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presented by
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Abstract:

*Sugungga, the story of the hare in the underwater palace in Korean P'ansori -
Socio-cultural issues and the Expansion to Europe*

P'ansori can be described as an epic song, performed by a solo singer and accompanying drummer on a barrel drum. There are five surviving P'ansori being performed in and outside of Korea. My aim is to show current socio-cultural issues regarding the influence of P'ansori on Korea's national identity and present an interdisciplinary research, linking folklore, musicology and history.

In December 2011 the prestigious National Theater of Korea gave its first guest appearance and sole guest play in Germany in performing a modernized version of the Korean traditional music genre P'ansori. This particular performance of the National Theater of Korea is noteworthy because Achim Freyer, a renowned artist and director and former pupil of the German poet Bertolt Brecht, realised both the Korean and German production: stage, costumes and lighting blended the Korean traditions and beliefs with his European aesthetics and understanding.

My paper will review the performance of the National Theater of Korea at the Wuppertaler Bühnen in Germany, focusing on the European interpretation and perception of P'ansori.

I. Introduction

From being previously enjoyed only by commoners and later cultivated and promoted by the upper class (*yangban*), P'ansori in the 21st century is now a highly appreciated art form, also targeting the international audience. This paper discusses the reinvention and transformation of the well-established tradition of P'ansori in focusing on the special stage in Germany "Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King" by Achim Freyer, based on Sugungga.

Achim Freyer is an internationally renowned artist and director born in Berlin 1934. He studied under the famous German poet Bertolt Brecht, was appointed Professor at the Berlin University of the Arts, participated in the documenta 1977 and documenta 1987, Biennale Venice 1995 and is internationally known for his theater, music theater and opera productions. "Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King" was his first production based on Korean P'ansori and he created the stage, lighting and costumes as well. The play returned to Korea between September 5th and 8th 2012 due to its popularity.

II. Background

Sugungga has always been a story of multi-ethnic origin. Various versions of it can be found in India, China, Tibet, Mongolia and Japan¹ and its origin in the Buddhist Jataka tales² from India are confirmed. Over the centuries distinctive “Korean” traits have been embedded into Sugungga, such as the characterization of the roles, focus, names and settings. P’ansori itself is an ever-evolving genre, as an oral tradition; being transmitted from master to pupil, it is a rare form of a still vibrant traditional culture. There has been growing interest outside of Korea regarding P’ansori performances and newly created P’ansori plays. Performers such as Prof. Chan E. Park in the USA also staged P’ansori completely in English³ in combination with western and east Asian instruments.

Achim Freyer once said: “P’ansori is perfect art, because it is a protolanguage of men and music. Even though I don’t know the Korean language, it touches me.”⁴ He also noted that one of his first impressions of P’ansori was, that it reminded him of the “tunes of Turkish monks and Sardinian folk songs”⁵ which would also make an interesting subject for further research. He was also fascinated by “the rough voices, unique melody and flawless alternation between song (*sori*) and recitation (*aniri*) and the use of both courtly and vulgar language (...) He connected the feelings and language style used in P’ansori with the rough expressions used by dock labourers (in Germany).”⁶

But what makes *Sugungga* particularly appealing for western audiences? Within the five remaining traditional P’ansori (Chunhyangga, Shimcheongga, Hyeongbuga, Sugungga and Jeokbyeokga), Sugungga has the most possibilities for heterogeneous interpretation - be it religious, political, mythical or humorous.⁷ In my opinion the seemingly light and flippant story provides the ideal base to project different interpretations according to preference, country and audience.

It is known that P’ansori singers are able to adapt quickly to the demands of their audience and will add or shorten their stories depending on the reception of the crowd. For example, a play of Sugungga solely for children and teenagers might have a different focus than a performance for adults.

