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Korean Bongsan Talchum mask theatre: A window to the past and the pride of the present

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Abstract. Masked folk theatre performances in medieval Korea were apparently the only socially acceptable form of artistic expression of common people. They expressed popular mindsets, aspirations, and desires in stereotyped images. The study of this cultural phenomenon can reveal much about Korean national character. The study aims to analyze the content of a Bongsan Talchum play and to reveal its deeper meanings through the prism of history and ethno-psychology. The study is based on a full text of a play published by Korean scholar Cho Okon. In Russian historiography, there are no academic works on the history of Bongsan Talchum theatre. The author relies on the works of Korean and Western researchers, who to a greater or lesser extent covered the history and current state of this type of mask theatre, as well as on his personal impressions obtained during his academic internship in South Korea. The research concludes that Bongsan Talchum in its criticism of negative aspects of social reality did not oppose established norms and existing orders, but satirized undesirable deviations from those. It was a short-term expression of an alternative value system and had a compensatory function. At present, Bongsan Talchum is becoming a cultural symbol of Korea both at home and abroad.

Keywords: Korea, mask drama, dance, music, shamanism, Buddhism, humor, satire, cultural heritage

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Корейский театр масок Понсан тхальчхум: окно в прошлое и гордость настоящего

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Аннотация. Народные театральные представления в масках в средневековой Корее являлись, по-видимому, единственной социально значимой формой художественного самовыражения простонародья. В них психологические установки народа, его устремления, чаяния, желания облекались в стереотипизированные образы. Изучение этого феномена культуры может многое рассказать национальном характере корейского народа. Цель исследования состоит в анализе содержания спектакля *Понсан тхальчхум*, выявлении его глубинных смыслов в контексте истории и этнопсихологии. Основным источником стал полный текст пьесы, опубликованный корейским ученым Чо Оконом. В российской историографии нет академических работ, посвященных истории театра *Понсан тхальчхум*. Автор опирался на труды корейских и западных исследователей, в той или той степени освещающие историю и современное состояние этого вида театра масок, и на собственные впечатления, полученные во время научной стажировки в Южной Корее. Выводы исследования заключаются в том, что *Понсан тхальчхум* с его критикой отрицательных сторон социальной действительности не выступал против сложившихся норм и существующих порядков, а в сатирической форме показывал нежелательные отклонения от них. Это было кратковременное выражение альтернативной системы ценностей и имело компенсирующую функцию. *Понсан тхальчхум* стал одним из культурных символов Кореи как внутри страны, так и за рубежом.

Ключевые слова: Корея, драма в масках, танцы, музыка, шаманизм, буддизм, юмор, сатира, культурное наследие

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The formation history of the Korean mask theater

Mask dance was first mentioned in Samguk Sagi (Historical Records of the Three Kingdoms), which recount the events of early centuries AD. The masks were believed to reflect images of deities and were used by performers to communicate with divine powers and convey people's thoughts and desires. Talchum dance (tal — mask, chum — dance) was a vivid form of communication

between people and gods and added an element of joy and entertainment to the performances. Dramas of that kind were staged in the United Silla (618–935), while in the state of Goryeo (918–1392) they even came to be performed in the court [1. P. 71]. In early Joseon period (1392–1910), the dance got its classical form of a satirical performance with religious (shamanistic and Buddhist) elements. Mask dance performances were financed by the state, overseen by Sandedogam (Performance and Ritual Bureau), and staged at banquets and major festivals in the Li dynasty court. In the early seventeenth century, the Performance and Ritual Bureau was dismantled, partly because of financial problems in the wake of Japanese invasions of the late sixteenth century and subsequent devastation of the country, but mainly due to the rise of neo-Confucian orthodoxy, with its reliance on strict ritual and denial of transcendental mysticism. However, many dancers continued to perform in provincial venues for common people, and, without state control, increasingly departed from classical standards and embraced local color. This gave rise to various types of Talchum performances, named after the locales where they were first staged, although they retained principal characters and turns of a plot [2. P. 150]. Later, there appeared professional troupes, whose members belonged mainly to the Cheongmin class, made up of people of despised professions. Professional actors had a hereditary status and occupation.

