

Politeja

No. 1(95), 2025, pp. 141-154

<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.22.2025.95.09>

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THE MAKKAN SHOW

THE TRIUMPH OF KOREAN ENTERTAINMENT THEATER (*TAEJUNG-GŬK*) OF THE 1930S

ABSTRACT

The research subject of the article is the ‘*makkan show*’ (*makkan-gŭk*). It developed in the early 1930s as an integral part of Korean entertainment theater (*taejung-gŭk*). Initially, it included simple vocal songs and dialogue scenes presented by actors between different plays. As its popularity grew, it transformed into an autonomous show that combined vocal and dance performances, popular Western music, film, and most importantly, improvised satirical scenes, presented either solo or in duets. The ‘*makkan show*’ dominated the program of many *taejung-gŭk* companies and became a symbol of *taejung-gŭk* theater. The primary purpose of this article is to describe the ‘*makkan show*’, explain the reasons of its popularity, and try to answer the question of whether its function was limited solely to entertainment purposes.

Keywords: Korean theater, popular theater, *taejung-gŭk*, *makkan*, Kim So-rang

INTRODUCTION¹

The 1930s brought an unprecedented heyday of popular entertainment theater (*taejung-gŭk*) in Korea. It was, as in Western countries, a manifestation of the triumph of the bourgeois class², and a vivid sign of difficult times. Shaped by the fear of a new era, *taejung-gŭk* theater expressed nostalgia for the past and the old order.³ Its intense development was an indirect and inevitable result of the rapid industrialization, urbanization and sociocultural transformations, the breakdown of the traditional order, difficult economic conditions and the repressive policies of Japan, which had occupied the Korean peninsula since 1910 and controlled all areas of social life. All this created the ground for the development of popular entertainment, which dominated the fourth decade of the 20th century and marginalized the other genres of Korean theater: classical *ch'ang-gŭk* opera, 'new school' theater (*sinp'a-gŭk*) and 'new drama' (*sin-gŭk*).

Taejung-gŭk companies monopolized the Korean scene of the 1930s. However, it should be not be forgotten that they lived and worked in very difficult conditions. Deprived of institutional and financial support, they had to rely primarily on their own skills, efficiency and creativeness. Subordinated to the mechanisms of the entertainment market, they had no choice but to satisfy the demands of the audience, since it was the audience that determined the success of a play and, consequently, their income as well. So, like any theater company submitted to the private sector, they *did everything possible within the limits of censorship to entertain and provide entertainment*.⁴ This is the reason they constantly made changes to their repertoire, modified the artistic program, promoted new stars, and introduced fanciful solutions that were often a mishmash of various, often emergency ideas and random concepts. The *taejung-gŭk* companies made a lot of efforts to meet the expectations of the public, and by doing this they also confirmed that *drama is the most social, the one most immediately responsive to the context from which it emerges and in which it appears*.⁵

The symbol of Korean entertainment theater in the 1930s was the 'makkan show' (*makkan-gŭk*). It emerged from the short artistic shows that *taejung-gŭk* companies presented between plays. At the beginning they included solo vocal songs and improvised dialogue scenes, usually maintained in a humorous, casual and even clownish tone.⁶ 'Makkan shows' dominated the Korean scene of the first half of the 1930s,

¹ The article uses the Mc-Cune-Reischauer transcription. The Korean surname precedes the first name. The article is a revised and expanded version of the text from the book: E. Rynarzewska, *Teatr Uwikłany. Koreańska sztuka teatralna i dramatyczna w latach 1900-1950*, Warszawa 2013.

² J. Bab, *Teatr współczesny. Od Meiningerńczyków do Piscatora*, przeł. E. Misiołek, Warszawa 1959, pp. 21-22.

³ Yi Sŭng-hŭi, "Yösŏng sunan sŏsa wa kabujangje ideollogi - 1910 nyŏndae mellodŭrama-rŭl chungshim-ŭro", *Sanghŏ Hakpo*, no. 10 (2003), p. 346.

⁴ E. Morin, *Duch czasu*, tł. A. Frybesowa, Kraków 1965, p. 19.

⁵ M. Freedman, *American Drama in Social Context*, London-Amsterdam 1971, p. 1.

⁶ *Makkan* shows share many characteristics with European *intermedia* performance and the Japanese art of *kyōgen* (literally, 'crazy words'), which were originally staged between acts of *nō* theater. The main source of inspiration for Korean artists, however, was Western commercial and entertainment theater.

having a negative effect on the development of ambitious artistic initiatives. It even competed boldly with popular melodramatic plays, which, after all, formed the core of the *taejung-gŭk* theater's repertoire.