The humorous element of Sugungga about the witty rabbit and his escape from the underwater palace is a story captivating all age groups, while the more subtle underlining social and political implications leave enough flexibility to bend the meaning to accustom the present environment. Achim Freyer acknowledges: “P’ansori talks about our life, dreams, anxieties, fears and beauty. Those are things that all artists talk about, or should talk about. P’ansori has strict rules and forms but I am going to express those features freely.”⁸

He uses the universal connection P’ansori has with other art forms, namely the meaning of P’ansori itself, why it exists: to link the Korean performance practice with the west.

The main reason for the creation of P’ansori is: to entertain with strong emotions and to unleash those same emotions within the audience, to make the audience identify themselves with the story and empathize with the characters the singer portrays.

I will examine if “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” was able to fulfill this aspiration.

¹ Grayson, James Huntley, „Rabbit Visits the Dragon Palace”: A Korea-Localised, Buddhist Tale from India (School of East Asian Studies University of Sheffield), 1

² Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“ (Martin-Luther-University, Halle-Wittenberg), 9

³ Park, Chan E., Hakenberg, Stefan, *Alaskan Pansori: Klanott and the Land Otter People*, 2005

⁴ Wuppertaler Bühnen, „Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King“, Textbook, 4

⁵ Wuppertaler Bühnen, „Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King“, 4

⁶ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“, 13

⁷ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“, 8

⁸ Korean Herald, „Venue to bring „pansori“ to the world“,

<http://www.koreaherald.com/entertainment/Detail.jsp?newsMLId=20110329000665> (accessed August 3rd, 2012)

Prior to the guest appearance in Wuppertal, Germany, the prestigious National Theater of Korea premiered “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” in Korea on September 8th 2011 with great success. They performed in Germany between December 21st to 23rd in 2011.

My evaluation will be based on their production from December 23rd.

Entitled “Mr Rabbit and the Dragon King”, composer Lee Yong-Tak and master singer An Sook-Sun created their own version in form of a Changgeuk based on the traditional P’ansori Sugungga.

The 68-member team of the National Theater of Korea (the Changgeuk division) had three sold out showings in Germany and the language barrier did not hinder the surprisingly present German audience in visiting this special play. It was equally well-attended by the Korean community of Germany. Community representatives from other cities undertook three to four hour travel time to Wuppertal to support the the concert.

The participation of the secretary of cultural affairs of North Rhine-Westphalia, the chief of Wuppertal’s Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the consul of the Korean Embassy in Germany and the director of the Korean Community Association of Germany clearly showed that this event was highly regarded.

III. Stage and Costumes

The narrative of Sugungga remains unchanged in “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King”. It is still the tale of a sick Dragon King, who resides under the water and dispatches his servant Byeoljubu, the tortoise to catch a hare. The King’s illness can only be cured by consuming the liver of a hare, which is interesting “because there is a Korean saying, which translated means ‘You have a big liver’. This expression is commonly used to describe a bold and fearless feat, not necessarily clever but gutsy in its execution.”

As stated by Achim Freyer, “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” should not become a reproduction or repetition of previous traditional staging. He wanted to transform the ancient tradition and show another aspect of Suggunga, while demonstrating that the epic song P’ansori was equal to similar forms of other cultures. Instead of transplanting the setting into something completely different, he drew his inspiration from the Korean landscape, from mountains, colors and great valleys and applied this in rough and bold lines to the designs of background images and costumes.

The main stage was in plain black, while the background image, held in black and white, changed according to the scenes; the darkness on stage put the musicians in the spotlight, while the majority of the sea creatures had white and black clothing. The animal characters on land had partly colorful or, for special characters, colorful costumes. The back of the stage was dominated by a big construction, where the female narrator of the story sat, in a three meter long blue dress. The dress also served as “a grand drape for the other performers who appeared from the inside of her dress.”⁹ The most surprising change that set this performance apart from traditional presentations was the use of masks, which covered the entire faces of the performers.

