984: 340) There had been a series of popular outbursts all over Korea prior to the March First Movement. However, only this movement can be interpreted as Koreans’ response to the Doctrine of Self-determination of Nations, which was put forward and supported by the American president, Woodrow Wilson. When the Doctrine was expressed as an integral part of the post-World War I peace settlement, and when independence movements had arisen among the national minorities of Europe, the political leaders of Korea decided that the time to recover sovereignty had come at last. ‘The spirit of revenge that dominated the deliberations leading to the Treaty of Versailles made it impossible to fully realize the principle of the self-determination of nations. Nevertheless, to some extent the principle was applied, based on which the former Austro-Hungarian nations as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania emerged as independent entities, while Poland, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, formerly under Russian domination, all became independent.’ (Lee, 1984: 341) The political awareness of the Korean people increased considerably. As a result of their suffering under colonial rule, they greeted the principle of self-determination of nations with the great enthusiasm. ‘Koreans were persuaded that at last the world was ready to bring an end to the age of force and usher in an age of justice.’ (Lee, 1984: 340) For this reason, not only the political leaders, but also the Korean people believed that the doctrine could provide the impetus to transform the Korean nationalist movement into a full-scale nation-wide effort. They were confident of regaining Korea’s independence.

6 Japan’s propaganda, including such statements as ‘Japan colonised Korea by accepting Koreans’, was not based on facts. Accordingly, international community had become extremely critical of Japan’s actions in Korea. Subsequently, Japan announced that their military administration would begin a so-called ‘cultural and civilized’ administration. ‘But all this simply represented
a different approach to the very same objectives as before. The new policy, therefore, was largely fraudulent and deceptive. First of all, until Japan was forced out of Korea in 1945, not one single Korean civil official was appointed to the post of governor-general. And although the announced change was made in the police system, police bureaus were expanded and the number of Japanese police personnel increased. Including the gendarmerie, police strength had grown to about 15,000 immediately after the March First Movement in 1919, and by 1938 it reached 21,782. At the same time more prisons were built and the number of arrests for ‘ideological crimes’ swelled. Furthermore, the widely advertised expansion of educational opportunities for Koreans, as will be explained in detail later, was not actualized, while the discriminatory practices continued as before. Korean owned newspapers published in *hangeul* were founded, such as the *Dong-A Ilbo, Joseon Ilbo* and the *Sidae Ilbo*. But for Japan this simply provided a means to exercise control over Korean opinion. True enough, the Japanese censorship remained strict and instances of deletion of text, confiscation, levying of fines, and suspension of publication occurred continuously, averaging as many as five or six times a month.’ (Lee, 1984: 346-347)

7 After the March First Movement, the national consensus on the future form of Korean government showed that people did not want the restoration of the old monarchy but a republic. This meant that the Koreans were willing to restructure Korean society.

8 There were three major forms of activity for the independence throughout the colonial period: the armed struggle of independence forces outside Korea, the diplomatic manoeuvres of patriots who had taken refuge in foreign lands, and the energetic work within Korea of the clandestine organisations and educational bodies. These activities sustained the will of the Korean people to oppose Japan and strengthened their spirit of resistance.

9 The modern Korean theatre movement took on an essential role in this movement. The majority of the Korean intelligentsia considered the theatre as the most effective educational method with which to modernize Korean society. Therefore, a number of social groups, which were mainly formed by college students and the younger generation, organized public addresses and theatre performances.
As was the case with simpa and sinpa, both singeuk and singeki were expressed using the same Chinese characters. Singeuk is a theatrical term used to indicate modern Korean drama and the modern Korean theatre movement in general. ‘New drama’ in this context showed the confidence and ambition in establishing a completely new theatre. For the leaders of the modern Korean theatre movement, the traditional Korean performance was not fully developed nor modernised. In sinpa style theatre, any possibility of its modernisation was rejected. The main reason for this was that the theatrical conventions and the process of the production of a sinpa style performance were far removed from the new modern concepts and ideas. The majority of Korean singeuk leaders had once studied in Japan. They imported theatrical terms but the cultural intention of the modern Japanese and the modern Korean theatre movement was not the same. This point will be discussed at a later stage.

