

# Origins of Korean Mask Dance Drama

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## Introduction

When a person puts on a mask, he is expressing something other than himself. If the mask is of a god, the wearer becomes god. If the mask is of the dead, the wearer becomes dead and therefore a medium through which communication with the dead is possible. Even sexual transformation can occur, thereby giving the wearer both male and female aspects. These contradictions, that a human being is also god, the living is also dead, and a man is also woman, are functions of magic art as embodied in the mask.<sup>1</sup>

The existing Korean mask dance drama originated in various ceremonies throughout early Korean history, when masks were used by shamans for religious incantation. The function of the mask and dance was therefore strictly religious. Gradually, however, secular elements entered the dance, and it became transformed into a means of artistic expression. Poetry and, later, social satire, were added to the dance, so that a drama utilizing masks and dance was created. The masks utilized were made of the simplest available materials, such as paper, wood, and gourds. And the total effect of the drama, despite the often crude appearance of the masks, is

striking to the viewer; it is performed outdoors from late evening until sunrise, with the players dressed in stunning, yet simple, costumes. This paper will attempt to trace in greater detail the origins of such a theater.

## Five Types of Masks

Among the various Korean terms for the word "mask," the two most widely used are *t'al* (탈) and *kwangdae* (광대). *T'al* also indicates trouble, disaster, and disease, suggesting that masks in Korea were traditionally used to counteract such misfortunes.<sup>2</sup> *Kwangdae* is a term that also means face, cheek bone, puppet player, acrobat, dancer, singer, and actor.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, there are five types of masks from which the Korean mask dance drama is derived.

(A) Hunting and totemic masks were used in the worship of certain animals, especially dragons, tigers, and bears. These animals hold special significance for Koreans, because Koreans believed that, for example, the dragon was an incarnation of the spirit that

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caused rain and predicted the future.<sup>4</sup> Tigers were once plentiful in the mountainous Korean peninsula and *Tan'gun* (단군 檀君), the mythological father of the nation, was said to be the son of a female bear. The Tiger Dance, *Ho-mu* (虎舞), is a dance of tiger worship which has been performed since the beginning of the nation, and the Lion Dance, or *Saja-mu* (獅子舞), is of Central Asian origin, imported circa the 6th century A.D.<sup>5</sup>

(B) Demon masks served as objects of worship by shamans. The *Hou Chong* royal tomb, built circa 5th or 6th century A.D. and unearthed in 1946 in Kyōngju, revealed a lacquered wooden mask which was a Korean version of the Chinese *fang siang shih* (方相氏) mask. The function of this four-eyed Chinese guardian figure was to chase away evil spirits four times a year.<sup>6</sup> At the shrine of Ch'ōnggye-dang is Songak, the modern Kaesōng, which served as a capital city of the Koryō dynasty (918-1392), there traditionally were housed four wooden masks. The *Ch'ōnggye ssi* mask (창계씨), is the spirit of insanity, the *Mok kwangdae* mask (목광대), represents the spirit of *kwangdae*, or actor, and the *Somi ssi* mask (소미씨), generally appears as evil spirit. All possess fearful expressions. The fourth mask, *Not nori* (웃노리), however, represents the spirit of laughter and therefore does not appear fearful. Whenever any of these spirits entered a person, he took on the characteristics of the particular spirit.<sup>7</sup>

(C) Medicinal masks were used to exorcise evil spirits, which were said to invade a human body, thereby causing disease. The shaman, whose functions include that of medicine man, used medicinal masks in the belief that he derived supernatural powers from them. For example, on the island of Cheju, off the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, there is a shaman ceremony termed *Yōnggam nori* (영감놀이). Feeling that the lust of the spirit of old men is responsible for the illness of young women, two shamans wearing old man's masks, impersonating two brothers of the spirit causing the sickness, sing and dance and talk to the spirit coaxingly to induce it to withdraw from the afflicted, and leave with them.<sup>8</sup> A more popular medicinal mask, the *Ch'ōyong* (處容), is hung on the front gates

of houses to chase away evil spirits. An accompanying dance is performed, which will be explained in greater detail in a following section on the Silla dynasty.