⁹ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“, 14

IV. Music

The newly composed music for “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” can be classified as a continuation and progression of the third stage¹⁰ of *changjak gugak*. “Music in this genre features elements similar to Western art music, such as a single composer for a piece that is written on the score, new musical structures closer to Western art music than traditional music, Western-style concert forms, a Western-style conductor(…)”.¹¹ The interesting fact is that only the music for the instrumentalists was newly written, who are supporting the singers on stage. The accompanying ensemble consisted of a Buk, Gayageum, Ajaeng, Geomungo, Haegeum, Sogeum, Piri, Daegeum and modern percussion in alternating play. Even though a modern western percussion was used, the music can not be described as *Fusion changjak gugak* since the main influence of the performance remained in traditional melodies and rhythm patterns and there were no further western instruments included which are essential to *Fusion changjak gugak* (such as “electronic guitar or jazz piano”¹²). A detailed analysis of the musical score would be of interest to understand its advancement and growth from the source and what lies ahead. The leading roles were sung by only one performer but the singers with minor parts often played two or three different roles. To change their roles, the singers simply attached a different mask to their heads. The main elements of the spoken part (*aniri*) were done by the female narrator, who sung the opening and closing scenes.

V. Message and Interpretation

Achim Freyer utilized Brecht’s “alienation effect” to present the still foreign P’ansori tradition to the German audience. The so called “alienation effect” makes a foreign world or different culture experiencable in conveying a current message as a parable. On the first glance in his execution of *Sugungga*, the illness of the Dragon King, residing in his underwater palace happened due to external circumstances. It does not come from within the royal household and was not brought on by one's own fault. The reason for the king’s sickness was explained as the pollution of the environment, shown with dozens of empty water bottles hanging over the stage. Simultaneously his subjects fell prey to dangerous fishing nets.¹³ The pollution of the water through waste and toxins is a global problem, the protection of the maritime world was even the collaborative theme of the Expo 2012 in Yeosu, Korea. Parts of “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” were even presented at the Expo in Yeosu.

The imperial palace of the Dragon King was only a dirty, black pit and the dominating colors of “blue, white and black were a stark contrast to the common *Changgeuk* performances where colors almost explode on stage”.¹⁴ The intrigant and rapacious members of the court did not want to help their king in fear of their own life but enviously disapproved of Byeoljubu, the tortoise, seeing him as a threat to their elite status. The Dragon King is portrayed as a slightly naive and old dodderer, who sees his power unravel before his eyes - despite his rank. Also, Byeoljubu, the loyal tortoise, is no longer blindly devoted to the king. Due to his special ability to live under the water and on land he was chosen to look for the hare but only the promise of money and status appealed to him to leave the underwater palace. While in the original version *Sugungga* Byeoljubu obediently follows his king’s orders due to the fact that he is the only one able to survive in water and on land.¹⁵ The king is no longer a wise and untouchable ruler and his ministers, as well as one of the core themes in the original *Sugungga*, the absolute loyalty is slightly shifted in “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King”. The original story of *Sugungga* shows us the devotion of the Dragon King’s vassals, who offer themselves to

¹⁰ Byong-Won Lee, Yong-Shik Lee, „Contemporary Korean Music“, The National Center For Korean Traditional Performing Arts, 2007, 179

¹¹ Byong-Won Lee, Yong-Shik Lee, „Contemporary Korean Music“, 172

¹² Byong-Won Lee, Yong-Shik Lee, „Contemporary Korean Music“, 183

¹³ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“, 15

¹⁴ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P’ansori For A National Identity“, 14

¹⁵ Ibid, 15

hunt for the rabbit even though their bodies, as creatures of the sea, were not made for it. But a question arises: what if the exogenous contamination shown through the dark colors and empty water bottles were in fact the result of a defilement from within? Corrupt court officials who are living for their own benefit and not their people and a selfish King with basically no power, facing a terminal illness.

Even though Achim Freyer notes that his production is not a political one, it certainly displays, rather openly, such implications.¹⁶ And, most importantly, the faithfulness and devotion of Byeoljubu who puts his life on the line during his brave quest and who lies and cheats to coax the rabbit into the underwater palace, is not as substantial and weighty as before.

