



Understanding South Korean and Southeast Asian Societal Contextual Differences through Classical Theater

Introduction

As part of the Southeast Asian Studies Department at the University of Malaya, we have been teaching, watching, and researching the performing arts, especially comparing traditional dance and mask theaters such as *talchum* in South Korea, *khon* in Thailand, and *wayang wong* in Indonesia. Comparing the theatrical mask performances offers various dimensions directly associated with contemporary and past practices, including femininity and masculinity. In comparative theater studies, the literature is scarce (Hauptfleisch 2000; Yingde 2010), and the gender dimension is nearly absent. Comparative studies of masculinities and femininities in traditional theaters must enlist changes in roles and characters in contemporary scapes. *Talchum*, *khon*, and *wayang wong* have the potential to inform us about various social, cultural, religious, and political contexts and gender representations, formations, and changes from hard to soft bodies and attitudes.

In gender studies, four types (hegemonic, subordinate, compliant, and marginalized) of masculinities are elaborated; but hegemonic masculinity is widely judged within gender and feminist studies (Connell 1995; Coles 2008). In addition to the four types of masculinity, soft masculinity is also discussed in the literature. It is about “male images that are exceptionally feminine to Western eyes” (Song and Hird 2014), while Louie (2012, 936) refers to the “girlish” looks and demeanors of Japanese boybands and likewise describes how notions of Chinese masculinity have “softened” and become “more feminine” (Louie 2012, 930). Jung (2011) sees this as impressed by sentiments for an older conception of masculinity in Japan. Louie (2012) notes a difference between metrosexual Western-associated notions of masculinity and those embraced by the younger generation in East-Asian countries (Ainslie 2017, 611). In developed societies and cultures, in movies the man of action hero is idealized as

a model of manhood who fixes the weaknesses of two other masculine models (i.e., the rebel and the breadwinner). They are part of “the ideology of heroic masculinity.” They are constructed dramatically as a man of action heroes (Holt and Thompson 2004, 425).

In drama, movies, and live art performances (and routine social matters), the male characters generally represent strength and courage as behavior characterized by assertiveness. By contrast, the feminine behavior characters are portrayed as passive, cooperative, and gentle; unlike men, they work and cater to the different needs of family members. For Walby (1989), such characters among men and women are the outcome of socialization—meaning the society and its institutions shape or construct social gender divisions between men and women. However, the main factor determining the gendered roles is socialization—how the families and communities train, educate, and enable girls and boys to behave. The mass media also profoundly affects the definition of personal sex roles. Various studies show that television, dramas, motion pictures, radio, books, and magazines reinforce traditional sex-role stereotypes (Lovdal 1989; Hart 2014). Children’s television programs are vital in early socialization, consistently depicting men and women in traditional stereotypes. Even the commercials are stereotyped. A study of 100 commercials on children’s television programs found that 95 percent of the narrators were male. Females were three times more likely to be shown in domestic activities, and males were ten times more likely to be shown in active roles (Ashraf 2018).

Debates, discourses, and analyses on gender, society, and politics are growing in every field of academia. However, discourses are lacking in performing arts, especially in traditional dramas and theater performances. Specifically, the literature lacks the impact of the feminine worldview on traditional performing arts and dramas, which has resulted in the transformation of characters and their appearance and performance as the world moves from Terminator to Avatar and from male hero to female hero (Faithful 2016). Gender stereotypes are being challenged in various fields of life (Meland 2020), including theater performances (Minehart et al. 2020). However, there is a lack of discussion and analysis to understand the dimensions of femininity impacting masculinity in the South Korean, Thai, and Indonesian theater dramas and how gender roles reflect the routine tasks of changing peoples’ attitudes towards genders, especially masculinity and femininity. *Talchum*, *khon*, and *wayang wong* have similarities and broad differences in many terms and contexts. The

comparative analysis of these dramas will reveal how and why masculinity in three countries’ dramas has taken different shapes and forms—a bit or quite different from the original narratives of these mask and dance dramas. These three mask dance theatrical and traditional dramas provide details about traits of changing masculinity in hybrid masculinity due to the influence of femininity.

