

Ritual to Heal

“칠성 새남굿 (Chilseong Saenamgutringut): Ritual for Sickness”

Performance: Dohee Lee’s “Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness,” presented by Gibney

Place: Gibney Center, New York, NY, February 23, 2023

Words by Karen Greenspan



“I was born on this island of conflict, where beauty and trauma collide,” sings Dohee Lee referring to her native Jeju Island off the coast of South Korea. With sung narrative, she invites the presence of her Korean ancestors and the ancestral land itself for her world premiere of “Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness.” Wearing a white cotton robe layered with strips of white paper and a white turban, she rings the shaman’s bell and opens her arms welcoming the audience members at Gibney Center in New York City (February 23-25) to heal along with her in a potent adaptation of a Korean healing ritual.

Jeju Island—sculpted by ocean, wind, and rocks—is the heart of Korean shamanism. Claiming 18,000 gods and goddesses and a matriarchy of women divers (for seafood), it is also the site of a United States naval base, a traumatic massacre in 1948, and multiple colonial occupations. Lee’s song continues:
“The wind blows,
The wind goddess, Youngdueng, brought me here to stand on another land of conflict.
I taste the same air here.”

Her vocalization (mostly in Korean) is layered over Adria Otte’s evocative score blending instrumental and nature sounds. Then with the command of an opera star, Lee gathers her shamanic implements—two bamboo branches, white paper flags, a set of knives attached to white streamers, and dances through the space belting out a rousing hymn to commence her daunting task.



Dohee Lee’s “Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness” presented by Gibney. Photo by Whitney Browne

Having trained at the master level in Korean traditional dance and music as well as with the shamans of Jeju Island combined with studying and collaborating with postmodern dance visionary Anna Halprin, Lee is a performing powerhouse. In addition, she has coalesced a group of highly talented collaborators for this full-scale production. By the end of the evening, she has crossed from the mundane world to the extraordinary and back again bringing along the audience and her onstage collaborators (three drummers and a ritual assistant) on this cathartic journey.

“Chilseong” began within the Asian immigrant and refugee community in California’s Bay Area, where Dohee Lee and her organization, Puri Arts, develop and produce community art and performance projects to support the community’s process of collective healing. The sickness, which Lee is dedicated to healing through her ritual performance, is not a physical ailment or a pandemic. It is instead the collective trauma from systemic oppression—of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, materialism, and militarism. In this work, she takes a shamanic ritual that is usually performed in private for a sick individual and recreates it as a public ritual for our collective ills.



Dohee Lee's "Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness" presented by Gibney. Photo by Whitney Browne

The ritual set and costumes are imaginatively realized by visual artist Dana Kawano with an ingenious integration of diverse materials. Two vertical white cloth runners hang against the back of the stage representing the bridge along which 18,000 deities descend. Suspended from overhead are three soft cylindrical constructions. The central white fabric cylinder represents the placenta (life force). The two clear cylinders on the sides each house a costume to be worn by Lee enabling her transformation into the essential characters of the ritual. An altar arranged with offerings of rice, thread, spirit money (sheets of white paper decorated with cut-out geometric designs), drinks, and ritual utensils is located upstage center. Finally, a box of additional props located downstage center completes the set-up.

"When we do a ritual, there is a lot of preparation," Lee emphasized during our interview prior to the performance. Regarding the implements she dances with, she explained:

“I hold one paper flag that represents the land. I also hold two bamboo branches with flags tied to them. These flags have lots of hands [paper cutouts] used to catch the spirits. The paper streamers that are attached to knives represent our mother goddess. So I am literally holding *her*. The paper part is her dress, and the knives are the bridge to the deity.”



Dohee Lee’s “Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness” presented by Gibney. Photo by Whitney Browne

The three drummers (Emily Encina, Jaeun Jun, and Adria Otte) seated stage left, assert a steady beat as Lee gathers her implements and dances. Her steps subtly rise and fall like breath in the body. She manipulates her implements inscribing the extended kinesphere with sweeping arcs and spirals until she clasps the branches together extending and shaking them toward the sky. She repeats these gestures facing each cardinal direction with a building energy that culminates in a sustained spinning sequence.