Byeoljubu was part of Sugungga's focus, displaying the need and the honor of duty and dedication to the king. Byeoljubu might not be a soldier, but in the P'ansori he shows the same qualities as a refined warrior, one who fights with his words.

But now it seems that the focus shifted and his role is only reduced to persuading the rabbit.

One of the figures with the strongest stage presence, almost omnipresent, was undoubtedly the female narrator, named Madame P'ansori. As the performers emerged from her long dress it almost seemed as if she, as the personification of P'ansori was giving birth to the characters and indulgently watched over her "children". In a prologue she creates the world of Sugungga, as sun, moon and stars are attached to her dress. She plucks them from the dress and uses poignant recitation, almost throwing the words out of her mouth for greater impact. The style of the prologue is in my opinion a new development, added by by Lee Yong-Tak and master singer An Sook-Sun.

It gave me an impression as if those long-drawn-out words were sinking down like heavy stones in the water.

"The arrangement of her clothes and posture immediately reminded me of the Queen of the Night from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* - the comparison lies not too far because Achim Freyer is famous for his international productions of *The Magic Flute*. Clearly, the stage of "Mr Rabbit and the Dragon King" was influenced by elements of his previous works, which made it so interesting."¹⁷ Other influences regarding the appearance of "Madame P'ansori" was certainly Japanese Kabuki. "With a ghostly white painted face, similar to a Japanese kabuki dancer, regal movements and with the use of a stern voice left a powerful impression, Madame P'ansori used song and recitation (*sori* and *aniri*) to comment the story. Her words were metaphoric and poetic; in some parts it was almost as if she was reciting a Korean *sijo*."¹⁸

As previously mentioned in Chapter III, the costumes and masks were very unique. The Dragon King was clad in yellow, a color mostly associated with royalty in Asia, while special characters, such as "the executioner who prepared to open the hare's belly upon the king's order"¹⁹ had the color red, as in blood and danger. "Interestingly, Freyer integrated other traditional folk elements, such as the ritualistic and martial dance of the executioner"²⁰ with a sword, often done in ancient times before a beheading. While most of the sea creatures were colorless in white and black, the animals on land were partly or in full color - rigid uniformity in the Palace under the water versus the vibrant chaos on the land.

Another big change in this performance was the use of big, flat paper masks, which covered the complete face of the performers and shielded their facial expressions from the audience. The mimic and movements (*ballim*) were severely restricted since the masks were very large and sometimes even fell off the performers, as witnessed on December 23rd, 2012. Encouraging *Chuimsae*, a result of direct communication between the singers and audience, did not happen in this performance even though the audience was asked to do so. I believe that the loss of proper *ballim* and mimic made it different for the audience to engage with the musicians, especially since a language barrier existed, a singer's facial expression could have aided an inexperienced audience member, in combination with subtitles. Subtitles were excellent and provided via projector, but since it was a translation it was impossible to match all points of the story simultaneously. Therefore the audience only had to rely on the subtitles, sometimes slightly delayed - an instant *Chuimsae* was not possible. Due to the masks the movements of the performers were restricted and less impulsive.

¹⁶ fifty2go, „Asien trifft Europa in der Oper“, <http://fifty2go.de/08/11/2011/asien-trifft-europa-in-der-oper/> (accessed August 14th 2012)

¹⁷ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P'ansori For A National Identity“, 14

¹⁸ Ibid, 14

¹⁹ Ibid, 15

²⁰ Ibid, 15

One of my greatest concerns are the changes and alterations to the sound, the most important and principal part.

As a musician myself, I am aware that the use of microphones manipulates and changes the sound. The masks, additionally to the microphones, are stopping the sound just millimeters outside of the mouth and break the flow of the air and sound waves.

