

Talchum: Voicing the People through Performing Art

Kona Brumsickle

Stonehill International School Bangalore, India

Abstract: Artwork that aims to express human emotions takes many forms. In particular, performing artists display emotions such as joy, sadness, longing, anger, and deliver their intended messages via theatre, dance, and music. Korean traditional mask dancing, or *talchum*, is unique in that the performers are completely hidden behind masks and costumes. Unlike theatre or dance, in which a significant amount of emotions are portrayed via facial expressions, *talchum* allows for its performers to portray characters that are beyond their innate gender and/or social status.

This study attempts to analyze how *talchum* dancers represent the public voice. *Talchum* originated among the common people of the *Chosun* dynasty as a tool for social criticism. By wearing masks (*tall*), performers can safely, without fear of retaliation from the government, mimic corrupt public leaders and reenact discriminative situations stemming from the *Chosun* Dynasty's social class system. *Talchum* performances during the late *Chosun* Dynasty, in particular, often mocked corrupt and incompetent aristocrats, as well as apostate monks who led promiscuous lives. Unethical romantic relationships and the miserable lives of poor working-class citizens were also popular sources for this satirical dance. Upon fastening on their *talls*, performers are exonerated from criminal accusations, and thus can freely express their emotions via their artwork. Unlike the present day in which mass media serves as an easily accessible channel for learning of social absurdities, the common people of the *Chosun* Dynasty relied on direct, oral communication. In this way, *talchum* was a valuable channel for exchanging stories of their daily lives. For Koreans, in conclusion, *talchum* was the commoners' way of rebuking its ruling class as well as the Establishment. In other words, *talchum* was the people's "voice."

Keywords: mask dancing, *talchum*, *Bongsang Talchum*, performing art, satire, *Chosun* Dynasty, social criticism.







I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, from Aristophanes of ancient Greece to Charlie Hebdo, social satire has greatly influenced society. British actor and comedian David Walliams argued that "social satire has been around since people have been around," and American journalist Molly Ivins described satire to be the "weapon of the powerless against the powerful." The various ways of exerting "power" throughout history have influenced the creation of specific types of satire fit to be used against each power form, and Korea was not an exception. Until the early *Chosun* Dynasty, Korea's *talchum* was a mask dance performed in local and provincial public gathering places. But by the middle of the 17th century, *talchum* was formally recognized as a form of art, and such dances were officially held on a stage called the *Sandae*, under the jurisdiction of the Royal Palace. In the Western hemisphere, realism emerged through art during the mid-19th century. The realism movement aimed to focus on non-idealized topics and events that were previously rejected in conventional works of art. Realistic works described people from all socio-economic classes, and often reflected changes resulting from the industrial and commercial revolutions. Within same context of this realist movement as well as the traditional social satire culture, Korea's *talchum* has also been passed on as a form of satirical literature that portrays the populace's voice on topics including the social class system, corruption, and social discrimination.

II. ANALYSIS: THE BONGSAN TALCHUM

Bongsan Talchum originated from various local villages in the *Hwanghae* Province (Northern Korea). The overarching plot involves Buddha's lion sent to punish apostate monks that lead corrupt lives in discordance with the Buddhist religious precepts. For the then Korean society, dominated by Confucian practices, *Bongsan Talchum* was a means to criticize such social absurdities in the form of performing art. Table I lists the masks used in *Bongsan Talchum*.

TABLE I: MASKS OF THE BONGSAN TALCHUM

	<i>Sang-jwa</i> , a young and innocent monk		<i>Mall-ttuck</i> , a cynic of the corrupt ruling class
	<i>Mok-joong</i> , a secular monk		<i>So-moo</i> , the maiden who seduces <i>Noh-jang</i>
	<i>Noh-jang</i> , an old monk who seduces <i>So-moo</i>		<i>Chui-ball</i> , <i>Noh-jang</i> 's romantic rival

