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## *Pansori Othello:*

### *Othello* with Korean *Hyangga*, *Cheoyong ga*\*

Seon Young Jang

#### I. Introduction

*Pansori Othello* (2018) is a Korean musical drama directed by Im Youngwook. Im had conducted an earlier work, *Pansori, Bartleby, the Scrivener* (2017), based on the short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” by American author Herman Melville. In *Pansori Othello*, a solo female singer, Seolbi Dan, interprets Shakespeare’s *Othello* with the essential elements of *pansori* performance: *sori* (song), *aniri* (narration), and *ballim* (mimetic gestures). Im’s production of *Othello* is not content with merely clothing the eminent Shakespearean tragedy in the elements of the Korean artistic tradition and setting it before contemporary Korean audiences. Instead, Im’s production casts

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a critical gaze on *Othello* by juxtaposing it with one of Korea's most famous *hyangga*, called *Cheoyong ga* ("Song of Cheoyong"), composed in 879, placing the story of *Cheoyong ga* briefly before the beginning of the whole narrative of *Othello* and ending after *Othello* concludes. *Cheoyong ga* is a Korean *hyangga* (poetic folk song), written during the eras of three dynasties (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Shilla) between the 7th and 10th centuries. Distinct from contemporary Chinese songs, *hyangga*, orally transmitted as vernacular poetry, was transcribed in *hyangch'al*, a writing system in which certain Chinese glyphs are used phonetically and semantically to represent the sounds of old Korean during the first 1,500 years of Korea's recorded history, when they had no writing system of their own. According to historical records, this vernacular poetry was compiled in an anthology called *Samdaemok* ("Collection from the Three Kingdoms") by the monk Daegu and Prime Minister Wihong during the reign of Queen Jinsong (887-97). Unfortunately, this collection was destroyed during the 13th-century Mongol invasions of Korea. Of the 25 surviving *hyangga*, 14 are preserved in *Samguk Yusa* ("Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms") and 11 in *Kyunyo chon* ("Life of the Great Master Kyunyo") (Kim, "The Mystery" 13).

*Cheoyong ga* is found in *Samguk Yusa*, the 13th-century collection of texts on Korean history and culture compiled by the Buddhist scholar-monk Iryeon. It parallels *Othello* in that it is about a husband named Cheoyong who discovers his beautiful wife being seduced and assaulted by a demon of pestilence called Yoeksin, though in the case of *Othello*, Cheoyong's experience unfolds in Othello's imagination. What makes Shakespeare's *Othello* different is that in it, a Moorish general, Othello, strangles his wife Desdemona (a daughter of a noble family) in bed in a premeditated act of jealousy. His Korean counterpart, Cheoyong, handles the situation differently. Cheoyong sees the four legs of his

wife and Yeoksin lying side by side on his nuptial bed, and his last remark—“Formerly two were mine; What shall be done now they are taken?” (Iryeon 504)<sup>1</sup>—expresses an ambivalent stance between magnanimity and fatalism, suggesting the possibility of forgiveness.

Im’s placement of *Cheoyong ga* in the spaces before *Othello* and after its finale offers spectators a glimpse into what a merciful husband could bear before hearing the story of *Othello* through Dan’s voice. Hearing her song, the audience comes to empathize with Dan, who demonstrates profound grief over Othello’s tragic end and concludes the play by singing and dancing as Cheoyong did in his yard after witnessing his wife in bed with Yeoksin. Cooperation between Dan and the audience proceeds naturally, following the characteristic of the *pansori* genre (National center for Korean traditional performing arts 10-13). As her final message on *Othello* before leaving the stage, Dan, eliciting the spectator’s empathy, advises, “Turn the gate of imagination carefully / Weigh its taste silently before swallowing / Do not give prey to a wild beast.” Moreover, she repeats gestures recalling Cheoyong singing and dancing: “Look, moonlight still lingers charmingly / Still, isn’t it good night for night?” (Im, *Pansori Othello Script* 33).<sup>2</sup>

Im’s *pansori* adaptation of *Othello* expresses a critical view of the sexism and racism that he finds in the original *Othello*. He introduces *Cheoyong ga* as evincing a Buddhist worldview as an ecological alternative to Western civilization. In an interview, he explains why he chose *Cheoyong ga* in adapting the play: “We are actually warned of ‘Orientalism’, but we