Performances were held on New Year's Eve, Chuseok (harvest festival), during periods of drought or on other occasions [3. P. 280]. Mask dance dramas were staged in the open air, at night, by the light of bonfires and torches, and sometimes lasted until dawn. The stage was a circle of rammed earth, with the musicians sitting around on its edge. Although there were female characters in the plays, the actors were always men.

Talchum plays had no single plot. Comical stories shown in individual scenes were totally unrelated to each other. They mostly visualized hyperbolized life situations well familiar to the audience, which implied their emotional involvement in the play. The audience "was carried away and felt they were witnessing a real scene, i.e., they were ready to improvise and take an active part in the performance through *chuimsae*" [4, p. 86]. It should be explained here that *chuimsae* is a way to establish emotional contact with the audience, invite the audience to participate and feel co-empathy. When the actor exclaimed "*chuimsae*!", he expected their reaction, and in response heard cheers of approval. This was the way to establish an emotional connection with the audience.

Bongsan Talchum, one of Korea's most famous mask dance performances, originated in the 17th century in Pongsan County, Hwanghae Province. It was initially performed on Buddha's Birthday (In the fourth lunar month), but in the

late Joseon Dynasty period, the date was moved to Dano Festival, held on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month to celebrate the end of the planting season. The stage was set up in the open air and had no decorations.

The performance was preceded by street processions, sacrifices to deities, and various entertainments, such as rope walking. In the past, street procession culminated with a ritual to appease the soul of An Chomok, a low-ranking local official who in the 18th century brought mask dance dramas back to life. He also introduced many innovations in the performance, like the use of paper masks instead of wooden ones, and took charge of the play [5. P. 52]. The performance began late at night in the full moon and lasted all night.

Those performances gathered a large number of spectators. That was partly due to the favorable location of Pongsan County, located at a crossroads north of Seoul and south of Pyongyang. There was a large market there, and merchants paid all the expenses for performances, partly out of love for the art, but more importantly to attract customers. This gave rise to permanent troupes of increasingly professional actors. Two-story balconies were built around the stage area for spectators who bought food and drinks during the performance [6. P. 205].

A significant contribution to further development of mask dance dramas was made by another official, Yi Songu. He was appointed *mogabi*, the chief dancer in charge of direction and dramaturgy, and did a lot to make the dances more dynamic and expressive. As Cho Dongil puts it, it was Lee who "helped the Bongsan Thalchum to become the pearl of mask performance in Hwanghae-do province in the late 19th — early 20th century" [7. P. 45]. By that time, the theater had consolidated its classical form, featuring lots of verses, including those from Chinese poetry, specific song lyrics, monologues, dialogues and, of course, various dances accompanied by traditional musical instruments: two flutes, a two-stringed violin and an hourglass-shaped drum. The music emphasized gestures and movements of the actors, enhanced the effect of the dance and created an emotional background to the performance.

Scenic Action

In order to grasp the specific character of Bongsan Talchum Theater, it is necessary to present a brief summary of the play. The summary is based on English translation of the original text and scenography made by a prominent Korean expert Cho Okon [8; 9].

Act 1: Sasanjachum (dance of four young novice monks). They are wearing white monastic robes and white cone-shaped hoods. The novices bow to the four Heavenly Kings, the patrons of the four sides of the world, and dance slowly to music. These actions are

intended to purify the stage and the surrounding space of evil forces, — a kind of opening ritual for the play.

Act 2: Palmokjunchum (the dance of the eight unrighteous monks-*mokjun*). They have broken every vow possible and got drunk. Each of them runs onto the stage in turn, to replace the previous actor, recites his own line, and performs a vigorous and eccentric dance, twirling around the stage, bouncing and waving their long white sleeves (*khansan*). The monks are dressed in colored jackets with multicolored stripes and white pants. Their masks are red with black and white spots on the lower half and seven horn-like gilded protrusions — all this ugliness demonstrates their promiscuous lifestyle (Fig. 1). However, the monks are no strangers to poetic sentiments. Thus, the second monk recites the following verses in chant:

> "Since there is no calendar in the mountains,
> Unexpectedly for me, the change of seasons comes.
> When flowers bloom, it must be spring.
> When the leaves on the trees grow, it must be summer.
> When the paulownia leaves fall, it must be fall.
> When snowflakes fall on the green pines and bamboos,
> It's nothing but winter.
> I, a free-spirited villager,
> Lived a reclusive life in the mountains.
> *(And a surprise ending)*
> But when I hear the sound of music,
> I lose interest in praying to Buddha.
> With this exquisite music, can't I have fun?
> Though my hair is gray, my mind is still young …" [10. P. 47].