Khon (Kiriwat 2001; Tongpaeng, Mahamud, and Sureephong 2018), *wayang wong* (Soedarsono 1997; Rahardjo, Sanjaya, and Untari 2012), and *talchum* (Saeji 2017) are independently studied to understand some aspects related to performing arts, but dimensions of the femininity and masculinity are much ignored. All three dramas are performed on stage, using masks and driving content from the traditional, political, and religious narratives. However, these are neither comparatively analyzed nor significantly studied to understand their linkages with the routine practices in the respective societies. This article claims that soft masculinity or hybrid masculinities have always been part of *talchum*, *khon*, and *wayang wong* dramas. In these, softer, humble, and brave characters as well as protagonists’ qualities are externalized compared to hegemonic characters and qualities of devils who subjugate men and women. Therefore, besides understanding the concept of soft masculinity in three traditional theater/drama performances in three countries, this article also wants to investigate ideological, political, and social contexts used to subside commoners’ issues by reinforcing hierarchical orders.

Methods

This paper compares male and female characters and roles in *talchum*, *khon*, and *wayang wong* theatrical dance and mask dramas. The researcher has practical experience in watching these dramas in live performances. However, the researcher re-watches these dramas on YouTube and reconfirms the understanding of being watched earlier. Each drama was re-watched with subtitles. We also sought help from research scholars in Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand to understand symbolic meanings of actions of roles and characters and, more significantly, meanings linked to male and female characters. In this sense, it was a systematic inquiry that used both digital/virtual performances and personal (practical) observations of the live performances in each country.

Additionally, the researcher widely reviewed and used literature to

substantiate actions and changes in the dramas. The research applied the thematic content analysis of the drama stories presented in the dramas and mentioned in the literature separately for analysis purposes. The main themes were identified as the following: main objectives of the dramas; origin of the dramas where these were created and performed; presenting the political ideology; presenting religious ideology; positioning social status quo; use of humor/satire; gender of characters; and display of gender norms.

Comparing *Talchum*, *Khon*, and *Wayang wong*

Traditional stage dramas have shifted attitudes towards men and women characters in South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. Men and their masculinity have become soft-masculinity in East Asia, especially in South Korea. Looking at Korean-pop and Korean drama will help realize that the hero characters have different looks than the Western ones. Not only can men wear make-up like women, but they also represent the gentle character like women yet strong and brave at the same time (Ashraf 2018). In the past, in Korea, male characters in drama were not accepted as soft. However, now these are well-accepted, although the male character still means strong masculinity in Korean society. Now in Korean culture, it is considered as “a hybrid product constructed through the transcultural amalgamation of South Korea’s traditional *seonbi* masculinity...and Japan’s *bishonen* (pretty boy) masculinity and global metrosexual masculinity” (Jung 2011, 39). In Thailand, a man’s character in theater drama is gentle, not as hard as hegemonic masculine, but a refined hero. In Indonesia, it is refined as *alus*, meaning soft and gentle man—quite far from the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. In the changing and evolving landscape of masculinities, this article underscores hero concepts and practices in traditional Korean, Thai and Indonesian theater performances. Specifically, it compares Korean mask dance drama (*talchum*) with Thailand’s mask dance drama (*khon*) and Indonesian dance drama (*wayang wong*) to understand how the traditional dramas have brought soft masculinity.

Talchum (*tal* means mask and *chum* means dance) is a traditional theatrical mask dance drama—recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of South Korea. *Talchum* evolved during the Goryeo (918-1392) and Joseon Dynasties (1392-1897). It has developed unique characters to represent features

of different regions in South Korea. There are eight major regional varieties of mask dance in Korea; Hahoe, Yangju, Bongsan, Gangnyeong, Gosung, Songpa, Gangneung, and Dongnae. Most of the *talchum* were religious ritual (Kim 1980). *Talchum* is divided into the song and dance (*gamu*) and speech (drama) parts. Therefore, according to its origin and performance, *talchum* is known by different names throughout Korea. In Korea’s history, as most of the performances functioned as a religious theatre were usually performed in the rituals, *talchum* has therapeutic features of entertainment. It is characterized by the humorous scheme, unplanned dance movement and steps, interface among characters, and mockery of oppressive agents of society (Murdoch 2015).



