PANORAMA SCHOLARLY GROUP

Global Review of Humanities, Arts and Society *(GRHAS)*

https://grhas.centraluniteduniversity.de/index.php/files



Rethinking Tradition in the Digital Age: An Oral History with Professor Joo-Young Kim on the Transmission and Development of Traditional Dance in China and Korea

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
traditional dance; Joo-Young Kim; oral history; intangible cultural heritage; digital transmission

DOI: *https://doi.org/10.63802/grhas.V1.I5.187*

ABSTRACT

This article presents an in-depth interview with Professor Joo-Young Kim, a leading Korean dance scholar, to systematically explore the multifaceted challenges and adaptive transformations faced by traditional dance in China and Korea under the intertwined pressures of globalization and digitalization. The dialogue unfolds around five central themes, each subjected to critical theoretical analysis: 1. The philosophical conflict and potential synthesis between traditional embodied pedagogies—epitomized by oral transmission and sensory apprenticeship—and the Western anatomical training models embedded in modern education systems. 2. The tensions between the institutional protection of traditional dance through "heritagization" and the standardization it often entails, which can undermine the form's inherent fluidity, diversity, and performative vitality. 3. The reconfiguration of traditional dance images through mass media (film, television, popular music) and new media (short video platforms), which risks transforming cultural practices into commodified spectacles and detaching them from their historical contexts. 4. The impact of contemporary performance mechanisms, wherein artistic theatricalization may lead to a separation of dance from its original social and ritual functions, thus threatening the integrity of its cultural ecology. 5. The challenges posed by emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR)—which, while offering unprecedented opportunities for the recording and dissemination of dance, also confront the embodied immediacy and experiential depth at the core of traditional practices.
Throughout the interview, Professor Kim articulates a consistent and critical stance: traditional dance should not be understood merely as stage-bound art, but rather as a culturally embedded social practice expressed through the body and rooted in specific communities. As such, any attempt at modernization—whether through educational reform, heritage preservation, media integration, or technological innovation—must be grounded in an unwavering respect for the cultural integrity and embodied essence of these traditions. Beyond documenting Professor Kim's critical reflections, this article outlines her multidimensional strategies for sustaining the "living" continuity of tradition amidst complex contemporary realities, offering forward-looking insights for the field.

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Interview Details:

Date: June 19, 2025

Location: Chuncheon, South Korea

Interviewer: Qin Shi

Interviewee: Professor Joo-Young Kim

Transcription and Editing: Qin Shi

1. Introduction: The Body in the Storm — The Contemporary Predicament of East Asian Traditional Dance

Entering the 21st century, globalization and digitalization are reshaping the global cultural landscape with unprecedented intensity and reach. Within this shifting paradigm, traditional dances of China and Korea—rich carriers of centuries-old collective memory and aesthetic ideals—have been swept into a profound and complex transformation. At the heart of this storm lies the multifaceted dialogue, collision, and negotiation between "tradition" and "modernity."

Modern educational systems, mass media, and digital technologies have opened new channels for the dissemination and development of these ancient art forms, enabling them to transcend regional and cultural boundaries and enter the broader public consciousness. However, this evolution is not without consequence. The commodification of tradition often leads to *de-historicization*; the spread of culture via new media results in *fragmentation*; and the institutionalization of heritage through theatrical staging may cause *de-contextualization*. Together, these forces construct a highly complex and tension-filled contemporary landscape.

It is against this backdrop that we had the privilege of engaging in a deep conversation with Professor Joo-Young Kim, a prominent Korean scholar whose decades-long research in East Asian dance history and body theory bridges both Chinese and Korean traditions. Professor Kim has demonstrated remarkable critical insight at the intersection of the traditional and the modern.

Through the method of oral history, this interview seeks to systematically document and interpret Professor Kim's reflections on the most pressing issues facing the field of traditional dance today. Her perspectives not only offer precise critiques of contemporary challenges but also engage in a deeper philosophical reflection that transcends technical discourse to touch upon foundational cultural questions.