Figure 1. The dance of eight Monks
Source: Bongsan Talchum (Mask Dance Drama of Bongsan). URL: https://english.cha.go.kr/chaen/search/selectGeneralSearchImagePop.do (accessed 12.03.24).

The monk's monologue, together with the dance that follows, is intended to immerse the audience in the atmosphere of the performance. The other monks also recite their poetic monologues as they enter the stage. At the end of the act, the eighth lecherous monk summons the others and they dance around the stage and leave.

Act 3: Sadanchum (dance of a traveling entertainer). Sadan is a woman who leads a group of seven traveling entertainers. They follow Sadan, dance with her, play various drums, join in dialogues, sing while lifting their masks, and at the end of the scene declare that they intend to visit eight famous Buddhist temples in the east of the country.

Act 4: Nojangchum (old monk's dance) Scene 1. The lecherous old monk Nojang falls for a beautiful shamaness, Somu, brought to him by his fellow mokjuns from Act 2. The girl flirts with him and performs a seductive dance. Nojang hangs his telling beads around her neck, thus confirming his moral downfall.

Scene 2. Sinjansuchum (shoe seller's dance). Nojang and Somu are dancing when there comes Sinjansuchum, a shoe salesman, and starts complaining of his hard life. The old monk beckons him over and buys a pair of shoes for Somu. At that moment, much to his surprise, a monkey pops out of Sinjansu box (Fig. 2). He tells the monkey to take the money for the shoes from the old monk. The monkey approaches Nojang and, standing behind Somu's back, makes several obscene gestures. With specific body movements, Sinjansu shows carnal desire for Somu. Instead of money, the monk gives the monkey a note that reads, "If you want the money for the shoes, come to Wood Street corner". The monkey shows it to Sinjansu. Assuming that he is about to be burned, the shoe salesman and monkey run away. Nojang and Somu dance.



Figure 2. The dance of Lion
Source: Bongsan Talchum (Mask Dance Drama of Bongsan). URL: https://english.cha.go.kr/chaen/search/selectGeneralSearchImagePop.do (accessed 12.03.24).

Scene 3. Chwiabarichum (Chwibari's dance) There enters Chwibari (an old bachelor and a drunkard in a mask very similar to those of mokjuns). He makes a bet with Nojang that he can beat him in the dance and get Soma as a trophy. But the old monk wins the bet, while his rival gets beaten. Then Chwibari performs a love dance seducing the girl with money. While doing so, he crawls between Somu's legs, raises his head and says, "Oh gods! It's really hot in here…". Somu pretends to have a stomachache and drops a doll from under her skirt, indicating that she has given birth to a child, which she immediately abandons. Chwibari takes on raising the child and teaches him Chinese characters and the Korean Hangul alphabet.

Act 5: Sajachum (lion dance). There enters a lion, who intends to kill and eat the lecherous monks for breaking their Buddhist vows, which gives them quite a fright. The lion dances around the monks, jumps in the center of the stage, shakes his head, demonstrating his intentions. The monks repent, together they dance, and the lion forgives them (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Masks of Bonsan Talchum theater
Source: Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Drama. 2020. Seoul, 2020. URL: https://archive.org/details/koreanfolkdrama/page/n55/mode/2up (accessed 12.03.24).

Act 6: Yangbanmalttugichum (dance of the Yangbans and Malttugi). Malthtugi, a servant of the yangbans (Korean nobility), dances and mocks the venality of aristocrats, who are illiterate, easily switching rival political factions in the hope of gaining privileges and high office. Three yangban brothers appear, they dance and shout, "Hey you, ratbag! What are you saying?" In response, Malttugi repeats what he said, but in a somewhat toned down form. They engage in a dialog that demonstrates that the servant is much smarter than his masters. The foolish Yangbans do not even realize that they are being ridiculed. All that is accompanied by music and dancing. The Yangbans have come to see Talchum mask dance

drama, and the servant suggests that they stay in an inn, which is actually a pigsty. Here they stay overnight, ineptly composing Chinese-style poems and singing haplessly. The Yangbans then instruct Malttugi to catch and arrest a certain Chwibari who has stolen government money. A servant brings the drunken criminal. The Yanbans want to kill him, but then agree with Malttugi, who offers to forget everything and get the stolen money from Chwibari. The scene culminates in a general dance.