(D) Spirit masks were used to appease the spirits which, traditionally, Koreans in animistic fashion believed inhabited all material objects. King Hōn'gāng (875-885) of the Silla dynasty ordered the carving of the white bearded *Sangyōm* (霜髯), mask or mask of the Mountain God, so that this god could be appeased.<sup>9</sup> On the first day of each new year (Lunar calendar), ten separate masked characters appear in a shamanistic ceremony called *Chisin palpki* (地神밧기) to soothe the spirit of the earth. This ceremony has ancient roots having originated with the mythological founding of the Korean nation in 2333 B.C.

(E) Memorial masks were worn by players to honor certain historical figures. *Hwang ch'ang-mu* (黃昌舞), for example, is a mask used in a mask dance drama in honor of a famous youth of the Silla dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

### Three Kingdoms

Between the 4th and 7th centuries the three Korean states of Koguryō (in the north), Paekche (southwest), and Silla (southeast) were engaged in a competition for primacy which was finally settled in 668 when Silla unified the peninsula. Very generally stated, Koguryō had a strong military character because of an elite military class which was catered to by the entire society,<sup>12</sup> Paekche was a sophisticated state with a well-organized government system,<sup>13</sup> and Silla was a dynamic state with a strongly centralized government organized around six tribal groups.<sup>14</sup> In the three states there could be seen the origins of the existing mask dance drama. (Two small states, Puyō on the Manchurian plain and Kaya at the extreme southeastern tip of the peninsula, have been omitted due to the brevity of this paper).

#### (A) Koguryō

A 3rd century Chinese source, the *Siku-chih Wei-chih* (三國志魏志), records that in Koguryō there existed a religious ceremony in honor of heaven in which dancing, singing

and chanting took place.<sup>15</sup> Another Chinese source referring to Koguryō, *Chiu T'ang shu* (舊唐書), notes that in a ceremony there were four dancers who danced abreast with their hair tied in buns, round-spot makeup on their foreheads, gold earrings, red and yellow pants, black leather shoes, and very long sleeves.<sup>16</sup> At the Koguryō tomb called Muyongch'ong, built in the 6th century, on the eastern wall there is a painting depicting two female and four male dancers accompanied by partly obscured musicians playing stringed instruments.<sup>17</sup> The costumes worn by the Koguryō dancers closely resemble those worn in mask dance dramas today, especially the long sleeves, termed *hansam* (한삼), which measure approximately two arms length.

### (B) Paekche

*Kiak* (伎樂), or *kigaku* in Japanese, the typical performing art of Paekche, incorporated masked dancers performing a kind of farce drama or pantomime. It consisted of ten scenes with Buddhist ceremonial elements, and the masks, having Aryan facial features, point to the Central Asian origins of this art. There was constant maritime traffic between Paekche and the eastern Chinese coast, and, in fact, Buddhism was imported into Paekche from Central Asia through the Chinese state of Eastern Chin. Therefore, "*kiak* itself was a mask dance drama for Buddhist evangelism, and thus it can be verified as being in the direct tradition not only of Central Asian music but also of that of Annam and India."<sup>18</sup>

According to the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀), a Japanese historical source compiled in 720, *kiak* was introduced to Japan in 612 by the Korean, Mimaji.

Another man of Paekche named Mimaji emigrated to Japan. He said that he learned from Wu [an Eastern Chinese state] their style of music and dancing. He was accordingly lodged at Sakurawi, and young people collected who were made to learn from him these arts. Hereupon deshi [pupils] Manu no Obito, and Seibun, Imaki no Ayabito, learned dancing from him, and handed it down to their pupils.<sup>19</sup>

Approximately 230 different *kiak* masks of the 7th and 8th centuries remain in Japan today.

### (C) Unified Silla

Silla unified the three cultures in 668 and *hyangak* (鄉樂) came to be the term applied to all the performing arts. The Silla *hyangak* which contributed to the development of the masked dance drama are as follows.