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the lines of *Cheoyong ga* are from Iryeon, “Cheoyong *Manghae Sa* (Cheoyong Sea-View Temple),” *Samguk Yusa (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms)*. Here, the lines of *Cheoyong ga* refer to Lee’s translation in “*Hyangga*,” *A History of Korean Literature*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter, the dialogues of *Pansori Othello* are from Im, *Pansori Othello Script*. Translations were done by the author of this article.

contemplated on the value of flourishing in the East and came to think of a Buddhist worldview” (Kim, “Creative” 12-13). On a superficial level, as the director makes clear, *Pansori Othello* appears to be contained within the discourse of “interculturalism” that critics use in general terms in dealing with Shakespearean performances occurring in countries such as Japan, China, Taiwan, India, and Korea under the academic topography called “Asian Shakespeare” (Lei, Ick, & Trivedi; Ryuta & Trivedi; Kennedy & Lan). *Pansori Othello*, however, subverts the hierarchy of West over East presumed in the academic discourse of interculturalism regarding Shakespeare performances in Asia. This interculturalism often aligns its theoretical foundation based on the assumption that the West and the East are equivalent to the center and the periphery or the colonizer and the colonized. This presumption of Western cultural superiority, I maintain, remains even when intercultural Shakespeares intervene as resistance to Europeanization, offering a solution between the polarities “of authenticity versus difference, of the universal versus the hybrid, and of the global versus the local” (Trivedi 5). Unlike other intercultural Shakespeare performances in Korea, Im’s production does not present Shakespeare’s play with “global fetishism,” relying on it “as the marker of cultural prestige; of Western modernity, global cultural capital; and of the heritage of Korean traditional arts” (Lee, *Performing the Nation* 122). Revealing limitations in the formation of civilization as portrayed in Shakespearean drama, Im’s production presents the spiritual world of the East, altruistic and gratifying, glimpsed in Cheoyong’s demeanor as a solution to *Othello*’s tragedy.

The close examination of *Pansori Othello* demands a proper understanding of the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which are not synonymous with culture. As Graham Hammill and Julia Reinhard Lupton explain, “what distinguishes religion from culture is its absurd insistence and

persistence beyond the local habitations of custom and habit, practice and power” (2). Concerning the opposing views that the play exhibits through *Othello* and *Cheoyong ga*, the director calls them simply ‘Western culture’ and ‘Eastern culture’. Ironically, in the interview above, he initially confesses his discontent with the concept of Orientalism. These opposing views, which appear to be restricted to cultural differences, I argue, need to be extended to and interrogated with a discussion about religion backing the literary works of the West and East. We are able to better understand the political and social contexts underlying the performance more specifically and grasp the universal potential for a better world in both *Othello* and *Cheoyong ga*. Finally, in *Pansori Othello*, although in the case of *Othello* represented in *Pansori Othello*, it diminished with the director’s stress on Othello’s fatal flaw.

In anger and jealousy, Othello murders his wife, a victim of Iago’s plot. Later, when Emilia discloses her husband Iago’s conspiracy, he realizes that he has committed a mortal sin and reproaches himself, calling his past times a “vain boast” (5.2.271).<sup>3</sup> Degraded to the status of a prisoner, disarmed of the sword with which he wounded Iago, and taken from the command of Cyprus (given to Cassio, as stated in Venetian officer Lodvico’s proclamation) (5.2.340-46), Othello commits suicide. Othello’s disintegrated subjectivity at the end, similarly to Desdemona’s final image before death, indicates universal membership in the civic society of Venice beyond national, ethnic, and cultural differences. Othello’s murder, interpreted by the director as a mindless act driven by patriarchal rage, needs to be further reexamined with religious discourse from Islam, as noted in Lupton’s analysis, where she reads Othello’s execution in the name of justice in the context of Judeo-Islamic law (117).