This article is structured around five key dimensions emphasized by Professor Kim—pedagogy, heritagization, mediatization, social function, and technological convergence—with the aim of providing a theoretically grounded and practically valuable reference for practitioners, scholars, and policymakers dedicated to sustaining the *living transmission* of traditional culture.

2. Pedagogical Transformations: Seeking Balance Between Embodied Learning and Scientific Analysis

Q: In the transmission of traditional dance, pedagogy is a central pillar. Under modern educational systems, how do traditional teaching methods such as *oral transmission and embodied apprenticeship* conflict with Western anatomical and scientific training models? And how might a balance be achieved?

Professor Joo-Young Kim: *The most significant transformation and source of tension in contemporary dance education in both China and Korea stems from the collision of two fundamentally different epistemologies and conceptions of the body. On one hand, we have the holistic, intuitive embodied pedagogy represented by oral transmission; on the other, the analytical, modern teaching approach grounded in Western anatomy and movement science.*

2.1. The Essence of Oral Transmission: Sensory Memory as Cultural Internalization

There is a common misconception that *oral transmission* is a crude, unscientific method based purely on imitation. In fact, its core is far more profound. The primary aim of traditional dance transmission is not geometric precision of movement or maximum muscular efficiency, but a deeply embodied process of cultural internalization. This process does not rely on rational analysis and deconstruction, but rather on what I call the *sensory memory of the body*.

As I have often explained: the term *oral transmission* (*kou chuan xin shou*) literally means "teaching by mouth and heart." The emphasis is not merely on verbal instruction (*kou*), but on the intuitive grasp (*xin*)—a resonance that happens not through logic, but through full-body perception. In a traditional master-disciple setting, the student is not simply observing technique with her eyes. More importantly, she is *sensing* with her entire body. She feels the rhythm and breath of the master's movement, intuits emotional intention through eye expressions, listens to the inner rhythm aligning footsteps with music, and immerses herself in a shared emotional and energetic field created between teacher and student. It is a fully immersive, highly individualized experience.

This embodied method, I would argue, is closely aligned with contemporary neuroscience—particularly with the concept of *procedural memory*, which involves encoding complex cultural information, aesthetic patterns, and affective modes into the neuromuscular system through repeated physical practice. I also draw from theories of *embodied cognition*, which provide a scientific framework for understanding how cultural knowledge is enacted through the body. Traditional dance pedagogy offers a living, exemplary model of this cognitive approach.

2.2. The Dual Nature of Scientific Pedagogy: Efficiency and the Risk of Decontextualization

In stark contrast to the sensory, holistic approach of *oral transmission* is the modern method rooted in biomechanics and kinesiology. I take a cautious but dialectical view of this approach. On the one hand, scientific training undeniably improves technique, safety, and efficiency. It transforms vague sensations into quantifiable metrics, enhancing pedagogical precision and standardization.

However, we must not ignore the hidden dangers. When a living, culturally meaningful traditional movement is reduced to a set of muscle contractions and anatomical alignments, we may gain efficiency—but lose the soul. This approach objectifies the dancer's body, turning it from a lived subject of experience into a passive object of measurement and control. The most critical consequence is *decontextualization*. Take, for example, a ritual movement in a traditional dance for heaven-worship. Its slow, solemn tempo may originate from a sense of reverence. Yet in

scientific training, it might be reduced to: "quadriceps contraction, knee flexion to 90 degrees." The student may learn the *form*, but miss the *spirit*. The ritual meaning, communal resonance, and aesthetic ethos embedded in the movement are silently stripped away in the process of analytic dissection.

2.3. A Hybrid Future: Constructing a Body-Centered, Technology-Assisted Pedagogy

Rather than advocating a return to tradition or a blind embrace of modernity, I propose a synthesis—a *body-centered, technology-assisted* pedagogical model that operates on three levels:

First, we must implement a *hybrid pedagogy* that does not pit the two approaches against each other but integrates them organically. Scientific analysis can be invaluable for foundational training, especially in preventing injury and refining technique. But when it comes to stylistic nuance and emotional expression, we must return to the immersive, intuitive modes of *oral transmission*, emphasizing embodied demonstration, emotional resonance, and the cultivation of aesthetic imagination.

