

A COMPARISON OF TALCHUM DRAMMA (KOREA) AND ANCIENT TUONG (VIETNAM)

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Abstract: *Talchum is a typical type of Korean folk stage, derived from Shamanism, closely associated with the Korean pop culture of the Joseon period (15th-16th centuries). “Tal” means masks, and “chum” is dance, it is the most basic characteristics which distinguish Talchum from other folk-style forms. Besides entertaining value, the lively literature of Talchum dramatizes the profoundly aesthetic vibrations and intense reflections on human life realism. Corresponding to Talchum, “Tuong” – Vietnamese folklore also focuses on disguise (mask painting), dance and singing. There are many similarities in music, dressing up, performance, stage organization between Talchum and Tuong, which means that the two countries share several characteristics in mind and folklore arts. It is another aspect that further illustrates the nature of the same root culture.*

Keywords: Talchum, Masked Drama, Tuong, Comparison, Vietnam, Korea

1. The Origin and Characteristics of the Talchum

In the Korean sense, “tal” means a mask and “chum” is a type of dance; Talchum is a dance with masks during performance, which appeared during the early Joseon period and gained its peak during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Korea. The birth of this type of stage is rooted in folklore, at a time when the conflict between the strata in society was not too serious and the ruling class had a positive and less conservative view of the people. The origin of the Talchum can be deduced from the sacrificial activities of the Shamanism praying the god of Shamanism, but it underwent a long process of transformation and perfection to attain complete maturity, from characteristics of the content to the way of acting. So the creative role of the Joseon people to Talchum is undeniable.

Talchum actors always have to wear masks. These masks are made from natural materials such as wood, dry gourds, paper and animal hair. Most of them reflect the nuances and structure of the Korean face, but there are also some masks that represent the faces of gods and animals, including real and imaginary ones. The Koreans believe the origin of the masks starts from a masculine mask worker dreamed of the village god while his sleeping. The god ordered him to make twelve masks and during this time, he must have no sex, no meeting or seeing people. He obeyed the god, worked day and night to finish all but the final stages of the last mask when the girl who loved him could not bear loneliness to peek at him through the tiny hole of the door. He immediately fell to death; the twelfth mask in his hand was

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without the chin. For that reason, some masks do not have a chin or the chin is not attached firmly. Though the story is fictitious myths, it shows that Koreans have highly valued the Talchum mask. They attach it with a sense of worship and desire, so it is identical with the sacred and purity. People who manufacture masks as well as those who wear masks while performing must be solemnly attentive and respectful. Masks are used only once, crafted by artists before the annual performance and immediately burned to ashes to maintain the sacred immediately after the show.

The stage of Talchum is a big, flat ground that can gather all the villagers. The time for performance starts in late night until dawn, next to a fire. That is why most Talchum masks are not beautifully and harmoniously crafted, rather it often breaks down the balance due to a certain facial part is exaggerated. That brings a strong impression to the audience, they can rely on to remember, distinguish different faces, as well as different characters representing many real classes in Korea society during the Joseon Dynasty time and latter.

The top eleven masks left now include: Yangban (the aristocrat), Kakshi (the bride), Chung (the Buddhist monk), Choraengi (Yangban's clownish servant), Sonbi (the scholar), Imae (the foolish and jawless servant of Sonbi), Pune (the courtesan), Paekchong (the murderous butcher), Halmi (the old woman) and two Chujic (lion), Imae (clown). Yangban has thick curved eyebrows, arrogant smile. Halmi is painted in black and brown, the color of sadness, loneliness and suffering of a widow who is ready to complain. Sonbi has disgruntled little eyes because the intelligentsia was not respected by Joseon society. Kakshi has a rosy cheeks and complicated bridal hair on the wedding day. Facial expressions do not express too much or too deep emotion during an important moment in life. The eyes half close, lips tighten to look just enough to be a true bride.