In relation to an aspiration for a better future, we need to attend to the

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter, all citations of *Othello* are from Shakespeare, “Othello” in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

crucial implication that the lead singer in *Pansori Othello*, Dan, delivers both narratives, taking several roles from Cheoyong, Iago, Othello, and Desdemona, and brings them into the play. A historical examination of *pansori* informs us that in the 17th and 18th centuries (during the Joseon dynasty, when the *pansori* genre arose and developed), there were no female singers. Even in the 19th century, when *pansori* started to be performed in the living rooms of noble families as well as in public places for commoners, singers were mostly males from the families of inherited shamans belonging to *cheonmin*, the lowest class in the Joseon dynasty. It is said that female *pansori* singers emerged around the late 19th century; Jung Noh-Shik identifies Jin Chae-Seon as the first female *myeongchang* (master singer) in *Joseonchanggeuksa* (“The History of *Changgeuk* [musical drama] in the Joseon Dynasty”) (Kim, “Women Masters” 289). These female singers are mostly *kisaeng*, that is, women from outcast or slave families who were trained to be courtesans, providing entertainment and conversation to men of the upper classes (Kim, “Women Entertainers” 139-44). Though they increased in numbers during the Joseon dynasty, *kisaeng* were looked down on by Joseon scholars, who were steeped in Confucianism. Given the unique status of female *pansori* singers as *kisaeng* in the Joseon dynasty under the strong influence of Confucianism and then in the early 20th century under the Japanese regime, Dan’s rendering of *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* connotes an ethical meaning to imagine the possible models of coexistence where people could dwell together as universal singular entities beyond their particular affiliations to nation, ethnicity, class, and gender.

## II. *Cheoyong ga* and Buddhism

To treat *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* as works simply standing in for different

cultures in the East and West would be to ignore the concrete historical, political, and social circumstances that set up the backdrop for each literary work (one a poem and the other a drama). To compare the title characters, Cheoyong and Othello, as similar—that is, aliens to Shilla and Venice and placed in similar situations—*Pansori Othello* introduces Cheoyong as a man not native to Shilla and depicts his appearance in the lines “face complexion is as reddish as adzuki-bean porridge/ eyes and nose are protruded like rocks on the slope/ chest and limbs are covered with bristly hairs” (Im, *Script* 2). This description of Cheoyong’s looks, employing colored, rough, and beastly images, is reflected in the words with which Dan describes Othello’s features—“face is as blackish as ink-stick/ stature is built like a mountain/ ear, eye, mouth, and nose are thick-protruded/ body is all covered with hairs” (Im, *Script* 6). Dan also asks the audience, “Is there any other man you can recall? Yes. This is Cheoyong, right?” (Im, *Script* 6) and guides them to identify Othello with the character Cheoyong.

Dan’s depiction of Cheoyong’s countenance does not come from the original account of Shilla’s *Cheoyong ga* recorded in Iryeon’s *Samguk Yusa*, where the poem and its related legend are included. Dan’s lines of Cheoyong are embellished ones, influenced by attempts to figure out Cheoyong’s appearance through Korean history related to *Cheoyong ga*. People loved to imagine Cheoyong’s image as they began to paste Cheoyong’s painting on the front of their gates to chase away evil spirits and to perform a dance called *Cheoyongmu* (Cheoyong dance) wearing a Cheoyong mask on New Year’s Eve to expel ills and summon fortune. Unlike Shilla *Cheoyong ga*, Goryeo *Cheoyong ga*, one of the popular vernacular poetic songs during the Goryeo dynasty (918-1392), describes Cheoyong as having a broad forehead, red face, round-dented nose, large mouth, and pushed-forward chin (Park, “A Study” 11;

Cho, “Difference” 134). *Akhak Gwebeom* (“Illustrated Text on Traditional Music”), written in the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), contains a painting of Cheoyong on one of its pages (Lee, “Korean Culture” 348-50).