Second, we must strengthen *contextualized training*. Teachers must assume the role of cultural mediators. Every dance taught should be accompanied by its historical background, cultural customs, and mythological narratives. Only through this holistic approach can the dancer's body truly become a living vessel of history and tradition.

Finally, we must actively preserve the *living demonstrations* of elder masters. These individuals embody *embodied knowledge* that no book or digital archive can replicate. Educational institutions must create opportunities for these "living national treasures" to directly engage with younger generations, fostering intergenerational transmission through the immediacy of shared bodily experience.

3. The Dilemma of *Heritagization*: Between the Ark of Institutional Protection and the River of Living Transmission

Q: As an institutional mechanism for safeguarding culture, the designation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has undoubtedly brought many benefits. However, do you see any inherent contradictions in this process? Where do these tensions lie?

Professor Joo-Young Kim: Heritagization is not a neutral or purely technical act of cultural preservation. Rather, it is a quintessentially modern intervention. At its core, it involves the selection, refinement, naming, and formalization of a once organically evolving and community-embedded cultural practice—primarily to render it preservable and administrable. To meet the criteria of inscription, applicants are often compelled to distill a "standard version" of the dance, which inevitably sacrifices its original fluidity, improvisational character, and plurality of forms.

3.1. The Central Dilemma: The Perpetual Tension Between Standardization and Diversity

This leads us to the fundamental dilemma of *heritagization*: the persistent tension between standardization and diversity, between formalization and creative transformation.

To illustrate, Professor Kim offers the example of a Korean mask dance: "In Village A, the dance might be more humorous and playful; in Village B, it might carry a strong ritual tone. But when we apply for heritage status, we are often forced to choose one version as the 'authentic' representation—or worse, to create a hybrid 'standard version' that merges elements from both. Once that version is institutionalized, it tends to marginalize or even erase other localized variants, undermining the very cultural diversity we aim to protect."

A deeper paradox arises from the pursuit of *authenticity* and *immutability*—qualities highly valued in heritage frameworks—which can, ironically, cast any form of innovation as a betrayal of tradition. Professor Kim poses a critical question: "When a dance is proclaimed as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,' will the younger generation of practitioners still feel empowered to experiment or innovate, even modestly? Or will they be intimidated by the frozen 'standard,' becoming guardians of the past rather than living carriers of the tradition?"

She summarizes the paradox succinctly: while institutional preservation aims to ensure continuity, its mechanisms—fixation and standardization—may end up stifling the very life force of tradition: its capacity for evolution and creativity.

3.2. Seeking a Way Forward: Building Flexible Systems That Protect Fluidity Itself

Despite these challenges, Professor Kim remains hopeful and proposes a more nuanced and flexible paradigm—a "post-heritagization" approach. She believes the critical question is: *What exactly are we trying to preserve?* A specific, fixed version of a dance? Or the dance tradition's inherent ability to evolve and renew itself?

If we choose the latter, a major shift in our thinking and institutional frameworks is required.

She offers three concrete recommendations:

(1) Implement Plural Documentation Strategies: Archives should function like ecological museums, systematically and impartially recording *multiple versions* of the same dance across regions, lineages, and historical periods. This plurality of documentation is itself a profound act of respect for traditional diversity.

(2) Promote Community-Driven Transmission Models: The true custodians of intangible cultural heritage are the communities that practice and sustain it. Thus, protection efforts must devolve a degree of authority back to the community level. Governments and experts should act as facilitators and supporters—not as managers or arbitrators.

(3) Establish a Dual Structure of Institutional and Folk Heritage: On one hand, national and international heritage registries should continue to exist as symbolic and strategic instruments. On the other hand, equal emphasis must be placed on building and sustaining a *parallel grassroots system*—a living, vibrant space where folk practices can flourish outside rigid institutional constraints.