Woo-Jin Kim was born in September 1897, and was the eldest son of a rich family in which polygamy was practised. The eldest son of his father’s first wife, who died when he was seven years old, he had a strict Confusianist upbringing but went to a private school and received a ‘new wave’, western style education. His father’s decision to send him there was somewhat paradoxical given that it clashed with the family’s conventions of Confucianism. In 1915 Woo-Jin Kim’s father requested him to go to Japan to study agriculture. After graduating from Kumamoto Agricultural High School in 1918, Kim ignored his father’s wish for him to return to Korea and entered Waseda University to study English literature. The title of his final B.A. essay was ‘Man and Superman: A critical study of Bernard Shaw’s philosophy’ written in English. He came back to Korea in 1924 and managed a family owned company He wrote many articles and plays during this time. He left Korea due to a family tension and despite his hopes to go to Europe, went to Japan once again. He declared his defeat under the social conventions of Confucianism and killed himself. On 4 August 1926, on the ship back to Korea with his lover Sim-Deok Yoon, a famous opera singer and formerly his colleague in the TAA, he threw himself overboard and died aged only thirty.

It had around twenty members including Woo-Jin Kim, Hae-Seong Hong, later the most important theatre director in Korean theatre, and Myeong-Hi Jo, a novelist and playwright.
Toward a Modern Society: History of the Korean Theatre in the

13 TAA organised their Korean tour at the request of another Korean student community, Dongwuhoe, to raise funds to build a dormitory.

14 Woo-Jin Kim was a man of many activities and merits. Early in his career he became one of the leading literary critics of the time, and was considered a pioneer of the modern Korean theatre movement. He produced and directed the very first singeuk performances, wrote a number of novels and translated several dramatic works, such as Dunsany’s *The Glittering Gate* and Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. Woo-Jin Kim also wrote a number of important plays. His significance is not limited to his contribution to the introduction of modern theatre onto the Korean stage. He was also the first person to give modern European and American drama an academic standing. He published essays about modern European drama and theatre movements such as Theatre Libre of France, Freie Buhne of Germany, and the Independent Theatre and Stage Society of England. His essays on modern European and American dramatists such as Milne, Pirandello, Capek and O’Neill, were published in *Sidae Ilbo* from January to May 1926. With his father’s financial backing Kim ordered drama books regularly from Macmillan Publishers, London, from which he obtained abundant information about the modern European and American dramatists.

15 The tour team also performed a violin concerto by Nan-Pa Hong, arias sung by Sim-Deok Yoon, and gave public lectures.

16 30 July 1921, *Dong-A Ilbo*.

17 Members of the TAA, including Han-Sung Go, Young-Pal Kim and Jang-Seop Jin, organised another theatre performance in their hometown, Gaeseong, after the TAA’s tour was successfully completed. Galdophoe, a self-supported student community in Seoul, organised three theatre productions and toured Korea for one month from the last week of July 1922. In the following year, part of the TAA and other Korean students in Japan organised another tour in Korea under the name of Hyeonseolhoe. Alongside this movement, local amateur theatre companies were organised and performed for the local audience.

18 Woo-Jin Kim unwillingly retired from the theatre world in order to run a family business on the orders of his father. It was impossible for him to spare enough time to prepare theatre performances. He could do no more than continue to publish essays concerning modern theatre and write plays until his
death.

19 The leader of EMS, Sung-Hi Bak, had no practical education in theatre production. He studied English Literature at Meiji University from 1921 to 1923 and was a frequent theatre-goer, which meant that he approached theatre with experience only as a spectator and as a literature student.

20 Not much could be expected from the EMS productions, as the company performed in public without training in acting and without a clear idea of what form the modern style should take. Direct experiences of western theatre were not yet available to the courageous pioneers and young amateurs. ‘In both their first and second production, the Towolhoi Theatre Company devoted all their energies to making stage sets and painting scenery while ignoring the practical acting skills. It is easy to discover their lack of practice and some actors are not properly trained in any sense. What is worse, some actors forgot their lines during the performance. ... It will be better to attract the audience’s attention not by painting the scenery or stage sets but by properly trained actors. Furthermore, they should pay more attention to the selection of repertories and the translation or adaptation of the European originals.’ 14 October 1923, Dong-A Ilbo.