The formation of Cheoyong’s image through masque, dance, song, and painting after its creation during the reign of King Heongang (875-86) makes people connect him even with a Muslim merchant who they maintain is Cheoyong. Moreover, one Korean scholar named Jung Soo-Il argues that Cheoyong came from an Arab. Im’s interpretation of Cheoyong as a foreigner identified with Othello appears to be influenced by the presumption that Cheoyong is a foreigner. However, he never identifies him as coming from a particular nation, be it one in Africa or in Arabia. This consideration of Cheoyong as a Muslim constitutes only a small fraction of the various speculations about Cheoyong’s identity, ranging from *yongshin* (Dragon God), a shaman, a member of *hwarang* (the Shilla elite youth corps), or a *bosal* (truth-seeker) of Buddhism to the son of an influential family in the local area (Yu “Shilla” 250-51). Mainstream research tends to study *Cheoyong ga* as being under the influence of shamanism and Buddhism, and thus Cheoyong is interpreted as a shaman or an inspiring presence in Buddhism rather than an unidentified foreigner from abroad. The scholars of *hyangga*, Kim Kichung and Peter H. Lee, more specifically, are united in contending that most of the *hyangga* are Buddhist in content and inspiration (Kim 16; Lee 83). Shamanism, as Korea’s earliest religion, was still popular in the Shilla Kingdom when *hyangga* was created, and Buddhism entered through the monk’s mission.

I argue that Buddhism, rather than shamanism, is crucial in understanding the setting within the legend of *Cheoyong ga* and especially Cheoyong’s unselfish and charitable decision in the poem. Deciding whether Cheoyong is a Muslim, a shaman, or a member of *hwarang* is not as important as considering

the influence of Buddhism on Cheoyong's conduct. Regardless of Cheoyong's identity in terms of race or nation, Buddhism has a significant influence on Cheoyong's actions. It is what makes Cheoyong withdraw from the scene where his wife went to bed with another man rather than confronting the man and observing his experience with detachment rather than involvement, finally sublimating it into arts, song, and dance. In addition to shaping Cheoyong's tolerant attitude, Buddhism also leads the demon Yeokshin to yield to Cheoyong's exorcism. Yeokshin capitulates voluntarily, professing, "Even though I have violated your wife in lust, you have not shown anger. I am impressed and find you admirable. I swear, therefore, to never violate henceforth any place where even your likeness is displayed" (Iryeon 504). Kim has inquired properly, "But what if the evil spirit had not been yielding? And does not it seem rather strange that an evil spirit should be yielding?" (Kim, "The Mystery" 20). Critics of *Cheoyong ga* have generally stated that Yeokshin surrendered because he was moved by Cheoyong's mercy and speculated about his yielding no more. I contend that Cheoyong's exorcism succeeded because Yeokshin sympathized with the Buddhist philosophy latent in Cheoyong's attitude and favored it. If Yeokshin conceived of Cheoyong's leniency as his weak side, he could manipulate it for his evil purposes, just as Iago did to Othello, who constantly called him "honest Iago," and *Cheoyong ga* would not have existed in the form we now know.

Buddhism, founded on the teaching of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, 563-483 BC) in northern India, arrived in Korea during the Three Kingdoms period (fourth through seventh centuries) through missionary monks from China. The monk Sundo brought Buddhist images to Goguryo from an earlier Chin state in northeastern China; the monk Malananda spread Buddhism to Baekje from Yangtze Valley in the eastern Chin state; the monk Ado took Buddhism

to Shilla (Matthews 151). In the era of the Three Kingdoms, Buddhism was not only well received by the royal houses and their dominions but was also officially recognized by the monarchs of each government. Buddhism in Korean history, until it declined with the rise of Confucianism in the early Joseon dynasty, functioned as a dominant religion that helped stabilize the daily lives of ordinary people as well as the nobility and protect the state from foreign invasion. The legendary tale of *Cheoyong ga* indicates close ties between politics—that is, the reign of the sovereign, King Heongang—and the Buddhist religion.

The legend's storyline is as follows: King Heongang took a pleasant trip to Gaeunpo (now located in Ulsan). When he stopped for a rest on the way back, the clouds and fog suddenly grew thick, and he lost his way. The king asked his subordinates what was happening, and the weather officer informed that it was caused by the Dragon of *Donghae* (the East Sea). To appease the dragon, the king ordered a Buddhist temple to be built in his honor. Greatly pleased, the dragon appeared with his seven sons, dancing and playing music, and allowed one of his sons, Cheoyong, to follow King Heongang. Coming back to Seorabeol (the ancient name of Gyeongju, the capital of Shilla), King Heongang arranged for a beautiful woman to be Cheoyong's wife and appointed him to *geupgan* (the ninth official rank). One night, Cheoyong returned home and found his wife in bed with Yeokshin, an evil spirit, who had transformed into a man. Cheoyong withdrew while he sang the following lines and danced.