*Köm-mu* (劍舞), or *Hwangch'ang-mu* (黃昌舞), was a masked sword dance performed in honor of Hwangch'ang, a young Silla *hwarang* (花郎) who was killed in battle with Paekche forces. The *hwarang*, literally "flower youth", were young boys drawn from the elite section of society who were trained in military, musical, and also religious (i.e., shamanistic) arts.<sup>20</sup> The *Samguk sagi* (三國史記), or *History of the Three Kingdoms*, written in 1185 by Kim Pu-sik, which contains various essays on the rites, ceremonies, and music of Silla, describes the historical background of *Köm-mu*.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that sword dances today have evolved so that they are performed by women only and never with masks.

According to the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事), or *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*, written by Monk Iryōn between 1281 and 1283, a mask dance called *Muae-mu* (無尋舞) was originated by a Silla monk named Wōnhyo.<sup>22</sup> *Muae* which literally means "freedom from obstacles," is the highest state of being in Buddhism, and therefore *Muae-mu* was a Buddhist ceremonial dance. Monk Wōnhyo, however, probably was not the creator, since the dance and accompanying music had Central Asian characteristics. He came to be associated with the dance by going from village to village performing for the purpose of propagating Buddhism.<sup>23</sup>

*Ch'ōyong-mu* (處容無), a dance to chase away the spirits of disease, originated in the native demon and medicinal mask dances of the Silla period. Until recently, this dance was performed frequently to protect against disease, with the players using masks of fearful expressions similar to the Chinese Fang Hsiang Shih and the Greek Gorgon. The *Samguk yusa* relates the story of Ch'ōyong, a son of the dragon king from the East Sea (Sea of Japan) who lived during the Silla period, who upon returning home one evening found his wife sleeping with someone else. Instead of bursting in on the seemingly unsuspecting couple, Ch'ōyong walked away improvising poetry. The "man," who was the spirit of disease, was

so impressed with Ch'öyong's generosity that he bowed to him and left.<sup>24</sup> As a result, it became customary for people to place an image of Ch'öyong on their doors to chase away the spirit of disease. The Ch'öyong-mu continued following Koryö dynasty and became one of into the the main dances in the existing Sandae mask drama.<sup>25</sup>

*Tosolga* (兜率歌), another significant art form of Silla mask dance accompanied by folk music, had the purely ritualistic function of praising the good deeds of kings and the prosperity of the country.<sup>26</sup> From *Tosolga* there developed the *Tosalp'uri* (도살পুর이), an existing drum rhythm or "shaman beat."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most important reference to the world of Silla dance is found in the poetry of Ch'oe Ch'i-wön (857-?), who described *Ogi* (五伎), literally, "5 skills." Inspired by a performance of *Ogi*, he wrote poetry describing the five skills of *Kūmhwan* (金丸), *Wöljön* (月顛), *Taemyön* (大面), *Sokdok* (束毒), and *Sanye* (狻猊).<sup>28</sup> According to Professor Yi Tu-hyön, the *Ogi* were Koreanized versions of Central Asian plays and therefore had the same characteristics as the *Pai-hsi* (百戲), or "Hundred Games" of China and *Sarugaku* (猿樂), or "Monkey Dances" of Japan.<sup>29</sup> The five poems, as recorded in the *Samguk sagi* are as follows:

*Kūmhwan*: *Swing the body, wave the arm and  
Juggle the ball,  
Moon and stars whirl and twirl.  
Who can match such skill  
Even the waves in the East Sea are  
calmed.*

*Wöljön*: *Shoulders up, neck in, and hair  
bun erect,  
Many men squeezed together,  
drinking contest.  
Hear the music and laughter,  
And flags flutter all through the  
night.*

*Taemyön*: *The man wearing the golden mask  
with bell in hand chases away the  
ghosts.  
Slow, fast, fast, slow  
He dances like the flying phoenix.*

*Sokdok*: *Look at the foreigner with dishevelled hair and blue face!  
Dancing in the courtyard with his*

*partner.*

*Drum beats and breeze whispers  
They dance to and fro, to and fro.  
Ten thousand miles across the  
Gobi Desert,  
Fallen brown fur, dusty.  
So good natured, so playful  
No other animal can match.*

