Talchum: Voicing the People through Performing Art

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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 tall, 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mask</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sang-jwa</strong>, a young and innocent monk</td>
<td>Pure white, decorated with drooping eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mok-joong</strong>, a secular monk</td>
<td>Masculine facial structure, defined forehead, large nose and emphasized mustache. Eyes and lips portray exaggerated joy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>So-moo</strong>, the maiden who seduces Noh-jang</td>
<td>Pure white, dark eyebrows. Uses red lips and cheeks to seduce Noh-jang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noh-jang</strong>, an old monk who seduces So-moo</td>
<td>Face is pure white like that of Sang-jwa, with dark defined eyebrows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chui-ball</strong>, Noh-jang's romantic rival</td>
<td>Ponytail resembles that of an aristocrat.</td>
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The mask of Sang-jwa, the young and innocent monk, is pure white and decorated with dropping 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-tuck has a quite rugged face. His frowning mouth depicts a character of anger.

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
On the other hand, masquerades (which use masks in which every actor of the scene is divided into three scenes: (a) the character depicted by the mask. A wide variety of people from various social classes, from the protagonist and costumes; thus, the performers are somewhat impeded from becoming completely immersed into character. Oftentimes, they only persuaded by the mask, and is thus able to immerse into the mask's character. One case of 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 a 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-tuck—

**[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-tuck)

**[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 Grhapti'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 Grhapti 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 Noh-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-tuck 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 deformed noses or mouths. Mall-tuck'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-hip, 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 a 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-tuck—
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