Having caroused far into the night  
 In the moonlit capital,  
 I returned home and in my bed,  
 Behold, four legs.

Two were mine;

Whose are the other two?  
Formerly two were mine;  
What shall be done now they are taken? (Iryeon 504)

Touched by this generous approach, Yeokshin departed, swearing not to enter places where Cheoyong's image was displayed (Iryeon 503-04).<sup>4</sup>

We could note the influence of Buddhism in the legend of *Cheoyong ga*. King Heongang built a Buddhist temple to appease the ferocious temper of Shilla's national guardian spirit, the Dragon of Donghae. It is uncertain whether this guardian spirit is highly regarded in shamanism or Buddhism. However, it appears that he is not only an influential figure in deciding national prosperity by causing weather changes that guarantee good harvests in an agricultural society but also a character supporting Buddhism, as he was very satisfied with the construction of the temple. On the one hand, the sovereign, Heongang, shows reverence to the Dragon of Donghae to promote the stability and wealth of his people. On the other hand, he befriends Cheoyong by presenting him with a beautiful wife and a government post. He then succeeds in defending his nation from an outside invasion, symbolized as the evil spirit, Yeokshin, that Cheoyong repels. Cheoyong, in some sense, is the surrogate of King Heongang, serving to protect Shilla from external incursions. This king, as he did for the Dragon of Donghae, builds a temple in remembrance of Cheoyong's exorcism, called *Manghae sa* (Sea-view Temple) or *Shinbang sa* (Bridal Room Temple). In the overall story of *Cheoyong ga*, Buddhism's state-protective nature becomes obvious in a form that connects politics and religion in Shilla society.

To understand Cheoyong's conduct in the context of Buddhism, we must examine more subtly the Buddhist philosophy shown in the Four Noble Truths

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<sup>4</sup> The legend's synopsis also refers to Kim's translation in "The Mystery and Loveliness of the *Hyangga*," pp. 17-18.

of Buddhism. The Four Noble Truths constitute the foundation of the Buddha's teaching. They state that first, all of life is *dukka* (the suffering of humans); second, the cause of suffering is *tanha* (the thirst or craving that leads to suffering); third, the end of suffering is getting rid of greed with humans' recognition or enlightenment; and fourth, Buddhists participate in the Eightfold Path (Right view, Right aim, Right speech, Right action, Right living, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration) as the process for deliverance from suffering. The basic tenets of Buddhism founded on the Four Noble Truths are that people inevitably suffer because they cling to and crave (*tanha*) ephemeral things or beings when there is no permanence in things and persons that they want to keep, such as parents, loved ones, and possessions. Suffering (*dukka*) arises because people expect satisfaction from the things and states that are intrinsically unsatisfactory as they are transient; there is no eternity in the phenomena we experience and in ourselves or the consciousness that takes it. People's craving, grasping, or coveting keeps them caught in *samsara* (the endless cycle of suffering and rebirth) and produces *karma* (the spiritual principle of cause and effect that shows humans become what they intend). However, people can be delivered to the state of *nirvana* (literally, "blowing out," peace of mind) when they are liberated from *dukka* by following the Eightfold Path.<sup>5</sup>

I maintain that Cheoyong's remark, "What shall be done now they are taken?" shows his realization or enlightenment that all things are only part of the processes of evanescent worldly affairs. Trying to keep things or beings as perpetual possessions is a useless and vain fantasy; in reality, there is nothing to have and nothing to be had. Even his beautiful wife is not everlasting, and his love and marriage are only transient moments within the passage of worldly

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<sup>5</sup> I take these Buddhist terms and explanations from Warren Matthews, *World Religions (Third Edition)*, pp. 127-77.

time. With this recognition, he retreats from the scene in which his wife is bedded by a strange man, replacing emotional attachment with contemplative detachment, and sublimates his lingering thoughts and feelings into song and dance.