*Sanye*:

According to an interview with an 81-year old man in 1960, a mask dance performance he once witnessed in southern Korea started with the juggling of balls to attract the attention of the audience.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the juggling of *Kūmhwan*, or gold ball, may have been a prelude to every performance. The *Wöljön* and *Sokdok* poems presumably show the Central Asian origins of some aspects of the mask dance, judging by the foreign features on the masks employed in these two scenes. However, they may also have been simply comic skits to mimic foreigners.<sup>31</sup> Some scholars have compared *Wöljön* to the Japanese *Kodokuraku* (胡德樂), or "dance of the drunken Mongolian using a mask with movable nose."<sup>32</sup> A still existing mask dance character, *Chwibarr* (醉發), performs with a red mask, signifying drunkenness, with a tuft of red hair on the mask in apparent Mongolian style. The *Taemyön* poem describes a shaman dance to expel evil spirits, and *Sanye* was the predecessor of the Central Asian origin, of the contemporary Lion Dance.

## Koryö Dynasty

The Koryö dynasty (918-1392) was heir to the rich musical and dramatic traditions of the Unified Silla. Due to the policies of King Söngjong (982-997), however, the early years of Koryö saw a growing secularization in the performing arts. For example, King Söngjong supported Confucianism as the philosophy and religion of the state and therefore abolished the native shamanistic performing arts inherited from Silla due to their unearthly pursuit and supposed vulgarity. The *P'alghwanhoe* (八關會), a native ceremony held in mid-winter to honor the spirits of heaven and earth, and the *Yöndünghoe* (燃燈會), a Buddhist worship ceremony held on the first day of the year, were both national celebrations.

discontinued by King Sŏngjong. This measure caused the upper classes and rich to continue the ceremonies on a local, private level, leading to the addition of secular entertainment, in order to entertain the rich, to the actual religious ceremonies.<sup>33</sup> In 1010, however, both ceremonies were re-established at the national level, and various inherited Silla plays were regularly performed at the royal gardens.<sup>34</sup>

*Narye* (儺禮) was a shamanistic ceremony, similar to the Silla *Ch'ōyong-mu*, in that both were religious in nature, with the function of chasing away evil spirits. In *Narye*, masked shamans tried to exorcise the spirits through incantation and the use of weapons such as swords.<sup>35</sup> This religious ceremony began to include more artistic elements in the sense that after a *Narye* ceremony, professional entertainers called *Uin* (優人) entertained the audience with music, dances, and masked dramatic offerings. This entertainment came to be termed *Nahŭi* (儺戲). It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe exactly who these professional performers were. However, suffice it to say that they were familiar with shamanistic rites, and shamans themselves were familiar with the performing arts. Therefore, many of the performers may have also served as shamans on various occasions, which was in keeping with the tendency of secularization of shamanistic arts in the Koryŏ dynasty. This must have contributed to the degradation of the shamans, who came to be identified with performers. It must be remembered that even today, ceremony and entertainment are not so distinctly separated. Another possible reason for the shamans' downfall was their very success. They had served the court as medicine men, protectors against natural disasters, and prophets who foretold the future. As their social prominence grew, their arrogance and greed became intolerable, so they were stripped of their political, and therefore social, power.<sup>36</sup>

A new development in the dramatic arts of Koryŏ was *Chohŭi* (調戲), or spoken drama. The stories were mostly martial in nature, concerning various soldiers during the time of the founding of the dynasty. During the reign of King Kongmin (1352-1374), however, it is recorded that an actor, working in the streets,

performed *Chohŭi* which contained criticism of petty officials such as tax collectors.<sup>37</sup> This was probably the first recorded instance of social satire in Korean drama, an element which was to become common in the Yi dynasty and contemporary mask dance dramas.

## Yi Dynasty

The Yi dynasty was established in 1392 when Yi Sŏng-gye usurped the throne held by the Koryŏ, entering into a close relationship with the Ming dynasty of China, he championed the philosophy of Confucianism, which became the state religion, and instituted a strict system of social classes.