The mask of Pune is the most harmonious. It has the oval face, the long and straight nose, sexy and flabby eyes that are typical of flirtatious ladies who flirt with gentlemen. When the stage opens, the actors wear masks to perform his role. Normally, there are rarely enough eleven masks in a Talchum, rather there are a few characters depending on the specific content. But Yangban and Pune masks are always there, alongside couples such as Yangban and Choraengi (nobles and servants), Pune and Chung (prostitutes and priests).

Talchum theater does not separate actors from the audience. While the actors wear masks and role play, the openness of the stage allows them to improvise and interact freely with the viewer. Once a year, after carrying out the solemn Shamanism rituals, villagers gather together to sing and dance throughout the night. The colorful, vibrant, cheerful, witty Talchum makes people more excited. Consequently, entertainment is the most prominent feature of Talchum.

And through the plays, behind the scenes of dance, the viewer sees a small society. Many contradictory situations are the root cause of the complexity of personality and movement of human destiny. This perception has been drawn by popular Korean artists from deep,

objective observations. Eleven faces are meticulously and skillfully sculpted that show their individual characteristics. These are different types of people in the society. They are good and bad, noble and humble, sometimes sympathetic and critical. The fair and tolerant behavior of folk authors has increased the value of Talchum, from purely entertainment purposes to reflection of worldview and humanity through visual art performance. This feature will be further clarified in Talchum's literary studies.

2. Literature characteristics of Talchum

Talchum's literary features are assertive because it belongs to drama with dramatic characters, actions, conflicts, etc. Talchum characters are significantly representative. Such characters have no names, no introductions or backgrounds, they are identified based on the type of the masks. They may represent a social class such as Yangban, Choraengi, or they can represent a specific character of the drama such as prostitution, bride, widow, etc. It can be seen that these characters are not divided into categories of modern drama, rather it directs to different types of people.

Each character is distinguished from other not only in the mask or dressing but also in dialogue, action to express personality, dignity, and fate. The clown has a naivety accompanied by ridiculous actions that make the audience laugh - a carefree laugh. The philosopher appears to be formal who understands all but reveals disgruntled pessimism of the times. The butcher looks fierce and impatient, but he is very introspective and honest. There are few dialogues in Talchum, the characters hardly speak but act, especially with dance gestures to lively and comprehensively express personality and viewpoints.

Characters of Talchum are not simply one-sided, rather most of them are set in complex situations to reveal inner innuendo. For example, the monk in a scene meets a prostitute, then his desire arises. But moral consciousness suppresses the priest's craving, which makes him very confused, not knowing what to do in front of the increasingly aggressive gestures of the prostitute. The embarrassment of the character is manifested through a series of actions that he cannot complete; it shows the complexity of the inner and the situation, from which the drama gradually climbs to the climax. The most basic feature of drama - conflict - is taken by Talchum as the principle of structure and action, which promotes the ability to reflect reality and enhance the capacity to influence the viewer's emotions and thoughts.

In terms of language, Talchum is often characterized by the choreography to save words, emphasizing the theme through gestures other than language. But Talchum is not pantomime, occasionally actors improvise to dialogue without scripting. At the beginning of the drama, there is no introduction, and in the end, there is neither comment nor explanation, only the brief exchanges are heard in especially necessary circumstances. Interspersed with dialogue are some guiding sentences, some poems of Sijo, Kasa, Hyangga are popularly used to sing. With the complement of musical instruments, poetry and music blend together into the specific language of Talchum. Although they are transformed into tunes, they still

retain their artistic features, especially the use of humanitarian rhetoric, exaggeration, parody, and laughing. Talchum language is therefore compact, expressive and aesthetic. It is also the most basic attributes of literature.

Reality of life through the view of the people is the inspiration for composition and play in Talchum. The most common subject in many works is inequality and injustice due to the increasing class division. The names of the playwrights have eliminated the problems of personal identity, instead being the stratification and the exploitation of the friction between different classes of people in the society. For example, it is the conflict between nobles and maids, between wives and concubines, etc. Furthermore, there are many attempts to analyze the inner feeling of the character. For example, in the scene below, the monk character is a typical example.