### III. *Othello*, Christianity, and Islam

When Dan introduces *Othello* as a story from a distant place, she explains *Othello* as the mirror image of the story in *Cheoyong ga*. She states, “The title is ‘a Venetian Moor, Othello’s tragedy.’ This is reflected in the mirror. As the left and the right of the reflected images are reversed, their endings are exactly opposite” (Im, *Script* 5). She asks the audience why *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* came to have contrary conclusions when Cheoyong and Othello are put in the same situations as the same characters whom she implies are aliens. Do *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* involve the same circumstances, as Dan presumes? Careful examination of the political and social contexts surrounding *Othello* shows that there are more racial and cultural anxieties surrounding Othello’s status in Venice than there are in Cheoyong’s position in Shilla.

In the academic discourse, *Othello* has frequently been interpreted as representing a black African by post-colonial and New Historicist critics, who tend to read Shakespeare’s works under the framework of Western imperialism and colonialism (Greenblatt; Parker; Bartels; Newman; Loomba; Neill). By contrast, critics such as Daniel J. Vitkus and Lynda Boose attempt to read *Othello* in light of the religious-political geography of Christianity versus Islam and regard Othello as a Turk or a Muslim, pointing out anachronism in the post-colonial and New Historicist construction of skin-color-based racism in

Renaissance times. Vitkus argues that Stephen Greenblatt and other New Historicists have applied a Western imperialist discourse belonging to later centuries, quite anachronistically, to the interpretation of Renaissance texts. He contends that in the 16th and 17th centuries, the English were the colonized, as they feared the Turkish threat to Christendom, as well as being colonizers who explored and conquered foreign lands (146). Similarly to Vitkus, Boose insists that by the time *Othello* was written in 1603, England had not yet come to embody the modern phenomenon of white racism, though by the mid-seventeenth century, this nation began the conquest of the New World and beyond (along with Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands) as the world's largest slave trader (40).

What fundamentally distinguishes Othello from Cheoyong is that Othello, regardless of whether he is considered a black African or a Turk (Muslim), is exposed to the hostility of Venetian citizens. It is hard to determine the basis for this hostility—it could be Europeans' racism, as seen in the criticism of post-colonialism and New Historicism, or it could be Christians' fear of conversion to Islam when the Turks expanded their dominance over European territories. Othello professes his own Christianity as he commands his officers to discontinue their scuffle: “For Christian shame put by this barbarous brawl” (2.3.155). The play never gives a definitive answer on whether he has converted from a pagan religion, probably from Africa, or from Islam. *Othello's* opening narrative of international romance, painted with Iago's racist terms and having endured legal judgment by Brabantio's racist prejudice, prompts the racialization of Othello as a black African who converted from paganism. However, as Lupton contends that “it is continually shadowed by the more troubling possibility of Othello's entrance into Christianity via its disturbing neighbor, Islam” (105), it is also reasonable to interpret Othello as a Muslim or

a Turk and thus someone who more deeply threatens the integrity of Venetian Christians, rather than a black African, who is more capable of a full conversion because of his pagan origins.

Indeed, England in the 16th century was a nation where politics could not be separated from the Christian religion. Following the Reformation, religious conflicts were so serious that they often triggered mass slaughter. In post-Reformation England, there was not only Protestants' increasing anxiety concerning Roman Catholics but also their intense worries over conversions to Islam or Judaism, two other inheritors of monotheism that shared religious roots in Abraham with Christianity. Although Dan postulates that Othello and Cheoyong faced the same conditions when they made their contrasting decisions, that was not the case. Religions influence the overall context of each story and each protagonist's actions differently. Buddhism does not work as a seed of tension with other religions (shamanism) or with the sovereign state in *Cheoyong ga*. However, Christianity and Islam are in an acute clash, making Othello's bid for citizenship—to be recognized in Venice as a citizen equal to other Venetian Christians—very complex. Othello, ironically, is summoned as a commander in charge of the war against the Turks on Cyprus, while his citizenship is still at risk, as noted in the opening narrative that questions his qualification as a legitimate spouse for a Venetian Christian. Though Othello proclaims that his military service in Venice and his lineage from royal families makes him worthy of Desdemona, whom he compares to “proud a fortune” (1.2.23), he is vulnerable to his other image as an internal enemy, an image he seeks to distance himself from. For Othello, triumphing in the battle against the Turks on Cyprus is a significant opportunity to be acknowledged as a citizen equal to Venetian Christians. However, he is deprived of this chance by a natural disaster, the tempest, as the third gentleman notifies Montano, “our wars

are done./ The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks/ That their designment halts” (2.1.20-21).