Professor Kim concludes this section with a poignant metaphor: "Our future heritage protection efforts must not aim to turn a fast-flowing 'river of culture' into a still, artificial lake. Our task is to reinforce the riverbed and clear the channels—so that this river can continue to flow, in its own way, toward a healthy and enduring future."

4. The Double-Edged Sword of Media Representation: Walking the Razor's Edge Between Cultural Diplomacy and Symbolic Consumption

Q: As traditional dance enters the realms of mass media and new media platforms, what opportunities and challenges arise? How do you evaluate the impact of this process of "mediatization"?

Professor Joo-Young Kim: *Mediatization is a sharp double-edged sword. On one side, it brings unprecedented visibility to traditional dance. On the other, it exposes these practices to the deep crisis of spectacularization and symbolic commodification.*

4.1. The "Magnifying Effect" of Mass Media: From Cultural Representation to Spectacular Consumption

Professor Kim begins by acknowledging the positive role of mass media—such as film, television, and popular music—in promoting traditional culture. These platforms can project the aesthetic beauty of traditional dance to audiences of millions, transforming it into a powerful, mobile "cultural emblem" for the nation.

However, she introduces a critical concept: *spectacular consumption*. Driven by commercial logic, the appropriation of traditional dance by mass media is often not rooted in respect for its cultural meanings, but rather in its use as a visually exotic or aestheticized element. This leads to what Professor Kim terms *de-historicization*: "Tradition is stripped of its original narrative and historical context, distilled, simplified, and re-coded into an easily recognizable and consumable *iconized motif*." The philosophical depth, historical memory, and spiritual values embedded in traditional dances are gradually diluted in the pursuit of entertainment and mass appeal—until only an ornate yet hollow visual shell remains.

4.2. The "Fragmentation Trap" of New Media: From Wholeness to Sliced Spectacles

If the danger of mass media lies in *spectacularization*, the threat posed by short-form platforms like TikTok is even more structurally embedded. Professor Kim refers to this as *fragmentation*.

She concedes that short video platforms, with their unmatched *accessibility and visibility*, have greatly contributed to the popularization of traditional dance. However, she warns of a fundamental structural conflict between the logic of these platforms and the aesthetic nature of traditional dance.

"Traditional dance—especially those with ritualistic or narrative depth—is essentially a rich, coherent *text*," she explains. Short-form media, by contrast, dismembers this text. Like a pair of sharp scissors, it slices an organically unified art form into isolated segments that aim solely for instant visual impact. As a result, the way audiences engage with dance shifts—from participatory, function-oriented practice to passive, symbolic consumption. Dances that once served functions of prayer, storytelling, or moral education are reduced to visually striking fragments—ready for likes, replication, and eventual forgetting.

4.3. A Path Forward: Building Bridges Between "Meaning" and "Traffic"

Despite the risks, Professor Kim does not advocate for rejection. Instead, she calls for a culturally conscious strategy of *critical engagement*. The key lies in leveraging media's reach while counteracting its reductive tendencies—*building a bridge between cultural meaning and digital traffic*.

Regarding mass media, she proposes three key safeguards:

(1) Cultivate creators with cultural literacy: Arts and media institutions should collaborate on interdisciplinary curricula that expose future directors, writers, and producers to traditional cultural knowledge.

(2) Establish expert advisory systems: During the early planning stages of films or large-scale productions, the inclusion of domain experts and seasoned practitioners should be mandatory to ensure cultural accuracy.

(3) Embed tradition narratively: Encourage creators to integrate traditional dance as a meaningful narrative device—contributing to character development or plot—not merely as decorative spectacle.

For new media platforms, Professor Kim proposes targeted strategies adapted to digital logic:

(1) Use "short-form + deep content" hybrids: Pair engaging short videos with comment sections or linked content that leads viewers to full-length performances, historical contexts, or behind-the-scenes insights.

(2) Promote *digital curation* practices: Museums and performance institutions should run official accounts on short video platforms, releasing curated, themed content that contributes to a coherent body of online cultural knowledge.