Condemned by the Korean intellectual community and repeatedly criticized by the Korean academy community, 'makkan show' was for many decades seen as a manifestation of artistic kitsch. In the late 20th century, however, it attracted the interest of many researchers⁷, who made an effort to reconstruct its history and incorporate it into the history of Korean theater. Their efforts express the belief that the 'makkan show,' like all theater, is *a fact of culture [...]*⁸, and as a part of social life proves its own value.

The primary purpose of this article is to describe the 'makkan show,' explain the reasons for its popularity, and try to answer the question of whether its function was solely limited to entertainment.

ELITE 'MASS THEATER'

A literal reading of the term *taejung-gŭk* implies the connection with contemporary mass art, which began to develop in the early 20th century in capitalist, urbanized and industrialized Western societies. However, this connection is only illusory and it is the result of an accidental coincidence of the term *taejung*, which means 'crowd,' 'many people,' 'mass.'

The discrepancy between *taejung-gŭk* and mass art becomes obvious if one accepts the common definition, which states that (1) mass art *refers to contemporary phenomena that transmit to large masses of audiences identical or similar content that is the fruit of few sources*⁹; (2) its mechanism of functioning is inherently based on technical media¹⁰; (3) it functions in multiple copies and forms of reproduction, reproduced through mass technologies and distributed on a mass scale.¹¹ The huge difference between mass art and theater becomes even more obvious when the definition of the theater that *the very nature makes it impossible to disseminate it in the form of reproduction*,¹² is accepted. The essence of theater is the uniqueness of each performance, resulting from the direct and live relationship of the actors with a different audience each time.

⁷ See, among others: Yu Min-yŏng, *Han'guk inmul yŏn'gŭk sa 1, 2* (History of Korean Theater Artists, vol. I, II), Seoul 2006; Kang Ok-hoe, Yi Sun-jin, Yi Sŭng-hŭi, Yi Yŏng-mi (eds.), *Singminji sidae taejung yesur'in sajŏn* (Lexicon of Popular Entertainment Theater Artists from the Japanese Occupation Period), Seoul 2006; Kim Mi-do, *Han'guk kŭndae-gŭk ŭi chaejonmyŏng* (A New Approach to Korean Theater Kŭndae-gŭk), Seoul 1995; Kim Nam-sŏk, *Chosŏn ŭi taejung kŭk'andŭl (30 nyŏndae)* (Korean Taejung-gŭk Theater Companies: The 1930s), P'aju 2010.

⁸ A. Hertz, „Zadania społeczne teatru,” in J. Degler (ed.), *Odbiorcy dzieła teatralnego: widz – krytyk – badacz*, Wrocław 1978 [1938], p. 35, Wprowadzenie do nauki o teatrze, 3.

⁹ A. Kłosowska, *Kultura masowa*, Warszawa 2005, p. 95.

¹⁰ M. Golka, *Socjologia kultury*, Warszawa 2007, p. 146.

¹¹ N. Carroll, *Filozofia sztuki masowej*, przeł. M. Przyłipiak, Gdańsk 2011, pp. 187-197.

¹² P. Pavis, *Słownik terminów teatralnych*, translated, edited, and annotated S. Świontek, Wrocław 2002, p. 527.

For that very reason most researchers of mass culture exclude the so-called mass theater from their area of interest. Although it might seem that *massness is an inherent attribute of theater in all eras of its historical development*¹³, in this case ‘mass theater’ is understood as ‘theater for all’ or ‘generally accessible theater’, and it is a theater addressed to a collective including all social groups.¹⁴ This statement confirms the misleading nature of the name *taejung-gŭk*. Korean theater, called *taejung-gŭk*, was address to an audience that was selected, and the selection was defined by financial and social aspects, as well as by common customs. In this sense, *taejung-gŭk* was a contradiction of ‘theater for all’, actually it represented an elite theater, as was accessible only to privileged Koreans who had time and financial means to go to the theater. All the arguments seem to prove that the name *taejung-gŭk* should be understood as ‘popular entertainment theater,’ which was intended to provide entertainment for the elite part of Korean society.

The nature of Korean popular theater reveals alternative names: ‘entertainment theater’ (*hŭngbaeng-gŭk*) and ‘commercial theater’ (*sang’ŏp-gŭk*), which were used interchangeably with the name *taejung-gŭk*. There were, in fact, more names to describe the popular entertainment theater of the 1930s. Some, such as ‘old school theater’ (*ku’pa-gŭk*) and ‘new school theater’ (*sin’pa-gŭk*), referred to the genre of ‘new school’ theater (*sin’pa-gŭk*) from which *taejung-gŭk* theater developed. Other names – ‘era theater’ (*sidae-gŭk*), or *show* (Kor. *shyo*) – exposed the ambitions of companies that wanted to keep pace with the social changes and tried to create theater that could respond to the challenges of the new era.

THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE OF TAEJUNG-GŬK

Theater scholars estimate that there were more than one hundred and sixty *taejung-gŭk* companies active in the 1930s. There must have been more, since official statistics include only ensembles noted by the press and omit numerous individual and niche initiatives that failed to receive publicity.¹⁵ The vast majority of *taejung-gŭk* companies did not have the opportunity to perform in the capital, so they organized touring performances, working actively in the provinces of Korea.¹⁶ This style of work surprised neither the public nor the actors since the itinerant and often even wandering lifestyle was deeply rooted in the history of Korean theater.

The *taejung-gŭk* community was not homogeneous. Some of the actors came from *sin’pa* companies, so they played in the manner of Japanese ‘new school’ theater (jap.

¹³ M. Leyko, *Wstęp*, in M. Leyko (ed.), *Teatr masowy – teatr dla mas*, Łódź 2001, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yang Sŭng-guk, “1930 nyŏndae taejung-gŭg ŭi kujo wa t’ŭksŏng” (Construction and Characteristics of the Popular Entertainment Theater of the 1930s), *Ulsan Ōmun Nonjip*, no. 12 (1997), pp. 147-148.

¹⁶ Touring activities included the ‘On the Slaughter’ Theater (Chungŏe Kŭkchang), the Bright Day Theater (Myŏng’il Kŭkchang), the ‘Beyond the Gate’ troupe (Munŏe Kŭktan), the Brothers Theater (Hyŏngche-jwa), the Spring and Autumn Theater (Ch’unch’u Kŭkchang), and the Capital Stage (Kyŏngsŏng Mudae).

shinpa); some were associated with *sin-gŭk* theater, which promoted contemporary Western plays. Different experiences shaped different acting styles. Only a few actors had the opportunity to apprentice themselves to the acting profession before their stage debut; most learned the ins and outs of acting directly on stage, brushing up their skills from older colleagues. The diversity of the *taejung-gŭk* community was also influenced by the social status of the actors and their level of education. These determined the rank of *taejung-gŭk* companies and often had an effect on their popularity.

In the first half of the thirties, the most popular *taejung-gŭk* companies covered: the Korean Theater Center (Chosŏn Yŏn'gŭksa), the Theater Bazaar (Yŏn'gŭk Sijang), the New Stage (Sin Mudae), the Sun Team (T'aeyang Kŭktan), the Golden Theater (Hwang-gŭmjwa) and the Number of Korean Theater (Chosŏn Yŏn'gŭk-ho). In the second half of the 1930s, the Art Reserve (Yewŏn-jwa), the Korean Theater Association (Chosŏn Yŏn'gŭk Hyŏphoe), the 'Middle' Stage (Chung'ang Mudae), the Romantic Theater (Nangman-jwa), the Cooperation (Kohyŏp) and the Arang troupe gained recognition.

The latter was established by actors from the legendary Far East Theater (Tong'yang Kŭkchang), which was established in November 1935. Within four months it had organized three companies: the Youth (Ch'ongch'ung-jwa), the East (Tonggŭk-chwa) and the Comedy (Hŭigŭk-chwa). They played a key role in popularizing entertainment theater, and the Far East Theater became its symbol.

REPERTOIRE OF TAEJUNG-GŬK COMPANIES

The program of *taejung-gŭk* companies in the first half of the 1930s was basically fixed and imposed by the tastes of the audience, the organizational capabilities of the companies and the skills of their actors.¹⁷ Some companies tried to make small changes, but they were subordinated to the commercial goals of the theater.

The artistic program consisted of three plays, which included 'moral drama' (*injŏng-gŭk*, literally 'the play of empathy'), 'comedy' (*hŭi-gŭk*, literally 'the play of joy') and 'tragedy' (*pi-gŭk*, literally 'the play of sadness'). The latter grew out of the tradition of melodrama and *made the audience cry, transforming the audience into a sea of tears*.¹⁸

Over time, *taejung-gŭk* companies began to deviate from the established pattern and made slight changes to the program. They retained the *pi-gŭk* and *hŭi-gŭk* plays, but instead of morality plays, they staged plays called 'western drama' (*sŏyang-gŭk*), 'historical drama' (*sa-gŭk*) or 'social drama' (*sahoe-gŭk*).¹⁹ However, their changes were only illusory, since all the plays, regardless of the promising name, belonged to the genre of bourgeois moral drama, and their melodramatic style followed the tradition of Japanese

¹⁷ E. Rynarzewska, *Teatr uwiklany...*, p. 201.