Act 7: Miyalhyoungamchum (a dance of old Miyal and her husband Youngam). Miyal comes dancing on stage with a fan in one hand and a bell in the other. She starts talking to one of the musicians, and tells him that it has been a long time since she was separated from her husband in the midst of war. She sings a long monologue song, calling for Youngam. Youngam enters, fails to notice Miyal and, while dancing, tells the musician how much he misses his spouse.

Miyal re-enters, they recognize each other, dance together, imitating sexual intercourse. Their dialog reveals that their son, who was staying with his mother, got killed by a tiger. Youngam goes on to declare that there is nothing left between them and suggests that they break up. Miyal discovers that a young shaman woman named Tolmori, who has just appeared on the edge of the stage, is actually Youngam's concubine. She beats her up and demands a division of the family property. Tolmori in turn also claims half of the rice fields. The two rivals fight, Miyal falls unconscious, and Tolmori leaves the scene. Youngam finds that Miyal is actually dead, expresses his sadness at this, and laments in verse that he did not have time to give her all the necessary medicines for her many illnesses when she was alive, listing them at length. *(In another script version, Youngam inflicts a blow on his old wife, after she said she would now live with the village bachelor, who had a big nose. The blow proves fatal.)*

There enters an old man with a white beard, dressed in a long white robe and a horsehair hat. This is Namgang Noin, the Elder of the South Pole (a Taoist deity of happiness and longevity). He makes sure that Miyal is dead, expresses his regrets over her death, and summons a female shaman (mudan) to perform an exorcist ceremony (kut) to send Miyal's soul to heaven. He then brings in a table with a wine bowl and some incense lit. Mudan, waving a fan and rattling a bell, performs a shamanic ritual to exorcise awakened evil spirits; she dances ecstatically and shouts incantations. Namgang Noin sends Miyal's soul to heaven. This is the end of the performance.

Act 8: Dwipuri (closing). All the participants of the play come on stage. They prepare a funeral feast, set a table with wine bowls and various dishes, bow twice, wish good luck to the audience and throw their masks in the fire.

Principal Elements of the Performance

Masks. Theatrical masks can tell a lot about national character, history and mentality of the people who created them. In Bongsan Talchum, masks were one of the most important elements of the performance and "acted primarily as a means to denote social roles of characters in the performance, which gave an astutely satirical picture of the relationship between various strata of society along with distinctive features of a typified representative of each stratum" [11. P. 45].

The masks are made of several layers of mulberry paper soaked in glue and are designed in a grotesque manner, with facial features greatly exaggerated. Pieces of fur, hair, and other materials might be glued onto the masks too. Their colors are bright to be clearly visible, as performances were held at night by the light of bonfires [12. P. 479]. Light colors symbolize beauty, youth and purity, while dark colors — old age and tiredness of life; red masks are associated with drunkenness.

Dance. An inseparable part of the performance is dance, characterized by fast, dynamic movements. The dancers are dressed in bright-colored costumes, whose colors have a symbolic meaning. The costumes exhibit a combination of five colors, each symbolizing one side of the world in Chinese and Korean culture: blue — West, red — South, black — North, yellow — World Center [13. P. 36], together with green — a symbol of positive energy, purity and health. Thus, the performance was symbolically included in cosmic processes. Long sleeves make the dance more expressive and dynamic, they focus the attention of the audience when the actors make them soar while bending and unbending their hands to express various emotions.

Particularly expressive is the dance of eight monks, with its fast, aggressive movements, jumps and spins. Each mokjun does his best to show off his dancing skills. However, not all the dances are so expressive. For one, the dance of four young novice monks is distinctive for its calm, smooth and gentle movements. Initially it was performed by men, but nowadays it is increasingly often danced by women [14. P. 62]. A special place in the performance is occupied by the dance of a shamaness (mudan). This ritual action is designed to cleanse the area around the stage from potentially dangerous evil spirits [15. P. 43]. The dance is accompanied by recitative, shouting, crying, bell rattling, threatening gestures and jumps.