She concludes with a resonant metaphor: "We cannot stop the tide of mediatization, but we can choose to become lucid surfers. Our task is to harness the power of the wave and steer the vessel of traditional culture toward wider seas—not let it be shattered into fragments by the surge."

5. From Stage to Life: Returning Dance to Its Native Cultural Soil

Q: Today, the protection of traditional dance seems overly focused on its presentation as stage performance. What risks does this model entail, and how can we restore dance to its original social functions?

Professor Joo-Young Kim: *First and foremost, we must recognize that traditional dance is essentially a social practice, and only secondarily a performing art. In traditional societies, most dances were not created for theatrical stages. They were integral to communal life: blessings at weddings, celebrations after harvests, rituals to ward off illness. In these settings, the boundaries between "performer" and "audience" were often blurred. Functionality outweighed pure aesthetics.*

5.1. The Perils of "Stage-Centric Preservation"

"Contemporary protection policies," Professor Kim argues, "have disproportionately focused resources and attention on cultivating elite national and provincial dance troupes, and on adapting traditional dances into polished productions suited for proscenium stages."
While this *stage-centric* approach has undoubtedly elevated the artistic quality and visual appeal of traditional dance, it comes at a steep cost: uprooting the practice from its native cultural environment.

She uses a vivid metaphor: "It's like transplanting a century-old tree, once freely growing in the wild mountains, into a climate-controlled glass conservatory. It may appear more beautiful and perfect, but it is cut off from sunlight, rain, wind, and the broader ecosystem that sustained it."

This severing from original contexts, she warns, threatens the diversity and organic vitality of the cultural ecosystem.

5.2. The Path of Re-Living: Balancing Preservation and Living Practice

To counter the "hollowing out" of traditional dance caused by excessive theatricalization, Professor Kim calls for a paradigm shift: from a *performance-centered* to a *practice-centered* model. The goal is to strike a dynamic balance between *preservation* and *re-living as part of everyday life*. She emphasizes: "Culture may survive through institutionalization, but it can only thrive through *living practice*."

She outlines three bottom-up strategies to achieve this re-grounding:

(1) Revitalize and Invest in Localized Traditional Practices: This requires a major reallocation of policy and funding priorities. While continuing to support elite professional troupes, greater emphasis must be placed on grassroots initiatives. This includes funding village-based dance preservation associations and local festivals rooted in community participation.

(2) Promote Community-Based Participatory Programs: To break down the performer–spectator barrier, public cultural institutions should shift from the one-way model of "we perform, you watch" toward interactive, embodied engagement. Professor Kim advocates for immersive projects that allow ordinary citizens to *experience* traditional dance through their own bodies—thus internalizing its joy and meaning.

(3) Redirect Cultural Policy from an Elite to a Community Orientation: She urges cultural authorities to adopt more sociologically grounded metrics when evaluating the success of preservation efforts. Instead of asking "How many international awards has this dance won?" we should be asking: "How many local people still participate in it?" or "How strongly do young people identify with this tradition?"

Professor Kim concludes with a moving image of embodied intergenerational transmission: "The revival of traditional dance as a community practice is key to reawakening the cultural vitality of a people. When a child, holding her grandfather's hand at a village temple fair, stumbles through the first awkward steps of a dance passed down for centuries—*that moment* carries more power and depth of transmission than any grand stage performance ever could."

6. The Prospects of Emerging Technologies: Navigating the Paradox Between Digital Immortality and Embodied Disappearance

Q: Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality have undoubtedly introduced unprecedented possibilities for the documentation and dissemination of traditional dance. But do they also pose challenges to the fundamental *corporeal presence* and *embodied experience* of traditional arts? How do you view the relationship between technology and traditional dance?