Figure 1. Family Social issue in Korean *Talchum* (source: Phoenix Voyages)

Its contents include stories about commoners, aristocrats, and priests. The stories often talk about immoral monks, hatred against aristocrats, the common person’s sorrows and joys, and issues between men and women (The International Information and Networking Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region and UNESCO 2014). In festivals, it strengthens community links and allows the villagers to burst their frustrations without fear of retribution. After the 1960s, historians and practitioners found

thirteen local practices of *talchum* and developed tourist and educational programs to celebrate, preserve, protect, and sustain it (Murdoch 2015).

Today, *talchum* mask dance is no longer a religious ritual. However, the religious ritual elements maintained or performed in some *talchum* performance like the Hahoe mask dance play developed from rituals in conjunction with offerings placed before the village shrine in the Gyeongsang-do area. Therefore, most of the current *talchum* all over Korea are significant cultural assets. In traditional ritual practices, every kind of mask is available, including female masks worn by men. *Talchum* is widely discussed and analyzed as mask drama (Murdoch 2011). However, little has been discussed about gender roles and performances (Ha 2016), especially the changing roles of boys and men.

Identical to *talchum*, *khon* masked stage drama is performed in Thailand, exclusively driven by the Rama story (Singaravelu 1982). Also, UNESCO has recognized *khon* mask dance drama as a unique intangible cultural heritage. *Khon* represents a male genre of Thai classical performance of the Ramayana story. In the performance, roles are performed by both males and females, but their roots are traced to masculinity (Foley 1990). Thai literature and performing arts have often taken subjects, content, and context from the Rama story. People in Thailand believe that Rama's story takes place on Thai soil. Rama is the main hero in the Ramakien story.



Figure 2. Phra Ram (Lord Rama) in Green Riding a Chariot
(source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Rama is the incarnation of a Hindu Deity known as Vishnu Narayana and called “Pra Narai” in Thai culture. This hero has a beautiful appearance and is charming with a green body. The outstanding characteristics of Rama include strength and courage with diplomatic strategies to fight a war and battle. In addition, Rama's character shows gentleness and strength (Cadet 1971). There are growing concerns among the public about the crisis of Thai masculinity in Thailand (Kang 2018) and the role of *khon* in sustaining masculinity. UNESCO has also enlisted *khon* as an intangible cultural human heritage since it entails vocal, musical, dance, ritual, and handicraft components. The performance involves elegant dance steps, instruments, voices, and heavy use of costumes. Besides a higher representation of art and cultural artifacts, *khon* is taken for vital moralistic function and reinforces respect for the rulers, higher age people, and win of the good over demons, contrasting the philosophy in *talchum* theater performance. Earlier, *khon* was performed in royal courts. Nowadays, it is also performed in educational institutions and theaters (UNESCO 2017).



Figure 3. Ramayana Wayang wong Performance at the Prambanan Temple, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (source: Gunawan Kartapranata)

Indonesian *wayang wong* is the classical theater dance drama in the Central Javanese state of the country (Kam 1987). It is predominantly a dance drama with a plot story from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. It is like a mask dance like *khon*. It has costumes, music, and tools to perform battles by the protagonists with the devils (Ludwig 1976). Identical to *khon*, *wayang wong* is rich with bodily movements and ornaments. It entails a single fight between refined (*alus*) forceful (*gagah*) characters, both performed by males, generally between a demon male and Arjuna, a great hero in the Mahabharata, who is refined, humble, and takes careful moves, not like the demon. These male heroic traits are acknowledged among Javanese and also practiced. The demons are aggressive, violent, hurling, uncontrolled, and cunning. The *alus* characters are humble and played by an ordinary man or boy with average stature and rare beautiful facial, bodily features, and soft voice (gentle voice). In the old days, these roles were performed by women (Ludwig 1976). The negative part of *gagah* is shown as strong and masculine through the typically designed mask, but it does not have gentle and soft practices the masses like it (Soedarsono 1997).