Satire. Bongsan Talchum theatrical performances, like other similar mask dance dramas are explicitly comic and satirical in nature. They reproduce reality as something incongruous by means of laughable images. The object of satire is primarily the yangbans, representatives of an educated class. Ordinary people treated the yangbans with mixed feelings of hostility and envy. This was reflected in the proverbs “Wherever a yangban goes, he is met with a luxurious treat; wherever a common man goes, he is met with hard work”, “A yangban never warms himself with straw” [16. P. 102]. The sixth act dialogues demonstrate narrowness and superficiality of their knowledge, their greed and down-to-earth desires. The servant here looks like a truly intelligent person in comparison with pompous and narcissistic aristocrats. This arouse a question of how the authorities could allow for such liberties in events that attracted large numbers of common people. Jeong Dong-il, a Talchum researcher, believes that such performances provided a kind of catharsis (korean *sinmyeong*), an emotional relief for spectators and actors who felt the constant pressure of a strictly stratified society [17. P. 91]. The performances satisfied a common man’s desire to find comfort, albeit temporary, from the injustices and hardships of everyday life.

Bongsan Talchum, ridiculing negative sides of the ruling class, did not oppose well-established norms and existing orders; rather, it was a satirical exposure of inappropriate deviations from those norms. That is why the authorities did not

persecute Talchum despite all the social satire they featured, when the superior were ridiculed by the inferior. It was tolerated as a spontaneous expression of alternative values, as an outburst of social inversion of existing world order. Social order was restored as soon as the actors and spectators left the scene. Such buffoon performances gave commoners "an opportunity to compensate for their frustrations and conflicts, which had long been suppressed in everyday life. When the mask dance drama was over, people returned to their normal daily routines." With the help of such entertainment "they could restore their desire for harmony" [18. P. 198].

Another object of satire was Buddhist monks. It should be said that under the Lee dynasty, their position, as well as that of Buddhism in general, deteriorated sharply. Under the previous Goryeo dynasty, Buddhism was encouraged as part of the State ideology; the monks enjoyed great authority and the clergy were numerous. From the 16th century on, Buddhism came under persecution by ruling elites as a doctrine inconsistent with rational norms of Confucianism. Almost all temple lands were confiscated. The social status of monks, — once moral authorities — was reduced to the Cheongmin, a lower class that included shamans, butchers, shoemakers, artists, etc. [19. P. 353]. However, they continued to claim moral superiority in the folk milieu, despite the fact that their majority was leading a far from pious way of life. Public reaction to this was manifested in Talchum performances. Thus, in the second act, the monks appear in a state of alcoholic intoxication, and one of them is so drunk that he can barely get up from the floor. In the fourth act, an old monk tries to seduce a young woman.

Nevertheless, Buddhism as a religion, and monasticism as an institution, were not ridiculed in the popular milieu. Young, uncorrupted novice monks in the first act are very attractive and fulfill an important function of cleansing the space from evil forces. The lion, who appears in Act 5 and is a symbol of Buddha in Buddhism, intends to punish sinful renegade monks and dispel a condensed atmosphere of vice. The monks regret their behavior, explain that they were just "following Chwibari's instructions", promise to "become good disciples of the Buddha" and ask to be spared [20. P. 43]. The lion nods as a sign that the Buddha always forgives the misguided who are on the path of redemption.

Humor. Bongsan Talchum theater performances exhibit a lot of down-to-earth humor. The characters are pushing, falling, pounding each other, looking under women's skirts, showing mental inferiority, etc. A lot of jokes are "below the belt". In the sixth act the servant, parodying a poetic effort of nobility, recites his own composition with the word "head" given by Yangban: "In the hole of a fence you can see a dog's head / In the hole of worn-out pants you can see a penis head" [20. P. 47]. Notably, the aristocrat likes this poem very much, which shows his lack of taste.

Similarly, sexuality is presented in a humorous manner. Sexual scenes are designed to suit unsophisticated tastes of common people. But even this might have been too much. There are reports that the lines spoken by the lecherous bachelor Chwibari's were so obscene that female spectators left before his appearance on stage [21. P. 50].