The old monk walked into the stage with a young merchant escorting the female Shaman. The old monk was immediately fascinated by the beauty of the female Shaman and started to flirt her. The most spectacular scene is marked by the passionate monk dance in order to appeal the beauty, and finally the female Shaman is conquered by the monk's gift - the precious rosary beads he always wears. This action is more than a gesture; it represents the near-complete collapse of the Buddhist doctrine before mundane desires. When the monk gets the nod of the female Shaman, he suddenly wonders what to do, but when the female Shaman leaves, he rushes behind her.

Actually, the meaning of this scene does not just focus on sarcasm, satirize on the metamorphosed monks or attacked the decadence of Buddhism in this period. Instead, the author has big magnanimity and tolerance to be sympathetic with the monk, asserting that their desires are natural and justifiable. It is also implicit in the positive viewpoint of the common people, that mundane life has the joy of sadness, desire, suffering, good and evil to prove that life is more meaningful than bearing ideal liberation that one must suppress, reject the most natural desires of man. This popular thought might be true during the Joseon period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Buddhist faith among the followers was not as strong as before.

The aristocrat is an indispensable character of the Talchum, he often presents to be ridiculed by different ways in different contexts. Usually, he is fooled by his servant, like that in the following conversation:

- Choraengi: Keep quiet a little, gentlemen are coming. And do not do anything to the gentleman, who has a pillar role for the court. What is a gentleman? It is composed of the word “yang” in kaejallyang (dog skin) with “ban” in kaeri soban.
 - Yangban: Hey, boy, what are you talking about?
 - Choraengi: Sir? Oh, I said the three brothers of the Yi family are coming. They have gained a lot of achievements for the court.
 - Yangban: That's right ... That's right.
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This is the opening scene of a play. The servant mocked the boss's boast by explaining the word yangban in a way that separates the word: one part is an attachment to the animal, the rest is an attachment to the object, which is extremely trivial. When the gentleman was angry, the servant spoke through the story, but it was an excuse to mock the gentleness of the boss. The act of pretending to listen to the words, the hum of the servant shows his scorn attitude to the lord. The above conversation is a small scene, then the sarcastic shades were pushed forward through the mockery of the servant. Chongraengi scolded -> Yangban questioned -> Chongraengi pretended to tell other stories-> Yangban believe, etc.

In Talchum, Chongraengi and Yangban are considered a parallel pair. Chongraengi is a servant but instead of being loyal and respectful, he always ridiculed and mocked the boss. This is justified because no one but the servant can comprehend the funny habits of the master. It can be said that the subject of Talchum addressed the diverse and complex issues of Joseon society in an urgent and genuine manner. It is the caste distinction that causes social injustice, the absurdity of religious nihilism from the viewpoint of the commoner, the degeneration of ideals, morals, familial sentiment, etc. Music, choreography, language, and the way of reflecting life by imagination are the artistic and literary qualities of Talchum.

3. Comparison of Korean Talchum and Vietnamese Old Tuong

According to Korean categorization, their folk dramas are Talchum and puppets. Research shows that Korean puppetry has a lot of similarities with Vietnamese counterparts. But Vietnamese folk drama does not have Talchum. In Vietnamese culture, the nearest genre in comparison with Talchum is old Tuong, so we conduct the research to understand their similarities and differences.

Tuong is a special traditional type of theater art that was formed on the basis of music and folk plays. There are many different origins, so the formation of the genre is also different due to regional culture. Binh Dinh is different from Quang Nam, and it is completely different from Tuong of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien-Hue provinces. The oldest type of Tuong appeared in Binh Dinh, and initially it used masks while performing. The ancient masks are not fixed, and they do not have aesthetic meaning like Talchum, rather they just distinguish the characters. At that time, due to lack of people, an actor had to perform several roles at once, so masks were mainly used to change roles. Later, when Tuong becomes more professional with more people involve the performance, the mask is not used anymore. Although not using masks, characters often paint on their faces with color to avoid the real face exposed.

