

“Portlandia” star Armisen startled after discovering he’s a “quarter Korean”

By Kim Tong-Hyung
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — American actor and comedian Fred Armisen recently learned his grandfather was a legendary dancer from Japan who, while living in Germany in the 1930s and '40s, allegedly volunteered in propaganda work for the Third Reich, and moonlighted as a spy for the emperor in Tokyo.

But among the startling discoveries about his lineage, the “Portlandia” star seemed most shocked about what has been general knowledge in the art world — the late Masami Kuni was actually Korean.

“Well, that changes everything,” a stunned Armisen said during a recent appearance on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) ancestry series “Finding Your Roots,” where host Henry Louis Gates Jr. revealed to him that Kuni was born in Korea in 1908 as Park Yeong-in.

“I’m a quarter Korean?” Armisen continued in disbelief. “You have to understand that I tell people, that I have interviews where I say I’m quarter Japanese ... I’m not Japanese at all.”

Before the end of World War II, Kuni was seen as an influential dancer, choreographer, and theorist whose work bridged Asian traditions and European modern dance. However, he received less recognition after the 1950s, apparently because of his past as a pro-Nazi artist, according to South Korean dance scholar Oksun Son, who wrote a study about Kuni in 2014.

While living in Germany from 1937 to 1945, Kuni staged dozens of performances in Germany and other European countries such as Italy and Hungary, Son said. It was also during this time when Kuni had a brief affair with a young German woman who gave birth to Armisen’s father in 1941, according to “Finding Your Roots.”

Kuni participated in propaganda activities for the Nazis, which included performances for frontline German troops, according to the PBS show, which cited a 1939 Japanese newspaper report. The show also uncovered a 1944 report from the U.S. Office of War Information which suggested that Kuni worked as a secret agent for Japan during his time in Germany and gathered information on southern European and Turkish affairs.

“He is a Japanese dancer and appears from time to time in the different capitals of Europe, always being charged with special duties which he covers by his profession. He is one of the most clever agents they have,” said the report from an American agent based in Istanbul. The show said it failed to find any other evidence indicating that Kuni worked as a spy.

“This is so insane,” Armisen said. “If this ended with you saying that he was a famous Japanese dancer, I am good ...

HK activist Wong says China rise means trade trumps rights

By Kelvin Chan and Yi-Ling Liu
The Associated Press

HONG KONG — Young Hong Kong democracy activist Joshua Wong is warning that China’s rise means human rights are in increasingly greater danger of being overshadowed globally by business interests.

He was responding to questions about his expectations for the Asian tour by U.S. President Donald Trump, who is visiting China and four other countries.

The 21-year-old Wong, Hong Kong’s most famous activist, is out on bail while he appeals a prison sentence related to his involvement in massive 2014 pro-democracy protests.

“Business interests override human rights,” he said in an interview with The Associated Press. “It unfortunately seems to be a common trend in the world” under a rising China.

During Trump’s Asian trip, he said there’s likely to be “a lot of uncertainty. No one can expect what will suddenly be published on his Twitter.” But he urged Trump to not let human rights lose out to commercial considerations, hinting that U.S. business interests could also someday be directly affected by China’s rising clout.

As an example, he referred to the recent case of British human-rights activist Benedict Rogers, who was barred from entering Hong Kong on what many suspect to be Beijing’s request, and said it might happen again.

“The day may come for U.S. politicians to be blocked from entering Hong Kong and when politicians or businessmen from the U.S. might not be possible to enter such an international financial center, how can they keep silent on the erosion of Hong Kong autonomy?” he said.

Beijing promised to allow Hong Kong to maintain wide autonomy and civil liberties after its 1997 handover from Britain under the “one country, two systems” blueprint,



ARMISEN’S ANCESTRY. Fred Armisen, star of the television show “Portlandia,” is seen in Los Angeles in this May 31, 2017 file photo. During a recent appearance on the ancestry series “Finding Your Roots” on the Public Broadcasting Service, Armisen learned his grandfather was a legendary dancer from Japan who, while living in Germany in the 1930s and '40s, allegedly volunteered in propaganda work for the Third Reich and moonlighted as a spy for the emperor in Tokyo. (Photo by Richard Shotwell/Invision/AP/File)

this clever agent, I can’t believe it ... it’s like a movie.”

Allegations that Kuni engaged in espionage activities for Imperial Japan have never been raised in South Korea, where Kuni’s overall body of artistic work is now largely overlooked or forgotten.

After the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, but was divided into the Soviet Union-controlled North and the U.S.-controlled South. Unlike many other famous Korean artists who returned home after the war, Kuni chose to stay in Japan and had very little contact with his family in South Korea. While Kuni choreographed *Chunhyang*, an opera based on a 17th-century Korean novel that was staged in Tokyo in 1948, he later distanced himself from Asia-centered themes and declared himself a “cosmopolitan,” Son said.

Born to a wealthy family in the southern port city of Ulsan, Kuni spent his childhood in Korea before leaving to study in Japan, which is where he adopted his Japanese name. While majoring in aesthetics at Tokyo Imperial University, Kuni pursued his passion in dance by taking classes from Baku Ishii, widely regarded as the father of Japanese modern dance who also taught perhaps the most famous Korean dancer ever, Choi Seunghee, who died in North Korea in 1969.

After graduating from the university, Kuni moved to Berlin on a Japanese government scholarship to pursue a doctorate at a Berlin university and learn from prominent German dancers such as Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman. After the war, Kuni moved to the United States in the 1960s and died in 2007.



PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS. Pro-democracy activists Joshua Wong, center, and Nathan Law, right, walk out of the Court of Final Appeal Hong Kong on October 24, 2017. Hong Kong’s highest court freed the pro-democracy activists on bail pending an appeal of their prison sentences after they were convicted of sparking massive protests in 2014. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

but pro-democracy activists and lawmakers fear China’s Communist rulers are renegeing on their pledge.

Wong urged the U.S. and other western countries to pay closer attention to “how the China model threatens Asia-Pacific stability.”

The China model is a reference to economic development without corresponding democratic reforms, as well as the name of a controversial booklet praising China’s one-party rule that the Hong Kong government planned to distribute in 2012 to schools as part of “moral and national education.” Wong helped lead protests that forced the government to shelve those plans.

Wong was given bail two months into a six-month prison sentence. He and a fellow activist, Nathan Law, were both sent to prison after the justice secretary won a legal challenge overturning more lenient sentences. The move sparked fears Hong Kong’s independent judiciary is

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