

Ágnes Paszabi: Ttal- reflections upon a keychain



There is a little plastic keychain on my house keys. It is kept in my bag, or occasionally pocket, being carried everywhere I go, easily accessible if my daily ritual of opening and closing the door calls for it. It depicts a Korean traditional hahoe mask, which I acquired in Korea, some place or another. I touch it at least twice every single day, make eye contact with its darkly shaded eyes, obscured by wrinkles of mirth, smiling up at me with unrepentant joy. It is modelled upon sacred objects, kept as treasures; and used to this day in performances of shamanistic origins.



I keep it there for the simple reason that it reminds me of experiences I had, connected to Korea. When I joined a traditional dance class a decade ago, it was a type of talchum that they started

teaching us. At the time it was weird, unusual, it called for inner strength and ladylike grace, neither of which I possessed. The colourful hansam, shaped like a really long sleeve, the firm movements and crisp silhouette our reflection cut in the wall-sized mirror all accompanied my participation, and I couldn't have enjoyed it more! Talchum was my first, but far from last foray into the world of Korean folk dance and traditions.

This little plastic trinket also reminds me of those happy hours discovering the Korea-related books of the Korean Cultural Center's library. A volume about all manners of masks and mask dances was the first I have really read from cover to cover. Admittedly, its main draw was the number of colourful pictures and the variety of costumes on them. Never before seen designs, wild colour combinations; it was like snapshots of a fairy tale, frozen in time. That is what gives personality to the character in the mask dance and masked dance drama. From the village fool through the little shaman to the yangban and Buddhist monk, it amplifies their few distinctive characteristics and makes it obvious for the viewer what kind of people they are.



It can't be a coincidence that when I finally visited Korea, a trip to Andong was planned. It is home to a particular type of mask dance tradition. I still remember the anticipation of arriving to the city, navigating in the pitch dark, having the last bus as a personal taxi and trying to convey where I want to go with my limited Korean. Then getting totally lost and walking around till finally I arrived to my host. Then the following pyjama conversations about local delights and blinking at the rapidly depleting bottle of Andong soju. Beautifully painted blue marks on white porcelain surface, blush-red cheeks and wide smiles.



The highlight of the Andong trip, (apart from the tteokbokki at the market and buying a bojagi from an ajuma I had a lovely conversation with about food, most of which I actually understood) was a visit to Hahoe Folk Village. Feeling like stepping into the Joseon dynasty, you can bask in the warm brown light reflected on the river and the thatched-roof houses. There is an open field there, with rows of seats surrounding it like an amphitheatre, and daily performances of music and mask dance are held. Finally, I was able to witness first-hand what it was like! There was an element of spontaneity about it, the performers in the beautiful mask interacted with the audience, they teased, questioned, raised a laugh, sometimes even made us sing. From young pre-schoolers to grandmothers, everybody could enjoy the stories and tap their feet to the rhythm of accompanying music. Ttong-ttong--kung-ta-kung!

The sound of the drums may have died down since then, but the memory lingers. And now I have little mask-keychain protecting my door keys to remind me.

Let's open the door to more exciting Korean experiences!