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Publication Date

2014-04-01

***Re-articulation of Gender Binary in Dancing Bodies:
Embodiments of Korean Mask Dance Drama T'alch'um from the 1960s to the 1980s***

Keywords: Korean Mask Dance Drama, T'alch'um, Embodiment of Dance Past, Gender Binary, Patriarchal Authority, Androcentric Perspective, Bongsan Mask Dance Drama, Hahoe Mask Dance Drama, Confucianism

In this 24th Thinking Gender conference, I focus on the reconstitutions of Korean traditional mask dance drama t'alch'um from the 1960s to the 1980s.¹ In analyzing storylines of these reconstitutions, I investigate the influence of the re-articulated gender binary and patriarchal authority to a Korean society. My goal is to examine how the gender binary and androcentric ideologies are reproduced in the t'alch'um storylines. I also explore how the fixed patriarchal family structures and the typical division of labor between men and women are depicted in the Korean mask dance reconstitutions.

While South Korea was rapidly industrialized from the 1960s to the 1980s, Korea socio-politically went through the period of transition to democracy. The government dedicated itself to being an independent state under a dictatorship, whereas the public dreamed of being a democratic nation. In these circumstances, Korean tradition – such as the mask dance, or t'alch'um – was symbolized as the cultural representative of expressing national identity. As one of Korean traditions, t'alch'um, or the mask dance, was reconstituted by two different subjects, the government and college student activists. In the two subjects' reconstituting ways, South Korea carried on the legacy and inbreathed national identity into the public from the 1960s to the 1980s.

During this time, the government claimed to advocate equal opportunity of employment regardless of sex and origins. The government convinced all the public of accumulating private wealth and being located in the same status socio-politically and economically while labeling low-ranking male and female factory workers as “industrial soldiers” (Moon 55). However, in reality, the government maintained the sense of Confucian

and patriarchal authority because the government still supported the male-focused perspectives and the patriarchal relationships in family and educational systems, and work places. I hypothesize that the male-centered patriarchal structures were vestiges of Confucianism. This tendency was directly influenced in the stories of t'alch'um reconstitutions. I take inspiration from Judith Butler and Laura Mulvey to explore the gender binarism and androcentric perspectives of this dance tradition. I examine the fixed patriarchal family structure and the typical division of labor between men and women with two stories of the reconstitution today. I focus on two stories, in particular: one is the old married couple's story in seventh scene of the Bongsan mask dance drama and the other is a story of the deprived Buddhist monk in fifth scene of the Hahoe mask dance drama.

I first turn to a discussion of the old married couple's story in the seventh scene of the Bongsan mask dance drama.² In this dance, an old wife is depicted as living alone in spite of getting married because her husband elopes with a young concubine. The wife does not expect the homecoming of her husband, but she wishes him to come back home. The husband suddenly returns with the concubine. Instead of blaming the unfaithful husband, the wife expresses her delight in seeing the husband again. The old married couple symbolizes sexual intercourse and patriarchal systems of lineage through familial reproduction. However, the husband begins to compare the wife with the concubine and blames the wife for her incompetence in producing a son. In the end, the wife is beaten to death by her husband.



(Pic 1 & 2. Old wife's dance, Pic 3. The old couple symbolized sexual intercourse, and Pic 4. Fight with a young concubine)

This story is a representative example in terms of the unequally structured sexual morality and patriarchal authority in Confucianism. The Korean Confucian ideology basically focuses on following ideas: classifying labor and role between a husband and a wife; predominant authority of a man over a woman; and preference of a son over a daughter. All women in this patriarchal system must dearly guard their virginal purity before marriage, and they have to remain faithful to their husbands after marriage. By contrast, for men, it was not important to keep virginal purity. In this Confucian logic, the old couple’s story justifies the man’s immorality while the female character is delineated as the faithful wife to her husband. It is considered normal that the female character devotes her life to obeying her husband. For such a reason, I argue that the female character’s behaviors in that story re-imprint the sacrificial toleration of the married women on the audiences’ mind because this kind of woman’s toleration is the required behavior in the context of marital relations in the Confucian patriarchal family structure. In addition, the husband blames the wife’s inability to produce a male heir to carry on the husband’s family line. The husband beats the wife, which leads her to the death in the end. This story depicts domestic violence by a patriarch. It is clear that the male character has the patriarchal authority to judge and regulate his wife’s behaviors and even her fate. The female character is illustrated as a weak and incapacitated character who is subservient to the male character’s gender power. Also, the wife is subjugated to her husband’s family line after marriage, and she has a necessary responsibility to perpetuate the husband’s family line. This dance’s storyline reveals that the female character is entirely dependent on the patriarchal family system. I argue that this old couple’s story reinstates the oppressive gender binary system by representing the patriarchal authority that comes from Confucianism.