During the reign of King Kwanghaegun in the middle of the 16th century, the *Sandae togam* (山臺都監), a governmental agency, was established to manage dramatic performances for all national celebrations, including entertainment for foreign dignitaries,<sup>38</sup> which took place at a set location outside Seoul called Hongjaewŏn.<sup>39</sup> This official sponsorship of actors, including mask dance players, ended in the 17th century due to two reasons. First, the invasions of the Japanese armies of Hideyoshi in 1592 and 1597 and those of the Manchu armies of the Ch'ing dynasty in 1637 severely depleted the Yi treasury. But a second, and probably as important a reason, was the changing of court tastes.<sup>40</sup> The long years of Confucian rule had instilled in the ruling class an abhorrence of "lowly" professions such as that of acting. It is unlikely, therefore, that pressed with economic difficulties the court would have continued sponsorship of these performers.

Before proceeding further, the terms *kwangdae* (廣大) and *Sandae* (山臺) should be defined in their Yi dynasty contexts. Although *kwangdae* in the late Koryŏ period referred to mask dance players, by the middle Yi period it became a generic term for assorted types of folk artists, such as acrobats, drum players, and narrative singers as well as mask dance players.<sup>41</sup> *Sandae* referred strictly to mask dance drama.

After the abolishment of the *Sandae togam* the dismissed performers scattered throughout

the country and formed wandering troupes of mask dance players. They gave performances at various locales, especially on market days on at the invitation of wealthy local families, before settling down in a fixed location.<sup>42</sup> Once settled, they transmitted their art from generation to generation and thereby different mask dance styles developed. Today, there are approximately fifteen known varieties of *Sandae* drama.

A dominant element of *Sandae* drama was that it was considered by the actors themselves to be a ritual performance in honor of the gods and dead actors. An integral part of any performance was the *kosa* (告祀), a shamanistic ceremony inviting the gods and departed actors to view the play. The actors also requested that the gods protect them throughout the performance.

Another element in the *Sandae* dramas was social satire dealing specifically with corrupt Buddhist monks and seductive female shamans, hypocritical Confucian aristocrats, the misery of the lower classes, and the tragedy and absurdity of the concubine system. In other words, the plays were very critical of the existing social structure of the Yi dynasty. The *P'aegwan chapkki*, a middle Yi text, states that in reaction to a heavy tax collected by the government from the people, some performers went before the king in the palace courtyard and presented a comedy satirizing tax collectors. After seeing the performance, the king was so moved that he abolished the tax.<sup>44</sup> Such an incident, however, must have been rare, for the satire in the dramas is quite subtle. For example, the mask dance play, *OKwangdae norri* (五廣大놀이), or *Five kwangdae*, is a play seemingly critical of the *kwangdae*, or actors themselves. However, the real target of the satire was the *yangban* (양반), or ruling class Koreans. In this way, the actors protected themselves.<sup>45</sup> The *Yijo sillok*, a Yi dynasty historical source, stated that actors bold enough to satirize Confucian vices were either executed or banished.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, *kwangdae*, or entertainers among whom mask dance actors were included, were considered to belong to the lowest strata of Yi dynasty society. Shamans also were included in this strata, since their original function was to provide entertainment for the

gods. "A shaman's work mostly consists of dancing and singing to please the spirits, so his skills are in fact the skills of an entertainer. . . . No clear distinction could be made between the entertaining performer and the shaman who was also a performer and entertainer himself. The two professions demanded similar skills and there were people who practiced both."<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

The historical origins of the Korean mask dance drama discussed at length in the text are, briefly stated, the masked dances that were of shamanistic and Buddhist rituals in the various kingdoms throughout Korean history. Specifically, the origins can be traced to *kiak* of Paekche, *Ogi* and *Ch'oyong* of Silla and the various performing arts of China and Central Asia. All of these elements contributed to the formation of the *Sandae* drama of the Yi dynasty.