¹⁸ Ko Sŏl-bong, *Chŭng'ŏn yŏn'gŭk* (Theater in the Eyes of Witnesses), Seoul 1990, p. 23.

¹⁹ "Maeil Shinbo" (28 VI 1931), in An Kwang-hŭi (ed.), *Hanguk kŭndae yŏn'gŭk sa charyojip 4* (History of Korean Theater of the Kŭndae Period: A Collection of Source Materials, vol. 4), Seoul 2001, p. 367; "Maeil Shinbo" (5 XII 1931), in An Kwang-hŭi (ed.), *Hanguk kŭndae yŏn'gŭk sa charyojip 4...*, p. 688.

‘new school’ theater. The evening program of most *taejung-gŭk* companies usually included three of the plays listed here, which, at most, were staged in different order.

A significant change in the repertoire of *taejung-gŭk* came with the introduction of short shows, commonly known as *makkan* (literally, ‘between plays’). Its development was initiated in 1927 by Kim So-rang (1891-?), the director of the Ch’wisŏng-jwa troupe. Initially it was presented during the change of decorations to liven up bored audiences and bolster the bloated budget.²⁰ In the Ch’wisŏng-jwa troupe *makkan* shows consisted of vocal solo songs and improvised dialogue scenes presented in the convention of farce.

The *taejung-gŭk* companies recognized the great potential of *makkan* and introduced them into their repertoire. Very quickly *makkan* became an integral part of their program, even though it had little to do with drama. As *makkan* shows’ popularity grew, they transformed into an autonomous show, commonly referred to as a ‘*makkan* play’ (*makkan-gŭk*, literally ‘a short play [presented] between scenes [of a performance]’). They dominated the program of many *taejung-gŭk* companies, and some of them decided even to hire an artistic director responsible only for the level and variety of *makkan*.

‘THE MAKKAN PLAY’: AN ARTISTIC KALEIDOSCOPE

A large part of the Korean public went to the theater exclusively to watch *makkan* shows, and the artists themselves aroused fervent enthusiasm, rising to the status of stage stars and celebrities. ‘*Makkan* play’ soon became a symbol of *taejung-gŭk*, and its ‘golden age’ was in the first half of the 1930s. At that time it dominated the program of many companies that were determined to give up other dramas, convinced that the ‘*makkan* play’ guaranteed better audience attendance. As time passed, *makkan* became more and more diverse. It was enriched by vocal and dance performances, jazz music²¹ and popular Western music, films, as well as numerous improvised scenes, presented by artists *taejung-gŭk* either solo or in duets. *Taejung-gŭk* companies borrowed elements from Western boulevard theater and the entertainment industry, which they learned through Japanese culture.

In an effort to attract audiences, *taejung-gŭk* companies modified *makkan* and invented new ideas with exotic-sounding names. Their repertoire resembled a huge, well-stocked ‘supermarket’²², where everyone could find something interesting for themselves. The tremendous diversity of the program expressed the spirit of the new era, but at the same time exposed the mechanisms of the consumer lifestyle and the growing

²⁰ Yu Min-yŏng, *Han’guk kŭndae yŏn’gŭk sa* (History of Korean Theater of the Kŭndae Period), Seoul 1996, p. 328.

²¹ The conventionality of the term jazz music should be taken into account here. In the 1920s and 1930s, the name denoted a hybrid musical and vocal form called *yuhaeng-ga* (literally, ‘fashion songs’). It combined elements of indigenous music, French *chanson* and Italian *canzone songs*, German songs, and adaptations of Western classical pieces such as tango and rumba. (See: Hyelim Kim, “Interactive Music Masking Between Korean Traditional Music and Jazz,” *The 9th Korean Studies Graduate Students Convention in Europe*, University of Warsaw, 17-20 IX 2012, p. 191).

²² “Tong-A Ilbo” (30 V 1931), in An Kwang-hŭi (ed.), *Hanguk kŭndae yŏn’gŭk sa charyojip* 4..., p. 250.

power of the entertainment industry.²³ *Taejung-gŭk* companies enticed audiences with new artistic solutions, though all of them had very little to do with theater, representing rather quasi-theater. Most of these so-called new ideas were usually based on the existing repertoire, which the companies tried to hide by calling them by new names.