The mask of Vietnamese Tuong also follows certain patterns and has its own meaning. There are usually three basic colors: white, pink and moldy. Looking at how a mask is drawn, we can recognize the nature of the character. The white face represents a beautiful appearance and calm personality. The red face is for bravery and maturity. The striped face means ugly appearance and bad temperament. The traitor is represented in the little black but

nearly all white eyes. The two sides of the cheeks having red marks are hot tempered. If one has the black cross or dark red background, he is the brave. The moldy mask is for yes-man, while the V-line face is for timid person. There is a common feature that the while the face is color-coded, the area around the eyes is natural. This may be the traces of masking the day before, or to use the effects of the eyes because in the drama, the eyes of the actor actively participate in performance.

Face masks are available but not fixed because they are usually drawn by actors before the opening. Actors dressed themselves so they know how to create personality for the face in accordance with the expressive shades of each role. When the actor steps out on the stage, the audience easily recognizes that he is the spirit, the good person or the bad guy, the gentleman or the humble. This is also a manifestation of symbolism and high stylization in the art of Tuong.

From the content perspective, Talchum often exploits the social issues manifested in everyday life, ancient Vietnamese Tuong recorded the image of the martial arts, martyrs, aesthetical and ethical lessons, and tragedy- a prominent characteristics of Tuong. If there is contradiction in the drama, it is the conflict between moral values which the characters fight to get the truth and Tuong is actually the stage of the heroes. In situations of violent conflict and confrontation, the protagonists of the drama have controlled the situation to act courageously and set a good example for people.

Being different in terms of reflective content and purpose, but both Talchum and Tuong are part of the Eastern narrative scene, they are quite similar in the modes of reflection. Such mode reflects the procedures and means of performance. In the process of re-enacting life, Tuong has no tendency to describe life realistically, rather it mainly use rhetoric words. All the sentences, physical gestures, walking on the stage are exaggerated and stylized to become principled singing, tones, and dance. Actors base on the circumstances and nature of the character to flexibly apply those models to suit. Characteristics of stylized rhymes are also reflected in the music, make up, the formation of the masks with mainly stylized lines, wrinkles on the face. The melodramatic process in Tuong or Talchum is governed by the dominant law of the yin and yang to ensure the harmony and balance.

Along with stylized rhymes, Tuong also uses the symbolic method, or using details to represent the entire to attract the audience to participate in the performance. A rod can be substituted for a horse, a paddle for a boat, some soldiers to replace an army, and a circus around the stage that can replace ten thousand miles. Being different from the realist psychological stage, Tuong has very little stage decoration. Talchum theater is also played on a flat, bare land in the village, next to the fire. It is just a lavish patio of Yangban, as well as a boisterous market scene, and when the monk appears, it turns into a Buddhist temple. It is the same with Tuong, when the actors appear, space and time also follows. In the past, there was only one mat in the middle of the temple yard and some boxes for the prostrate

dress, and they were able to represent various spaces and times, from the palaces to big, dangerous mountains, etc. Tuong or Talchum contain both the classical characteristics and elements of the modern one. Classical elements show that all the songs and dances are “gold standard”, while modern nature reveals in the performers on stage without decorations, Tuong is the authentic stage. The elements of music and dance are developed harmoniously in the performing arts.

The orchestra consists of percussion instruments: (drum, bar, cymbals), trumpets (trumpets, flutes, mainly trumpet), strings and some other instruments. The Talchum also uses the popular instruments of the nation such as the kayagum, janggu drum. The similarity of music, dance, performance, costume, and specific artistic practices may be indicative of Korea's cultural and artistic intimacy to Vietnam. In addition to China's influence on the art forms, the similarity in ideology and folklore art is another sign of the co-operation of the two countries.

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