In some scenes, comedy can juxtapose with tragedy, like in the scene of the fight between Yangban's old ugly wife of and his young sexy concubine (Act 7). The fight prompted a lot of laughter in the audience, but also empathy of a significant part of them, primarily female spectators, who identified themselves with the long-suffering old woman [2. P. 160]. The husband turns his back on his old wife, who has been searching for him across the entire country for a long time. He has made a young woman his concubine, and is unwilling to give her up. The conflict ends with the old woman's death. This tragic finale makes Halmi a victim of a patriarchal, male-oriented society.

Bongsan Talchum in Modern Times

The 20th century was a challenging period for mask dance dramas. During the period of Japanese occupation (1910–1945), colonizers sought to impose their own culture and tried to limit national cultural festivities in every possible way. Many festivals involving mask dance were banned, but until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, local merchants staged occasional performances in the markets to stimulate trade. Thereafter, until the end of World War II, Talchum performances never got authorized by colonial authorities.

The Korean War (1950–1953) together with subsequent events were not supportive of entertainment genres either. It was not until the 1960s that mask dance drama began to attract more attention and Korean folklorists managed to recover the texts and scenography of several performances. At that time, General Park Chunghee's government sought to assert Korean national identity in the face of modernization and Westernization and to restore Korea's cultural heritage trampled by the Japanese colonizers. In 1962, mask dance dramas were included in a newly created list of cultural heritage objects [21. P. 379]. Bongsan Talchum was recognized as Korea's most important intangible cultural asset № 17, and in 2022 it was included in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity[1]. The desire to restore the most vivid phenomena

[1] 47 Elements Inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Press Release. December 22, 2022. URL: https://www.unesco.org/ru/articles/47-novykh-elementovvneseny-v-spiski-nematerialnogo-kulturnogo-naslediya-yunesko (Accessed: 15.03.2024).

of national culture found support among young people too. In the 1970s, democratically minded students who opposed the dictatorship of President Park Chunghee studied Talchum and staged performances where traditional scripts were complemented by politically charged statements [2. P. 153]. In the 1980s, Korean traditional culture was further promoted as part of the state policy. In December 1988, the Korean Folk Theater Association was established and entrusted with the task to preserve and promote the country's rich theatrical heritage. Bongsan Talchum received international esteem as a representative element of Korean culture. In 1988, during the Seoul Olympic Games, when the Korean government sought to demonstrate the riches of national culture to an international audience, Bongsan Talchum was chosen as one of the most illustrative specialties of Korea's society and culture [6. P. 193].

In the 21st century, the government together with various public organizations are working to preserve and promote Bongsan Talchum in order to pass on the mask dance drama to younger generations. They organize creative workshops, training programs, summer schools, educational initiatives, cultural festivals, etc. Bongsan Talchum is included in school education in South Korea; texts presenting its history and principal plots are featured in dozens of textbooks for elementary and secondary schools [22. P. 58]. It serves as a bridge between the past and the present, opening a window into Korea's rich cultural heritage and its enduring artistic traditions.

Conclusion

Bongsan Talchum, a Korean mask dance drama, is a complex theatrical performance that combines ritual elements, such as prayers for the welfare of the village or for a good harvest, with humorous dialogues, pun, satire on ruling classes, as well as melodic recitals, songs, and dances to rhythmic music. The themes and interludes of the performances reflected various aspects of Korean society, focusing on social issues and values.

Besides being visually captivating, Bongsan Talchum is also an exciting performance that carry the audience away with its colorful masks, expressive movements and energetic rhythms, evoking various emotions and immersing them in the narrative. This genre can be attributed to the carnivalesque, comic culture, typical of medieval societies across the continents. The commoners' ability to comically interpret reality during buffoon performances temporarily shatters well-established social and value hierarchies and calls into question social dogmas. "Carnavalisation of consciousness" (term coined by M.M. Bakhtin) arouses the feeling of unification in people, spreads new meanings and ideas, and creates

a temporary sense of enthusiasm and relief necessary for existence in conditions of constant social frustration.

Recent decades have been marked by a revived interest in Bongsan Talchum Theater, which has led to a rediscovery of its cultural significance. Efforts have been made to preserve and popularize this traditional art form, ensuring that it is preserved for future generations, and make it an important cultural symbol of Korea.

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