The best example of the strategy presents a show called in a very original and extravagant manner: 'show' (Kor. *shyo*). It displaced 'comedy' (*hŭi-gŭk*), and then was itself displaced by a show with the peculiar name of *variety show*. Soon, however, *variety show* too became boring, so it had to give way to a show called in a familiar manner: *taehwa-mandam* (literally, 'dialogue-art of empty talk').²⁴ The whole process of transforming the *show* into *taehwa-mandam* took only a few months, proving the great flexibility of the *taejung-gŭk* companies, determined to satisfy audience expectations.

Most of the initiatives undertaken by the actors of 'makkan show' were a kind of marketing ploy imposed by the competing market of the cultural industry. The showpieces were often created spontaneously, determined by external circumstances, fleeting trends, and the audience's tastes. In this sense, 'makkan show' was an accidental artistic product rather than the fruit of a consistently developed theatrical strategy. It revealed the impermanence and uncertainty of the rapidly changing reality, becoming its vivid and dramatic sign.

THE MAKKAN GENRES

The most popular genres of 'makkan show' included: *nonsense comedy* (*nŏnsensŭ kŏmidi*), skits (*sŭk'ech'wi*) and *mandam*.

The first one, commonly called *nonsense*, included short satirical showpieces.²⁵ They dealt with moral topics, and the main plot thread was the problems of everyday life.²⁶ They were characterized by a dynamic pace, and their composition was formed by improbable linguistic convolutions and unpredictable word clusters, serving primarily to provoke laughter from the audience. They were usually presented by two or three actors, who mocked human flaws and weaknesses, portrayed marital problems in an exaggerated form and ridiculed the modern lifestyle in modernizing Korea. The artists played the roles of a clumsy, often unemployed husband and a vain, greedy, discontented wife.²⁷

²³ E. Rynarzewska, *Teatr uwiklany...*, p. 205.

²⁴ Ko Sŏl-bong, *Chŭng'ŏn yŏn'gŭk...*, p. 23.

²⁵ Seventy-eight *nonsense comedy* scripts have survived to the present day, and this number testifies to the immense popularity of the genre.

²⁶ Neither the name *nonsense* nor even *nonsense comedy* functions in Korean and English dictionaries to refer to the performing arts. Theater historians assume that the term was adopted from Japanese, where it appeared around 1923 in the context of 'comedy of the absurd.' See: Ch'oe Tong-hyŏn, Kim Man-su, "1930 nyŏndae yusŏnggi ūmban e suroktoen mandam – nŏnsenŭ – sŭkech'i yŏgu" (Mandam, Nŏnsenŭ, Sŭkechi in the Phonography of the 1930s), *Hanguk Kŭg'yeshul Yŏn'gu*, no. 7 (1997), p. 72.

²⁷ Sŏ Yŏn-ho, *Han'guk yŏn'gŭk sa – kŭndae p'yŏn* (History of Korean Theater – Kŭndae Period), Seoul 2003, p. 222.

The main plot of *nonsense* included the argument of these two, who kept pointing out each other's faults and flaws. The wife, mostly representing the modern type of woman (*sin-yōsōng*), criticized her husband for ineptitude, conceit and alcohol abuse, while the husband accused his wife of vanity, laziness and stupidity. As the conflict grew, the couple reached for heavier and heavier accusations, until finally resorting to intimidation and blackmail. The quarrel ended in reconciliation, generally the result of unforeseen circumstances, or the intervention of a third character appearing by chance.²⁸

The second genre of 'makkan show' was the skits, and like *nonsense*, was presented by a pair of actors. The element of improvisation still played an important role, although it was somewhat limited by a predetermined certain pattern of actions.²⁹ The warp of intrigue was also the conflict of the characters, but it did not end in reconciliation. The main goal of the sketch creators was to provoke uncontrolled, free and probably not even always motivated laughter.³⁰ In order to arouse it, actors generally resorted to situational comedy, which was enhanced by the episodic structure and triviality of the message.³¹ The creators of skits often used parody to portray the characters of classic messages, legends, popular novels and films in an exaggerated light.³² The composition of many skits was enriched by songs, and the actors presented either new songs created by the skits writers or songs that were commonly known.³³ Musical accompaniment was an extremely attractive solution, so writers began to attach great importance to it, subordinating dialogue and later also the plot to it. It was the elaborate musical layer that enabled skits to survive hard times and laid a lasting foundation for the *ak-kūk* musical theater that developed in the next decade.³⁴