Examining the acoustics would be a useful area of further research. The usage of masks aroused associations with "Greece, the Greek drama - divided into tragedy (late 6th century, early 7th century), comedy (486 BC) and satire play. Just like in the Greek drama the masks in "Mr Rabbit and the Dragon King" were exaggerated with a bold style painting and the characters seemed to gain more weight on the surface due to the fact that the actors were hidden behind the masks. The personalities of the actors were cloaked while the characters should fully develop themselves on stage. Also the reduced colors and the handpainted patterns on the clothes made them almost seem like a caricature, sprung to life through a calligraphic script."²¹

I would like to mention two scenes which were newly created for this production. After Byeoljubu was chosen to hunt the hare, the Dragon King summoned the greatest painters to draw a picture of it: Kim Hong-do, Ai Weiwei, Andy Warhol, Albrecht Dürer and Pablo Picasso. It was interesting that Kim Hong-do (1745–c.1806), a famous Korean painter from the late Joseon Period) was the first one and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), one of the most famed German artists during the Reformation, was the last one to attempt this task. And only Dürer made the perfect drawing of the hare. Could this imply the transformation Sugungga took - in Achim Freyer's eyes - traveling from Korea to Germany? Or was it a metaphor for Freyer's own process to create "his" - maybe rightful - view of Sugungga?

The second thought-provoking scene happened when the hare convinced the Dragon King to let him go to fetch his liver, which he allegedly forgot on land. During the farewell party, the hare and the Dragon King both drunkenly exchanged their masks. The Dragon King had now the face of the rabbit, and the hare the mask of the Dragon King. The shift of power, which happened when the hare tricked the king, could be shown through the mask swapping. This scene can easily be overlooked but from my viewpoint this shows the central moment where the lines dividing the once powerful Dragon King and the clever, yet powerless - and lower class - hare blurred, concluding with the escape of the hare.

The ending however, was completely different.

While most versions of Sugungga prefer the storytelling of a supernatural being, who rewards Byeoljubu for his loyalty to the King with a magic cure, Achim Freyer's version included two different things. In „Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King“ Byeoljubu takes the excrements of the hare back to his King, thinking to himself that being poor and a beggar would make him inventful.

This is a complete reversal of the original play, because now, Byeoljubu, who stood for dedication and trustworthiness, almost self-abandonment, is now dishonest and a cheater who would give his King the waste of a hare to consume. The hare did not escape into the woods and mountains but, intertwining another tale, vanishes into the full moon. "The story of the moon rabbit is a known tale in Asia.

In China the hare assists the moon goddess in pouring the elixir of life, while in Korea the hare pounds delicious rice cakes on the moon. Inside the moon the hare laments that the most precious thing is its own life and Madame P'ansori, as the narrator of the story ends it with the sentence 'Hurry, *go back again!*' This is possibly a reference to the circle of life, which continuously repeats itself."²²

VI. Conclusion

²¹ Suh, Dorothea, „The Importance Of Korean P'ansori For A National Identity“, 14

²² Ibid, 15

The enthusiastic responses after the performance in Wuppertal show that Achim Freyer was able to captivate the German audience with his production. “One of the reasons for the cooperation between the National Theater of Korea and Achim Freyer was not to create something completely new but to provide a fresh and provocative view of tradition and culture to stop the trend of traditional music getting absorbed and re-made into parts of popular culture.”²³

Although productions like “Mr. Rabbit and the Dragon King” are still subject to further exploration of what impact massive changes in the original P’ansori story will transmit to the audience, the possibility of global campaigns has generated wide interest in the public, national and international media.

The fact that a native audience with prior knowledge might react and understand it differently than an audience without the knowledge of Korean history, music and culture still remains an open topic.

While it seems that the essence and intention of the P’ansori Sugungga was completely overthrown, Achim Freyer showed us his very interesting and elegant, but still controversial, interpretation of Sugungga. Korean Traditional Music, especially P’ansori, might not be as fast as Hallyu in reaching out to the world to promote Korea but it certainly has undertaken its first steps towards the global stage.

²³ Korean Herald, „Venue to bring „pansori“ to the world“, <http://www.koreaherald.com/entertainment/Detail.jsp?newsMLId=20110329000665> (accessed March 29, 2012)

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