The mask of *Sang-jwa*, the young and innocent monk, is pure white and decorated with drooping eyes. *Sang-jwa* is a young monk that is at the service of an old monk of high seniority. His large, wide eyes, sharp nose and pale lips come together to create a somewhat worrisome facial expression. In contrast, the *Mok-joong* mask represents secular Buddhist monks prevalent during the *Chosun* Dynasty. The masculine facial structure, defined forehead, large nose and emphasized mustache are not characteristics of a typical monk. His eyes and lips portray exaggerated joy, and the yellow dots are intentionally added to emphasize his youthful nature. *Chui-ball*'s mask is rather gruesome. His ponytail resembles that of an aristocrat, but is disheveled. Moreover, it is hard to tell from his lips whether he is smiling or frowning. He has the complexion of a drunkard, and has many wrinkles on his forehead. *Chui-ball* steals *Noh-jang*'s romantic interest. *Noh-jang*'s mask is ludicrous. A full set of white eyebrows are settled on top of a black background, and his round eyes and protruding lips do not resemble that of a typical monk. *Noh-jang* does not conform to Buddhist precepts, and rather commits his life to seducing young *So-moo*. *So-moo*'s face is pure white like that of *Sang-jwa*, and has dark defined eyebrows. She uses her red lips and cheeks to seduce *Noh-jang*. Lastly, *Mall-ttuck* has a quite rugged face. His frowning mouth depicts a character of anger. In the dance, *Mall-ttuck* criticizes the ruling class and exposes corruption. A total of 27 masks (including four *Sang-jwas*, eight *Mok-joongs*, *Noh-jang*, *Chui-ball*, the shoe-merchant, *Saeng-won* (aristocrat), *Seo-bang* and *Doryun* (young aristocrats), *Mall-ttuck*, *Yeong-gam*, Grandma *Miyal*, *So-moo*, Buddha's lion, and the shaman) are used in the *Bongsan Talchum*.

The *Bongsan Talchum* is divided into seven episodes as follows:

[Act 1] Ceremonial Opening Dance by the Four Young Monks (*Sang-jwa*)

[Act 2] The Eight Buddhist Monks (*Mok-joong*)

[Act 3] Dance and Songs by *Sadang* and *Kosa*

[Act 4] The Old Priest's Dance

- Scene 1: The Old Priest (*Noh-jang*) and the Young Shaman (*So-moo*)
- Scene 2: The Shoe Merchant
- Scene 3: The Prodigal (*Chui-ball*)

[Act 5] The Lion Dance**[Act 6]** The Noblemen and their servant (*Mall-ttuck*)**[Act 7]** The Old Couple (*Yeong-gam* and Grandma *Miyal*)

Act 1, the ceremonial opening by the four young monks, signals the beginning of the dance to the four traditional Gods representing the North, the East, the South, and the West. It is a ceremonial act of cleansing the stage from evil spirits. In other words, it is a ritual process of driving away evil spirits.

In Act 2, the eight *Mok-joongs* appear one by one, each intelligently reciting a famous line of traditional poetry. They then dance blissfully around the stage. This act is the most elegant and masculine dance within the *Bongsan Talchum*.

The *Sadang* Dance, Act 3, is dominated by a widowed Grhapati's dynamic performance. His initial solo dance is followed by *Sadang* carried onto the stage on a palanquin supported by seven other Grhapatis. They take notice of the widowed Grhapati and run around the stage to in attempt to seize him. The widower is ultimately chased out of the stage. *Sadang* and the seven Grhapatis throw back their masks and elatedly sing vulgar folk songs (*taryeong*).

Act 4, the Old Priest's Dance, is divided into three scenes: *Noh-jang's* Dance, the Shoe Merchant's Dance, and *Chui-ball's* Dance. *Noh-jang's* Dance portrays an old monk, previously praised by the incarnation of Buddha, violating Buddhist commandments upon being seduced by young *So-moo*. In the Shoe Merchant Dance, *Noh-jang* buys shoes for *So-moo* on credit, and the merchant sends a monkey to *Noh-jang* to collect debt. However, the monkey flees as soon as *Noh-jang* threatens to beat it with firewood. *Chui-ball's* Dance is decorated with scenes in which *Chui-ball* defeats *Noh-jang* after a prolonged battle. *Chui-ball* then falls in love with *So-moo*. The couple gives birth to a child, to whom *Chui-ball* teaches how to read and write.

In Act 5 the Lion Dance, Buddha sends his lion to punish the eight *Mok-joongs*, *Noh-jang*, and *Chui-ball*, as they have abandoned their priesthoods and become apostate monks. Upon discovering the lion on the stage, the *Mok-joongs* at first do not realize the beast, but gradually learn of its spiritual existence. The *Mok-joongs* beg for forgiveness, pleading that they only persuaded *Noj-jang* to sin due to *Chui-ball's* demagoguery. The lion pardons the *Mok-joongs*, engages in a playful dance with them on stage, and exits.