The last genre, *mandam* (literally, 'free stories,' 'uncontrolled words,' 'chaotic character') included short satirical monologues that referred to social realities and pictured them in a parody style.³⁵ The artists used the convention of traditional satirical plays (*chaedam-gük*) that were an integral part of the Korean traditional theater.³⁶ They usually focused on creating a parody of the reality. The literary value of the *mandam* was dominated by the free artistic expressions. Actors used comical, even clownish means and their performances, based largely on improvisation, were characterized by

²⁸ Ch'oe Tong-hyōn, Kim Man-su, "1930 nyōndae yusōnggi..." p. 73.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

³⁰ Kim Chae-sōk, "1930 nyōndae yusōnggi ūmban ūi ch'on'gük yōn'gu" (Art of Ch'on'gük on Gramophone Records of the 1930s), *Han'guk Kūg'yēsul Yōn'gu*, no. 2 (1995), p. 60.

³¹ Ch'oe Tong-hyōn, Kim Man-su, "1930 nyōndae yusōnggi..." pp. 76-77.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁴ Sō Yōn-ho, *Han'guk yōn'gük sa...*, p. 223.

³⁵ Only a few *mandam* scripts have survived to modern times, which, according to some scholars, proves the small popularity of this genre. See: Kim Chae-sōk, "1930 nyōndae yusōnggi..." p. 60. Others claim that the genre did not disappear, but evolved into a new form called *yadam* (literally 'unofficial story,' 'unofficial story') and was also presented in the second half of the 1930s. Ch'oe Tong-hyōn, Kim Man-su, "1930 nyōndae yusōnggi..." p. 70.

³⁶ Sō Yōn-ho, *Han'guk yōn'gük sa...*, p. 224.

compositional simplicity and a weakly outlined plot.³⁷ The main purpose of *mandam* was to provoke the audience to laughter and to reach this goal, actors used unrefined jokes, clownish antics, trivial tricks, and even simple onomatopoeic expressions.³⁸

AGAINST *MAKKAN*³⁹

Makkan performances, known for their straightforward humor, offered audiences a respite from the harsh realities of occupation and daily stresses through tears and laughter. However, these shows also drew significant contempt and disgust. Critics, predominantly from the ‘new drama’ (*sin’gük*) movement inspired by contemporary European drama⁴⁰, were particularly displeased. Admirers of Strindberg and Chekhov found *makkan’s* satirical conventions and simplistic plot solutions offensive. They were especially discontented with the intrusive comic elements, parody, and foolish acts, alongside the silly expressions and situational and verbal comedy, which included arbitrary linguistic effects and simple onomatopoeic expressions.⁴¹ For these critics, the important social issues addressed in the improvised *makkan* scenes were overshadowed by their comical and exaggerated presentation, which they believed only incited uncontrolled and often unjustified laughter.⁴²

As a result, ‘new drama’ advocated for condemned ‘*makkan* art’ from the beginning, calling for its removal from theatrical repertoires. One of the earliest and most fervent opponents was poet Sim Hun (1901-1936), who had already criticized *taejunggük* troupes by 1932, demanding the exclusion of *makkan* from their programs. In the ‘Tonggwang’ (Light of the East) magazine, he urged, *Do away with the makkan! They probably allow you to gain the audience’s sympathy. However, you have forgotten that even a salesman is bound by certain rules! The audience may not be familiar with the art of theater, but you, who are so often pointed at and mocked, should maintain your own dignity and take care of your good name. [...] There are not enough words to describe the disgusting, offensive acts you are doing on stage during solo shows, revues, and the like. It’s hard to watch it. It’s hard to listen to it. [...] I saw those vulgar displays of yours, listened to those disgusting dialogues of yours, and was thinking whether you even realize that among the audience applauding you are educated students, cultured men and well-bred women.*

³⁷ Ch’oe Tong-hyön, Kim Man-su, “1930 nyöndae yusönggi...,” pp. 71-72.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

³⁹ The strong views expressed in opposition against the *makkan* shows by Korean playwrights, writers, and poets were recalled and discussed also in: E. Rynarzewska, “The Identity of Paradoxes in Contemporary Korean Theater: Ideals Versus Realities,” *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, vol. 77, no. 1 (2024), pp. 130-132.

⁴⁰ Modern Western drama began to be staged in the early 1920s by amateur student groups. In the following decade, it formed the core of the repertoire of the Theater Arts Institute (Küg’yesul Yön’guhoe), which operated from 1931 to 1938.

⁴¹ Ch’oe Tong-hyön, Kim Man-su, “1930 nyöndae yusönggi...,” p. 72.

⁴² Kim Chae-sök, “1930 nyöndae yusönggi...,” p. 60.