Professor Joo-Young Kim: *The core tension in technological engagement with traditional dance lies in how it impacts the most essential qualities of the form: corporeal presence and embodied experience.*

6.1. The Double Face of Technology: Opportunities for Perfect Representation vs. the Risk of Sensory Loss

Professor Kim begins by acknowledging the enormous potential of technology: "Motion capture can record, with extraordinary precision, every joint angle and muscular movement of a master's dance in three dimensions. VR can create immersive learning environments where students on the other side of the world can virtually stand beside the master, observing and mimicking every move in 360 degrees. AI can analyze vast data sets to detect the subtlest stylistic nuances between different lineages and masters."

In her view, these technologies offer unparalleled capabilities on the level of *representational documentation*.

However, she quickly moves to articulate a more profound ontological concern. No matter how advanced technology becomes, it cannot replicate two core elements of traditional dance: its *presence* and its *interaffectivity*. "Traditional dance is a living, performative art—realized by living bodies in specific times and places," she emphasizes. Its power derives largely from the *irreplaceability of live encounter*: the dancer's breath, sweat, and the shared energy field of the people present. In Korean, this resonance is called *gyogam* (교감)—a state of mutual affect and empathetic communion.

For Professor Kim, technology creates an inherent and often insurmountable gap in transmitting *embodied experience*. This *loss of bodily immediacy* is its greatest danger, potentially ushering in a form of *disembodied transmission*.

6.2. A New Path Forward: A "Body-Centric, Technology-Assisted" Paradigm

Confronted with this tension, Professor Kim is unequivocal in her position: she advocates for a "body-centric, technology-assisted" paradigm. "Our goal," she states, "is not to use AI to create perfect 'digital dancers' to replace humans, but to design technology as a tool that *supports and enhances* the memory and learning capacity of human dancers."

She proposes several application scenarios:

(1) A young dancer uses VR to rehearse within a virtual recreation of an ancient palace or rural ritual setting—deepening their emotional and contextual understanding of the dance's origins.

(2) A teacher records a student's movements with motion capture, then employs AI to analyze discrepancies with a master's model—offering highly personalized feedback for improved precision.

(3) A dance researcher reconstructs a once-lost choreography through digital archives and 3D modeling, after which a live dancer re-embodies the form based on the reconstructed data.

In all these examples, technology does not displace the human body. Rather, it becomes a powerful partner in perception, learning, and memory. The body remains firmly at the center of the process.

6.3. Concluding Reflections: Toward Coexistence in Productive Tension

In closing, Professor Kim offers a philosophically grounded vision of future coexistence between tradition and technology: "Technology is not inherently the enemy of tradition. What matters is the philosophical framework we use to guide it."

She calls for a *lucid, critical cohabitation* with technology—a coexistence grounded not in passive acceptance but in deliberate tension and active stewardship.

"Our ultimate goal," she concludes, "is to make technology a tool that allows the memory of the body to live longer, clearer, and richer. This points to a new possibility: a paradigm in which ancient bodily wisdom and cutting-edge digital systems coexist in mutual respect and stimulation. This, I believe, may be the key to ensuring the vitality of traditional dance into the next century—and beyond."

Author Contribution

This manuscript is based on an in-depth academic interview conducted by Qin Shi with Professor Joo-Young Kim. Qin Shi was responsible for the interview design, transcription, translation, and editorial structuring of the text. Professor Kim provided the core analytical content through oral responses and approved the final version of the manuscript. Both authors contributed intellectually and jointly shaped the thematic development of the interview.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Compliance with Ethical Standards: Not required.

Informed Consent: Obtained from all participants.

Ethical Approval: This work does not involve any studies with human or animal subjects requiring institutional ethics clearance.

Funding

None

Competing Interest declaration

The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

None

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Appendix

Embodied Cognition: This theoretical framework posits that cognition does not occur solely within the brain but is fundamentally grounded in the body's interaction with its environment. It emphasizes the central role of the body in cognitive processes, suggesting that the body itself is both the vehicle of thought and a source of embodied intelligence.

Procedural Memory: A type of implicit memory related to the performance of tasks—such as riding a bicycle or swimming—that, once learned, becomes difficult to articulate but remains deeply retained in the body through practice.