In Act 6, *Mall-ttuck* takes the stage in a satirical and humorous attempt to provide his guidance to the ruling class by criticizing its corruptive practices and lavish daily practices. Aristocrats are also ridiculed; they are depicted with masks with deformed noses or mouths. *Mall-ttuck's* satirical dances include "searching for a new wife," "writing poetry," and "paja" (anagrams). He also ridicules the Establishment by capturing *Chui-ball*, who is accused of embezzling government funds.

The protagonists of the last act are *Yeong-gam* (a tinker) and Grandma *Miyal* (a shaman). *Miyal* and *Yeong-gam* were separated during the war, but eventually reunite after a long search for each other. However, they fight over *Dolmeoli-jip*, *Yeong-gam's* concubine. *Miyal* is beaten to death by *Yeong-gam*. *Namgang*, a senior citizen in the village invites a shaman to perform a spiritual burial for *Miyal*. This act illustrates the dire living conditions of the working class, as well as gender violence.

A *talchum* dancer becomes an aristocrat upon wearing the mask of an aristocrat, and transforms into a young maiden upon wearing a mask of a young maiden. Regardless of the performer's gender or age, he or she fluidly changes character through a single mask, and is thus able to immerse into the mask's character. On the other hand, masquerades (which use masks that cover only half of the performer's face) and other Western forms of masked dances involve heavy make-up and costumes; thus, the performers are somewhat impeded from becoming completely immersed into character. In the case of *talchum*, the audience is allowed to become oblivious of the actor behind the mask, and can focus solely on the character depicted by the mask. A wide variety of people from various social classes, from the protagonist *Mall-ttuck*—

despite his lowly social class as an aristocrat's servant—to the monks, the Shoe Merchant, the shaman, the wanderer, butcher, and even the monkey and the lion can be candidly portrayed due to the masks. The *talchum* allows the artists to express their opinions regarding social class and corruption in a proud (even vulgar) and direct manner. Thus in Korean culture, the *talchum* is an optimal form of satirical art due to its harmonious combination of music, dance, cynical jokes, and theatrics.

III. CONCLUSION

The *talchum* contains public criticism of the ruling class, and thus served in the name of humor and satire, as perhaps the only tolerated exit for the general population's boiling emotions. The fact that such an art form was possible in the *Chosun* Dynasty, a society with social castes is a surprise to many. Gathering around the market place to watch *talchum* may have been one of few days during which commoners could openly enjoy ridiculing its aristocrats. *Talchum* was also a tool used by the general population to relieve pressure from their daily hardships; paradoxically for the ruling class, *talchum* was a means to suppress social movements that attempt to overthrow the government and its repressive social hierarchy. In Korea's traditional culture, *talchum* was the working class' channel of communicating its anger and oppressed opinions. *Talchum*, the one tolerated form of satire in the *Chosun* Dynasty, has thus maintained its lineage as Korean's monumental folklore.

REFERENCES

- [1] [1].Lee, Ji-eun. "A Study on the Late Chosun Dynasty Period about Social Trait on the Traditional Korean Bongsan Masked Dance." *Seoul, South Korea, The Graduate School of Ewha Womans University, Ewha Womans University, 2009*, pp. 1–83.
- [2] [2]."[Weekender] The Embattled State of Satire." *The Korea Herald*, February 27, 2015. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150227000970>.
- [3] [3].“Realism (Art Movement).” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, September 23, 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_\(art_movement\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realism_(art_movement)).
- [4] [4].봉산탈춤보존회 - 중요무형문화재 제17호. Accessed October 1, 2019. http://www.bongsantal.com/bongsantal/en_bongsantal04.html.
- [5] [5].“Bongsan Mask Dance.” *Koreatimes*, June 11, 2009. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/10/700_46700.html.
- [6] [6].JY Dance Holic : 네이버 블로그. Accessed July 28, 2019. <https://blog.naver.com/elrisa17jazz/221296120553>.
- [7] [7].“봉산탈춤.” *봉산탈춤*. Accessed August 1, 2019. <https://terms.naver.com/entry.nhn?docId=3325970&cid=56785&categoryId=56785>.
- [8] [8].봉산탈춤보존회 - 중요무형문화재 제17호. Accessed October 1, 2019. http://www.bongsantal.com/bongsantal/en_bongsantal01.html.