*These makkān of yours are destroying order in the family and in society. They absolutely must be abolished!*⁴³

Korea's first professional stage director, Hong Hae-sŏng (1894-1957), shared an equally uncompromising view, dedicating an entire article, *Hŭnghaeng-gŭg ūi chŏnghwa nŭn makkānmul ūi p'yeji* (*The purification of commercial theater requires the elimination of makkān*), to the necessity of eliminating 'makkān art.' In his article he pleaded, *If makkān performances are not eliminated, we cannot expect the purification of popular theater. If popular theater is not purified, the Korean theater community will not be able to perform its social function and effectively create culture. Meanwhile, most theater companies are striving to expand makkān. [...] These troupes are destroying the theater, as they focus on entertainment that satisfies the audience's low needs and compensates for mediocre emotions. Such action is nothing but suicide.*⁴⁴

The condemnation of *makkān* extended beyond theater theorists like Sŏ Hang-sŏk (1900-1985) and An Ham-gwang (1910-1982) to include writers such as Yi T'ae-jun (1904-?), Paek Ch'ŏl (1908-1985), Pak Yŏng-hŭi (1901-?), and Ch'oe Chŏng-hŭi (1912-1990). Yu Ch'i-jin (1905-1974), a leading playwright and initiator of Korean realistic drama, also called for the removal of *makkān*: *Makkān shows must be removed! For the sake of theatrical art! Theater troupes, as well as playwrights, directors, actors, stage designers – all artists associated with these troupes, are hostage to the popularity of makkān. They all have submitted to makkān and live in their shadow. This is deplorable! [...] This alliance of makkān and drama brings confusion in the theater, and inevitably leads the theater to decline. It is crucial to purify the theater from the atmosphere of makkān, from the turmoil that makkān causes!*⁴⁵

The abolition of *makkān* was eventually accomplished in July 1936 by the Far Eastern Theater (Tong'yang Kŭkchang).⁴⁶ The Far Eastern Theater was soon followed by other *taejunggŭk* troupes, and within a few years *makkān* shows had almost completely disappeared from the Korean theater repertoire.

JUST ENTERTAINMENT?

'Makkān shows' functioned in the political and economic reality of the 1930s and had to conform to it, just as any theater, functioning in industrial culture, has to conform to the demands of the market.⁴⁷ Thus, they succumbed to fashion, met the expectations

⁴³ Sim Hun, "Tonggwang" (1 X 1932), in An Kwang-hŭi (ed.), *Hanguk kŭndae yŏngŭk sa charyojip 5* (History of Korean Theater of the Kŭndae Period: A Collection of Source Materials, vol. V), Seoul 2001, pp. 581-582.

⁴⁴ Hong Hae-sŏng, "Hŭnghaeng-gŭg ūi chŏnghwa nŭn makkānmul ūi p'yeji" (The Purification of Commercial Theater Requires the Elimination of Makkān), *Tong-A Ilbo*, 1 I 1935.

⁴⁵ Yu Ch'i-jin, *Tongnang Yu Ch'i-jin chŏnjip 7* (Collected Works of Yu Ch'i-jin-Tongnang, vol. 7), Seoul 1993, p. 53.

⁴⁶ For more on establishing and activities of the Far East Theater, see: E. Rynarzewska, *Teatr uwikłany...*, pp. 252-267.

⁴⁷ D. Ratajczakowa, „Teatr wielkiej liczby. Próba spojrzenia”, in: M. Leyko (ed.), *Teatr masowy – teatr dla mas*, Łódź 2001, p. 13.

of the audience, reacted spontaneously to the surrounding reality, and commented on everyday life. In this sense, they referred to the tradition of European cabaret, which bore the hallmarks of political theater and was strongly involved in social problems, agitated, undermined the value of existing institutions, and often fought in the interests of the lowest classes.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether the ‘*makkan* show’ reveals such characteristics.

It is difficult to answer this question unequivocally. The only sources of knowledge are gramophone records, recorded in the thirties by the phonographic companies Taihei, Regal, Cheron, Okeh, Columbia, and Polydor.⁴⁹ More than one hundred and forty records have lasted until the present day. Among them, only ‘a few referred to social reality.’⁵⁰ However, it should be taken into consideration that some of the record companies were owned by the Japanese, while the rest were in the hands of Westerners, who had to submit to the regulations of the Japanese administration if they wanted to retain the right to do business in the Korean market. They would not risk releasing a record whose content in any way challenged the political order of the time.