In routine social life, young Indonesian men are pressured by the routine. Still, strong social discourses in the media demand them to improve their leadership roles beyond dominant and macho masculinities (Nilan 2009). In the Indonesian context, a few studies have shown a link between violence and masculinity (Nilan, Demartoto, and Wibowo 2011; Wilson 2012; Nilan et al. 2014), which reveal violent masculine practices being practiced and sustained around cultural discourses of respect, honor, and hierarchy (Nilan, Demartoto, and Wibowo 2011). However, the relationship between theater drama, especially *wayang wong*, and society has not been studied.

Talchum represents the Korean culture, and society provides a look with a gender. Male performers usually take the male characters in the drama, and the female characters are also played by male performers, which has caused masculinity and soft masculinity to be less significant. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asian traditional performances, Rama, the hero, performed in Thai *khon* and Indonesian *wayang wong* by male performers are always depicted in stylized movements showing the gentleness of their heroic character and facing their enemies, demons, and King Rawana. However, through progressive movement (*alus* in Indonesian tradition), the character sometimes is performed by a female performer who was leading the monkey armies to manifest the good deeds of

good characters opposing evil characters and show the gentleness of the hero where masculinity is not essential.

Table 1. Similarities and Differences among *Talchum*, *Khon*, and *Wayang wong*

Themes/areas	<i>Talchum</i> (Kim 2018; Saeji 2017)	<i>Khon</i> (Kiriwat 2001; Ngean 2014; Srinin 2016)	<i>Wayang wong</i> (Kam 1987; Suardana 2019)
Main objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Building a sense of community -Relieving the sufferings of commoners -Depicting the sufferings of working-class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Entertaining nobles and educating commoners so that they should respect the higher status -Training commoners to be faithful to the royal courts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pleasing nobles and reinforcing elite power over commoners -Representing Javanese aesthetic unity through the obedience of nobles -Externalizing the protagonist's inner qualities
Originated and performed in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Agriculture and traditional community -Male shamanistic rituals -Festivities mark changes in the agriculture calendar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Royal and princely courts dance drama -Adapted from swordplay and shadow play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Human puppet theatre performance -Portraying stories of the Indian Ramayana or Mahabharata epics -Royal court dance drama; now the human puppet
Political ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Disfavoring the political statuesque 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Maintaining honor for rulers -Reinforcing reciprocal dependence between leaders and followers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Favoring the political status quo -Rebellions battled and defeated -Presenting nationalistic and kingdom oriented -Favoring nationalism or kingdom
Religious ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Considering a sacred performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Romanticizing the past and heroes in the Hindu text -Supporting religious values of good and bad -The triumph of the good king over the evil king -The performance being a sacred heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Romanticizing the past and heroes in the Hindu text -The performance being a sacred heritage

Social status quo	-Presentation of strict social hierarchy	-Presenting strict social hierarchy and reinforcing respect for people in status -Social and cultural capital for the upper class -People being taught about right and wrong and good and evil -Teaching students to be organized, to obey and to work in the group	-People being taught about right and wrong and good and evil; and to be organized, to obey, and to work in the group -Presentation of strict social hierarchy
Humor/satire	-Famous for its humorous satire -Directly criticizing ostentatious monks, corrupted nobles, and polygamy -Offering comic relief for ordinary people	-No satire and no critique on nobles	-Humour but not targeting the elite and religious scholars
Gender of characters	-Concubine and wife's roles performed by men -Female roles being originally performed by male characters; but in the recent past, women participating fully clothed and without speaking	-Besides male protagonists, the female leading actress role performed by a female	-Male characters being predominant; a female performing the female leading actress role
Gender norms	-Presenting the tyranny of men over women due to polygamy	-Portraying the tyranny of men over women; men, with the support of men, bringing back the woman -Women shown weaker -Ngang (main actress)	-Presenting evil of men over a woman -Women shown weaker
Other dimensions	-For women and nobles, white masks -For people living harsh life, black masks -For drunk people, red masks -Characters distinguished by their masks, costumes, and dance styles -A mask dance drama; no swords and battles -A brief drama	-The performance of male and female characters; but males being predominant -Traditions and morality portrayed -Combination of mask and unmasked dance performances; and also performed as shadow play -Long drama for a couple of hours	-Performance by male and female characters; but males being predominant -Traditions and morality portrayed -Combination of mask and unmasked dance performances; and also performed as shadow play -Performed over days