Sounds of resonating vocals mixed with twinkly chimes nudge the action along as Lee and ritual assistant Mi Kyung Kim each unfurl a white cloth runner on the

floor running parallel down the center of the stage. Lee kneels before the box of props facing the audience and sits back on her heels. Closing her eyes, she rocks back and forth and motions with her arms inviting the monstrous spirit (illness) to enter her. Her shoulders and chest rise and fall as her breathing grows more excited and tinged with weeping. In the score, we hear disturbed, rapid chatter as Lee shakes, trembles, and grabs at the air. The agitation crescendos with the cymbals clanging loudly rousing Lee to her feet.

Jumping upward and flailing her arms, Lee is utterly filled with fierce energy. She sheds her white robe and enters one of the clear cylinders (like a narrow shower stall) to don the monster costume of colorful paper strips, straw, and rope embellished with rows of tiny white skulls and paper hands with a mask/headdress to match. Bathed in red light, she grabs a small doll-size version of her monster self and cavorts about the stage aggressively lunging, punching, kicking, and stomping with twitches and jerks as she provokes and taunts. The accompaniment of loud, harsh, syncopated percussion is now played in stereo—with musicians stationed on both sides of the stage. The overall emotional temperature is raised courtesy of the inspired lighting design by José María Francos.

Seeming to run out of steam, Lee unmask and disrobes muttering audibly as she prostrates before the other cylinder. Entering it, she transforms again and steps out as a snake. Encased in a white muslin costume lined with a series of hoops and decorated with black ink designs and white hanging tassels, she hunches over like a primordial creature emerging from the water. Her hands and feet caress the space and floor as she senses her way across the stage and exits. The musicians sing and drum an interlude while Lee changes into a traditional shaman's *hanbok* (traditional Korean attire consisting of a full skirted dress bound under the armpits with a ribbon-sash).



Dohee Lee's "Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness" presented by Gibney. Photo by Whitney Browne

Lee explained that the snake is the *chilseong* (snake deity) from the title of the ritual. She continued:

"The snake represents the life force and vital energy—the place of rebirth from sickness. In the traditional way of doing the ritual, we make a small snake with paper, but I wanted to make a snake I could wear. In the same way, we make a doll to represent the monster, and the shaman sends it off the island so it won't bother people anymore. But I felt like that was not enough. I needed to become the monster and see how that feels. For me, this monster is also a victim. So, how can we heal it and let it go back to its life? That's my way of dealing with sickness." Dressed in her *hanbok*, Lee completes the ritual in the traditional way vocalizing many customary prayers as she dances her hand implements to the four directions while kneeling and bowing. Visibly exhausted, Lee revives herself skipping about and gathering three colored streamers in red, green, and yellow. Lee explained, "These colors represent our ancestors, the deities, and the space that holds everything. I use them for cleansing—the space and the people." She spirals the

colored chiffon through the air with her right arm while she hikes up her skirt with her left. Her movements intensify as she energetically throws, catches, and tussles with the streamers—even tossing them at the musicians. Finally, she throws them to the side and commences a spinning frenzy.



Dohee Lee's Chilseong Saenamgut (Duringut): Ritual for Sickness presented by Gibney. Photo by Whitney Browne

Taking a sip of water, Lee addresses the audience directly saying, “This ritual is too short. It usually lasts a full week!” And in a most convincing way, she encourages the audience to come onstage to participate more directly. We are invited to sit as she and her assistant sing and move circulating among us with the paper streamers thrusting them in a downward motion. You can feel them brushing against the front of your body and then the back. Then asked to stand, we dance with Lee to a reprise of an earlier hymn with a stirring 6/8 meter. It is, of course, quite healing and magical to dance under the lights to live music with other people invested in the moment.

We return to our seats and Lee performs a final traditional song-dance to purge the monstrous spirits that cause illness and close the gates (from the program notes). The energized musicians, in addition to their drumming, sing a rousing choral response to each of Lee's sung verses. She dances her implements to each direction and after bowing repeatedly to the central spirit (cylinder), she launches into a final prolonged spin—and the ritual is concluded.

In speaking with me, Lee made clear, “My motivation for coming to the United States was to make art—non-traditional art. But I'm not really making art for art's sake. I use art to serve the people, the spirit, and all the different dimensions that need to be heard.”