It can therefore be assumed that the gramophone records recorded by the artists do not give a complete picture of the ‘*makkan* show,’ which was subject to censorship. Live shows presented by *makkan* artists were also subject to censorship. However, they were spontaneous and improvisational in nature. It cannot be ruled out that on stage, artists allowed themselves to make political allusions and smuggle in casual comments. Be that as it may, direct reference to reality, including political reality, was a common ploy to attract audiences. Korean artists were certainly aware of this.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the ‘*makkan* show,’ like all Korean theater, was subordinated to Japan’s repressive policies. And the Japanese administration prevented the staging of ambitious repertoire, and much less intended to tolerate any criticism of the political and social reality of occupied Korea. It was the restrictive policy of Japanese censorship that made the ‘*makkan* show’ become empty entertainment, with dance and singing supplanting aspects of social criticism.⁵¹

This also explains why the ‘*makkan* show’ cannot be compared to European cabaret. Although many *makkan* shows made allusions to the social problems of Koreans, and in this sense *constituted a kind of commentary on the surrounding reality*,⁵² their authors dealt primarily with moral topics, avoiding direct references to the political and social situation. The management of *taejung-gük* companies took great care not to provoke the Japanese administration with incorrect content and not to alienate the audience either. Therefore, they skillfully selected a repertoire that entertained, moved and

⁴⁸ J.R. Brown (ed.), *Historia teatru*, tłum. H. Baltyn-Karpinska, Warszawa 2007.

⁴⁹ Kim Chae-sök, “1930 nyöndaeyusönggi...,” p. 57.

⁵⁰ Ch’oe Tong-hyön, Kim Man-su, “1930 nyöndaeyusönggi...,” p. 78.

⁵¹ Yang Süng-guk, *Han’guk hyöndaeyusönggi* (A Monograph on Contemporary Korean Drama), Seoul 2001, p. 269.

⁵² Sö Yön-ho, *Han’guk yön’gük sa...*, p. 242.

laughed, instructed and educated, while keeping a safe distance from the tense political situation and real social problems.⁵³

The artists stigmatized the vices of their compatriots, criticized the demoralization and decline of customs, mocked the blind imitation of Western trends and fanatical attachment to tradition. By ridiculing chosen aspects of social life, on the one hand, they signaled the existence of a problem and perhaps made the audience think about it, but on the other hand, to some extent, probably even in a completely unintentional way, they carried out the policy of the Japanese authorities, which, under the guise of the need to reform Korea, legitimized its own actions aimed at discriminating against Koreans.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the popularity of 'makkan show' was determined by the immense popularity of Korean *taejung-gŭk* theater, which was a response to the demands of its era. In this sense, 'makkan show' was the outcome but also the hostage of the reality of the 1930s. However, justifying its popularity solely by the political and economic situation seems to oversimplify the phenomenon. It is important to consider whether the triumph of *makkan* was influenced by cultural conditions.

The development of the 'makkan show' was influenced by entertaining Western art, which flowed into Korea via Japan.⁵⁴ For centuries, this art was created by various incarnations of satyrs, mimes, jesters, clowns, gags and comedians, who were the core of European circus sideshows, folk festivals and fair shows.⁵⁵ Undergoing numerous metamorphoses, they reached the Korean scene of the 1930s and took roots in Korean culture, although they belonged to a foreign culture.

It's worth asking, then, why Korean audiences received the Western jester with such enthusiasm. It seems they saw in him the embodiment of the traditional *kwangdae* actor, who for centuries had successfully entertained the low class and made people laugh with his rubbishy style of speech, word games and iconoclastic retorts. If this assumption is correct, we can draw a conclusion that the attractiveness of *makkan* shows was not determined by their aura of modernity, but by an intrinsic connection to the folk culture of old Korea. In the clownish shows presented by *makkan* artists, audiences discovered the familiar world of their traditional culture: the antics of Servant-Maltug'i from masked dance plays (*t'alch'um*) and the audacity of Hong Tong-ji from native puppet shows (*kkoktu-gakshi-nor'ŭm*). The audience saw a world that was slowly becoming the past, and as such was evoking nostalgia and longing. And it was these sentiments that may have determined the popularity of the 'makkan show' and elevated its artists to stars of *taejung-gŭk* theater.

⁵³ E. Rynarzewska, *Teatr uwiktany...*, p. 201.

⁵⁴ Kim Mi-do, *Han'guk kŭndae-gŭk ūi chaejonmyŏng...*, pp. 50-51.

⁵⁵ J.R. Brown (ed.), *Historia teatru...*, pp. 21, 51, 63, 127, 157, 231-233, 404-407.

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