As the outside enemy, the Turkish fleet, disappears, Othello encounters skirmishes among his troops, who started a feast in a pleasant mood but suddenly fell into anarchy and disorder during the night. He admonishes the brawling soldiers in an interestingly harsh tone that implies that they have become their enemies, the Turks: “Are we turn’d Turks, and to ourselves do that/ Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?/ For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!” (2.3.153-55). As the tragedy progresses, as if validating Christians’ suspicion of the Turks going renegade in Renaissance times, it is not Othello’s soldiers who “turn Turk” but, ironically, Othello himself. As Lupton elaborates in detail (114-15), “turning Turk,” though it appears to be simply describing libertine paganism assimilated to lawlessness and disorder indicated in the “barbarous brawl” (2.3.155), becomes clearer upon second reading given the intervening line, “Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?” implying that what actually typifies Turkish behavior is austere discipline under Islamic law.<sup>6</sup> As Othello turns Turk, it is the image verified by this second reading of “turning Turk,” that is, his reversion to a position emblemized by harsh law associated with passionate justice.

As the play proceeds, Othello is increasingly identified with a law that is married not to mercy and love but anger and jealousy, as presaged in the scene where Othello dismisses Cassio from his position without hesitation. Othello’s decision is guided not by a cool rationality that could help him to reflect and to return to mercy but by blood and passion that harden his mind and undergird the law’s severity. Upon witnessing brawling soldiers, Othello

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<sup>6</sup> My elaboration of *Othello* in relation with Islam and Christianity owes much to Julia Reinhard Lupton’s religious interpretation of *Othello* in “Othello Circumcised,” *Citizen-Saints*, pp. 103-24.

proclaims, “My blood begins my safer guides to rule,/ And passion, having my best judgement collied,/ Assays to lead the way” (2.3.188-89). Anger and jealousy, rather than testifying to Othello’s paganization, contributes to his fierce adherence to Islamic law, since these passions, in the Judeo-Islamic register, work as allies of the law, reinforcing its ruthlessness (Lupton 117). He announces that if an offender is convicted, he will sentence that individual even if it is his brother: “he that is approved in this offence,/ Though he had twinned with me—both at a birth—/ Shall lose me” (2.3.194-96).

Othello’s turning to Islam is completed in the scene where Othello murders Desdemona on their nuptial bed. As Othello approaches Desdemona, he behaves like a priest assisting a sinner’s confession before death, “If you bethink yourself of any crime. . . Solicit for it straight” (5.2.28-30), rather than a murderer who is taking the life of an innocent person. Basing his belief in his wife’s fidelity not on her words, but on the handkerchief—“I saw my handkerchief in’s hand” (5.2.67)—he is confident that his wife, who no longer possesses his handkerchief, is a sinner, and concludes that she must die: “Thou art to die” (5.2.61). Regarding himself as the agent who directs Desdemona’s atonement for her sin, Othello takes his action not as a murder but as a sacrifice: “makes me call what I intend to do/ A murder, which I thought a sacrifice” (5.2.69-70).

When Othello hears from Emilia how the handkerchief was found in Cassio’s place and how her husband, Iago, conspired to deceive him, he realizes he has committed a mortal sin. Profoundly repenting for his conduct by likening it to the act of throwing “a pearl away/ Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.356-57), he drops “tears as fast as the Arabian trees/ Their medicinable gum” (5.2.359-60) and stabs himself. Interestingly, when Othello commits suicide, he parallels himself with a Turk that he slew in defending Venice,

simultaneously occupying the positions of subject and object, conqueror and transgressor, and Christian and Turk.

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog  
 And smote him thus. (5.2.362-65)

In the late 16th century, the circumcision that Othello refers to associated the Turks with Jews, who practiced carving on their bodies for religious reasons. This served as a mark of difference that was “disturbing, deeply threatening, and by consequence as negatively value-laden to Christian Europe,” as Boose explains (40). Here, Othello’s suicide can be interpreted as a voluntary act of self-circumcision, a final stroke that cuts off his life by turning the Turk into and onto himself. Othello’s suicide means that he dies as a true Christian and a citizen of the Venetian republic, indicating his universal singular subjectivity overtaking national, ethnic, and cultural differences.