Table 1 has rich comparative details of three cultural and traditional dance and mask dramas in three countries. *Talchum* is not what contemporary South Korean men undergo changes in their masculinities. *Talchum* is full of humor and jokes about the elite class, but it still represents a pure masculine form of men. Male characters perform it; men even wear female masks. Even the humor is by men against men. *Talchum* maintains traditional Korean masculinity, but men's masculinities have changed and mixed with soft masculine traits in contemporary Korea. The *khon* drama traditionally presents gentle male characters mixed with soft masculinity, especially the protagonist. However, the main storyline or myth is maintained clearly showing men's control (Kiriwat 2001).

Talchum originated and performed in agriculture and traditional communities and did not present warrior ventures. However, *khon* and *wayang wong* were originated and performed in different spaces and contexts. Both are outcomes of royal endeavors to garner support among the masses for their hierarchical roles; and their social, political, and religious superiority over the commoners. *Talchum* disfavors the political ideology and statuesque, but the other two do not; these reinforce reciprocal dependence between the followers and leaders; and rebellions are shown to be defeated. In *talchum*, we found a binary of nobles and white masks—also, binary for people living harsh life and black masks; and binary for drunk people and red masks. These binaries reveal the qualities of each character. *Talchum* is entirely a mask. However, *khon* and *wayang wong* have some characters without masks.

All three theatrical dramas support the religious ideology. However, the context of *talchum* differs from *khon* and *wayang wong* because *talchum* endorses religious behavior and social drama. The religious *talchum*, like the Hahoe mask-dance play developed from rituals in conjunction with offerings placed before the village shrine maintain few religious/rituals elements, whereas the social drama *talchum* as the focus in this study endorses issues of the monk in a religious institution, social status, and status que power ideologies through satire. Instead, these three represent and support traditional hierarchical social structures that predominate males in every field of life.

Talchum has strong humor and satire and directly criticizes monks, corrupted nobles, and practitioners of polygamy. The matter of polygamy affects women's rights. However, *khon* and *wayang wong* do not have humor targeting the elite and religious monks, even the corrupt. Historically, the performance

of *khon* is for kings, their royal families, and the noblemen in royal ceremonies. It aimed to please them. Before 1935, female characters' role with masks was performed by men, but then the female characters were introduced.

Talchum has many positive roles, characters, and themes, including the opportunity for men to represent women in masks and share their matters linked to the concubines. From a feminist perspective, it may be judged differently because women could represent their issues in a far better way. However, that happened in the past. In contemporary *talchum* practices, women are also performing their roles. Instead, men are performing theirs. In *khon* and *wayang wong's* performances, no man performs a female's role. However, in all three dramas, women's roles are subject to men's power and authority. Women respect men's command and authority to reinforce the patriarchal social structure. In *khon* and *wayang wong*, protagonists' roles and appearances are softer and more tender than devil men's roles and performances. However, in all three dramas, men are portrayed as tyrannical over men and women too. There are no changes in their roles. Male heroes' roles are not replaced with female heroes. However, soft images of male heroes are being portrayed.

Conclusion

The comparative and thematic analysis of three mask and theatrical dance dramas offers insight into the softening role of heroes and the realities in which these dramas were performed. Except for *talchum*, these dramas reinforce traditional social structures of hierarchy and domination of men over resources and power. These represent good and evil men; masculinity dominated every sphere of life, whether these were presented with softer bodily or behavioral appearances. After piecing together all themes focusing on the roles and characters of individuals in three dramas, the paper concludes that these dramas have originated in different cultures and locations. The prime context is reinforced to educate masses where the leaders in a religious context, power status quo, and social structures like in *talchum* are delivered through humor to criticize the elites and social conditions and religious groups. Whereas in the Southeast Asian context, education to the masses through the classical dance drama of *khon* of Thailand and *wayang wong* of Indonesia could be learned through the divine characters taken from the religious text, Ramayana

(Indonesia), and Ramakien (Thailand) performed through stylized dance drama.

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