Another example of gender repression in the mask dance reconstitutions is a story of the depraved monk in the fifth scene of the Hahoe mask dance.³ This scene criticizes a monk.

In this story, a young female begins to dance to seduce an old male monk with her charms. She is depicted as urinating to seduce the monk. The monk runs up to the spot where the young woman urinated and then sniffs the smell of her urine. The young woman’s lascivious behaviors stimulate the monk’s sexual desire even though sexual relationship between men and women are regarded as taboo within the Buddhist faith. The woman continuously exaggerates her come-hither look and gestures to the monk without speech. The monk yields to her temptation, and they dance together for a while. The woman eventually rides on the monk’s back, and they leave the stage together.



(Pic 1. A young woman who is urinating, Pic 2. An old monk seduced by woman’s urine, and Pic 3. Flirting dance)

The female character shows the monk her hips and legs by lifting up the hems of her skirts and urinates without saying one word. In fact, portraying unhesitating sexual expressions of the female character plays important roles in inviting boisterous laughter from the spectators. Also, the female character decides the monk’s destiny. However, in my view, the woman’s lascivious bodily expressions are completely objectified by the monk’s masculine gaze. Unlike the male character, the woman does not have spoken dialogues, and her lusty bodily expressions are for the monk’s visual stimulation. Her lack of speech and visual displays suggest that the female character is not a central subject in this story. The woman plays an auxiliary role to only support the male character’s actions and speech. The story intentionally focuses on the male character’s sexual attention, and the female

character's lusty body-movements are wholly shaped by the male character's gaze in which the woman is erotically exaggerated. While the female character functions as a seductress who causes the immorally sexual desire of the male character, the woman becomes an exploited object in the male-centered storyline. I argue that the male character's erotic gaze embodies an androcentric viewpoint. Moreover, the female character's figure and role are determined by the erotic gaze of the male spectators as well as the male character's gaze, or monk's gaze. While the male spectators are identified with the male character, they can project their gazes onto a surrogate in this old monk story. I argue that the female figure in the story of t'alch'um reconstitution here is exploited by both the male character and the male spectators who have access to the male-centered gaze's power and fantasy.

The t'alch'um reconstitutions I describe here reflect how gender binary and the androcentric perspective circulate in the everyday life of the Korean public. While the Confucian patriarchal ideology is emphasized in the t'alch'um's reconstitutions, the masculine and feminine binary frame is exemplified by fixing the patriarchal family structure and locates the female characters within the scope of domesticity. The androcentric perspective embodied by both the male characters and the male spectators places the female characters as erotic and passive objects and sexually manipulates their corporeal movements. Through these analyses, I argue that although the t'alch'um reconstitutions play instrumental roles in preserving Korean traditional performing arts and establishing national identity, these reconstitutions are not liberated from the Confucian patriarchal ideology. In fact, in the contemporary Korean society, the patriarchal authority has still invisibly subsisted in a wide range of socio-economic issues including marriage and divorce, inheritance and distribution of wealth, labor and wages, and education. These issues have continuously created the power imbalance between men and women in familial, social, and economic areas. What is worse is by reiterating the Confucian patriarchal ideology in the t'alch'um reconstitutions, the

contemporary Korean public has been unconsciously obsessed with the fixed gender binary and the androcentric perspective that are distributed in the patriarchal family structure and the unfair division of labor between men and women.

1 T'alch'um was a popular dance theater form in the nineteenth century. It presented dissenting opinions of the marginalized classes against the dominant social hierarchy and fostered communal consciousness of the marginalized classes.

2 The Bongsan mask dance drama was a representative mask dance of Hwanghae Province, presently located in the North Korea. The mask dance was originally performed by villagers in Bongsan township. In 1967, the mask dance was designated as the 17th Important Intangible Cultural Property of Korea by the South Korean government.

3 The Hahoe mask dance drama was a representative mask dance of Gyeongsang Province, presently located in the South Korea. Originating in ancient times, the mask dance was performed to celebrate important rural events, such as village sacrificial rites, rice planting and harvesting, as well as for enjoyment. In 1980, the Korean government designated the mask dance as the 69th Important Intangible Cultural Property.

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