21 EMS kept insisting that they performed modern theatre but the critics and the audiences no longer regarded EMS as a singeuk theatre company. ‘I heard that some members of the Korean intelligentsia blamed and devalued Towolhoe as a sinpa theatre company not a company in the modern theatre movement. However, it is almost certain that their criticism toward Towolhoe is criticism that never considered the socio-cultural situation. The social circumstances in Korea make it difficult to develop any kind of social movement and activities and a modern theatre movement is one of the hardest to develop. ... It is impossible to benefit from performing modern European drama and even harder to earn a minimum income needed just for the maintenance of the company. For this reason, it is inevitable that the cultural standards have to be lowered and perform commercialized melodrama. The common audience loves to watch this kind of theatre but the intellectual audience ceaselessly complains about it. They blame us and label Towolhoe a sinpa theatre company not a singeuk theatre company.’ (U. Kim, 1926) As U. Kim points out, it was almost impossible to satisfy both the intellectual and the common audience with the same program. Consequently, the survival plan of EMS led
to the loss of their identity as a modern theatre company and even worse, failed to claim mass support from the Korean audience. At this point several critics began to separate themselves from EMS and it was regarded in the same light as other commercial theatre companies. EMS lasted until 1931 but never belonged to the center of the modern Korean theatre movement after early 1925. According to the critics, the EMS of the latter period had lost its enthusiasm and reinstated the defects of its early days. They selected Korean original plays as a part of their efforts to ‘approach the audience policy.’ However they ignored both European drama and Korean plays written under the modern spirit.

22 As a son of high government official, Sung-Hi Bak himself possessed an estate in Korea and thus did not care how high the costs of constructing costumes and stage sets were. Jeong-Yang Bak, father of Sung-Hi Bak, was the first envoy in the Korean Embassy in the U.S.A.

23 This is a part of the declaration of TARA’s foundation.

24 ‘The first issue of *Geukyesul* was published in April 1934 and the fifth and last issue was published in September 1936. It was used to deepen the understanding of the theatre among the Korean intelligentsia and also had an educational function.’ (Y. Seo, 1982: 213)

25 TARA regularly invited trainees. Initially, twenty trainees were selected in November 1931 with the establishment of the academy. The content of the theatre academy programme covered general theory of the theatre and its production such as theatre history, drama theory, acting skills, stage effects, stage make-up and voice training. This theatre academy was held regularly until 1939. TARA also organised public lectures, which mainly focused on the development of the modern European theatre. Like the theatre academy classes, the public lectures were regularly organised. The first public lecture in November 1931 included the following:

*After the German Free Theatre* by Hi-Soon Jo  
*About the French Arts Theatre* by Heon-Goo Yi  
*The Past and Present in Russian Theatre* by Dae-Hoon Ham  
*Theatre Culture and the Future of Korean Home Drama* by In-Seop Jeong

26 Despite their well-conceived policy, the response of Korean audiences and critics did not meet TARA’s expectations. Modern Western drama remained an unfamiliar dramatic form to the Korean audience. After 1933 TARA overcame
this problem when Chi-Jin Yoo insisted on original theatre. This change in the policy of TARA encouraged Korean dramatists, who until then had been denied the chance to be commercial writers. As a result, TARA discovered many playwrights and dramatists such as Chi-Jin Yoo, Moo-Young Yi, Seo-Hyang Yi, Gwang-Rae Yi, Jin-Soo Kim and Se-Deok Ham who provided their plays for TARA productions, based on which many brilliant original Korean dramas were produced. This was the other significant contribution of TARA.

27 Almost all commercial plays, well-made melodramas in this context, were written by Korean playwrights. Unfortunately, these commercial plays were not published at the time, as a way to protect copyright. Some copies for censorship and rehearsal disappeared after World War II when the Japanese Colonial Government destroyed many documents including plays. Some remaining copies also disappeared during the Korean War (1950-1953).

28 As a result of the Japanese Colonial Government’s ‘Immigration Policy’, many Koreans moved to Manchuria and Manchuria is today in the district of jurisdiction of Pyeongyang in the Roman Catholic Diocese.

29 The Japanese Government prohibited the communist drive in all cases. Therefore, ‘The Proletarian Theatre Movement’ itself was illegal. Small theatre group was the only way to perform proletarian theatre. It was inevitable that the proletarian theatre weakened as the proletarian theatre artists could not expect any income from the performance. However, its theatrical significance was that small group theatres and self-established theatres, whose target audience was the labor force and peasantry, developed into the progressive national theatre movement after the liberation of 15 August 1945.