These contributions, however, influenced mainly the form of the drama. The content was dictated by the social environment of Yi dynasty Korea, since the themes of the dramas reveal mainly the antipathy of the common people for the formal, hypocritical morality of the ruling class. To study the origins of the mask dance drama in Korea therefore, one cannot ignore the social conditions under which the drama was created.

## APPENDIX

### *Yangju Sandae*

There are eight acts in this drama, with twenty different dancing steps depicting various characters. The sequence of the drama is as follows.

- Ritual whereby the players parade through the village in the evening to the performing area.
- Kosa* (ceremony-prayer to the spirits of mask and late mask dance performers with food and wine offering).
- Act One: Two monks dance a prayer to Buddha and spirits.
- Act Two: *Om*, a monk with skin disease, enters and confronts the first monk.
- Act Three: Comic, boisterous confrontation of the monk with skin disease and re

of the monks appearing offstage.

—Act Four: Two hideous looking characters, Lotus Leaf (Yönip) and Winker (Nun kŭmtchōgi) appear and all the monks are frightened by their appearance. They (monks) all take turns staring into the faces of the two characters.

—Act Five: Eight monks on stage.

Scene One: Monks do Buddhist chant in mocking manner, showing their hypocrisy.

Scene Two: One of the monks asks the character, Wanbo, to bring his descendants (son, grandson, and great grandson) back to life. Another character, Sinjubu (acupuncturist) appears and performs acupuncture.

Scene Three: A young Sadang (female shaman) performs a drum dance. One of the monks and Wanbo push her aside and start to play with her drum.

—Act Six:

Scene One: Old, degenerate monk appears and flirts with two prostitutes.

Scene Two: Shoe seller appears with a monkey, and old monk buys shoes for the prostitutes. Then, shoe seller persuades monkey to bring a woman to him.

Scene Three: Drunk character named Ch'wibbarri appears and chases away the old monk. Then he himself begins to flirt with the prostitute in an obscene manner. Midwife appears to help with childbirth of the prostitute. Child is born. Ch'wibbarri, seeing that the prostitute does not care for the child, flings the child away and exits.

—Act Seven:

Scene One: Two servants, Malttugi and Soettugi, mock the upper class.

Scene Two: A young man appears between an old man and a young concubine and takes her away.

—Act Eight: Unfaithful old man appears, followed by his neglected old wife. She falls and dies on the road, and their son and daughter appear. Daughter takes shaman's role and they conduct funeral and the drama ends.

There are thirty two characters in the entire play, but only twenty two masks are used since some of the masks are used by more than one character. The dancing is a detailed pantomimic art in that there are over twenty distinct movements for the players to express the correct emotions, situations, and social status. Musical instruments used to accompany the players are basically *chōttae* and *haegŭm* (types of flutes) and *ch'anggo* (drum). Cymbals are also used.

Mask dance dramas in other areas of Korea (there are approximately fifteen different mask dance dramas performed in Korea today) have basically the same plots with, of course, regional variations.

By the time that a performance has ended, it is dawn and the masks are collected and placed in certain shrines or homes. Previously, the masks were all burned after a performance since it was believed that the masks, once worn, had become contaminated by evil spirits. This was one of the main hindrances to the preservation of Korean masks. The performances are usually held on New Year's day, January 15, April 8, May 5, and August 15 (Lunar Calendar), as well as during other national holidays. Also, performances occur during times of drought.

#### FOOTNOTES

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4. Yi, pp. 143-44.
5. Yi, p. 435.
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7. Yi, pp. 146-47.
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32. Yi, p. 79.
33. Yi, pp. 112-14.
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36. Pak Kye-hong, *Han'guk minsok yŏn'gu* (Seoul: Yongsŏl Publishing Co., 1973), p. 399.
37. Yi, p. 119.
38. Yi, p. 129-30.
39. Song, p. 160.
40. Henthorn, p. 215.
41. Song, p. 13.
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43. Sim U-sŏng, *Han'guk ŭi minsok kŭk* (Seoul: Changje Press, 1975), p. 30.
44. Yi, Nŭng-hwa "The Shamanism of Korea," *Folkism*, Vol. 11 (Seoul: Emillle Museum, 1973), p. 151.
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