#### IV. Dan, Female *Pansori* Singer, and *Kisaeng*

If Othello embodies a universal singular being that acknowledges his equal citizenship with others by surpassing his prior affiliations of nation, ethnicity, and class, with his suicide, Dan expresses a universal aspiration for an equal society where people reciprocate in hospitality without discrimination and social bias. In *Pansori Othello*, Dan is a *kisaeng* who performs *pansori* on stage. Through her own body, which performs the songs, narration, and mimetic gesture, she not only connects *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* but also entwines the

various characters of Cheoyong, Othello, Iago, and Desdemona. In Korean history, *kisaeng* first appeared around the Goryeo dynasty. Originally, the term ‘*kisaeng*’ was used to refer to women with skills in music, dance, poetry, medicine, and needlework, employed by the government. Later, in the late Joseon dynasty and the early 20th century, *kisaeng* started to be perceived as courtesans trained to entertain and please “the government officials dispatched to provincial towns” and “military men stationed in borderline districts” (Kim, “Women Entertainers” 139). This also corresponds to the time when female *pansori* singers first emerged. Most female *pansori* singers started off as *kisaeng*, who originally practiced composing poetry, playing traditional musical instruments, and singing lyrics (not folk songs such as *pansori*), but came to study *pansori* as *pansori* gained popularity among upper-class men.

The *kisaeng* were of the lowest class, the *cheonmin*, in the hierarchical Joseon society. The *kisaeng* were subject to social contempt and discrimination not only because of their social class but also because of the disparaging view of women who stood outside familial norms. Confucianism, which flourished in Joseon society, tended to label women either as virtuous maids and wives or as adulterers. During the period 1910-1945, when Korea came under Japanese colonial rule, the *kisaeng* association helped sustain and hand down the *pansori* tradition at a time when traditional performance genres were repressed and weakened under Japanese cultural censorship. However, they were often treated with disdain and withering gazes, in contrast to the male *pansori* singers, who had often received high-ranking titles before Japanese imperial rule—though they were the same *cheonmin* as female *pansori* singers (Choi 380; Song 92).

The dual narrative of *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* voiced by Dan is meaningful in considering the social status of a *pansori* female singer who was a *kisaeng* during Korea’s modern age (from the late Joseon dynasty to the early

20th century). Dan's situation is different from that of a Shilla woman, such as Cheoyong's wife, who is not reprimanded for her extramarital affair. Dan would probably not be the same as one of the women in *Othello* (Desdemona, Emilia, and Cassio's courtesan, Bianca), though Dan appears to be more on the side of the women in *Othello*. The Shilla dynasty, during which *Cheoyong ga* is set, had several myths associated with the worship of the goddess that was revered as a symbol of economic fertility and the reproductive capacity of women. It was also a time when women held the right of inheritance and property rights by which they could freely dispose of their lands and assets. Additionally, there were three female monarchs called Queen Seonduk, Queen Jinduck, and Queen Jinsung, who were elected by Shilla's *kolp'um* (bone-rank) system. This was the Korean hereditary status system, which was different from other ages in Korean history, when there were no female monarchs. Ku, Ja-Sang explains that unlike the Joseon dynasty, which was shaped by Confucianism, the social environment of Shilla, in which women stood more as equals with men, collaborated with Buddhism, which acknowledges women's subjective enlightenment to be reincarnated as the Buddha (24). In this sense, Dan's approval of Cheoyong's magnanimity, as indicated in the voluntary imitation of Cheoyong's dance with which she closes her performance, delivers her message to the world. Though she is herself a *kisaeng*, the object of social derision, she wishes that people in contemporary society would be more sympathetic toward women who are susceptible to temptations and faults, as Cheoyong was to his wife and Yeokshin.

Dan communicates her lamentation over Desdemona's death as caused by Iago's cunning scheme, tainted with a misogynistic idea, and Othello's intolerance, which became increasingly dangerous with his gullibility. Bemoaning the tragedy of the husband and the wife, she criticizes Othello as

unwise and imprudent for falling prey to Iago's malicious devices. She sympathizes with Desdemona, who was persecuted by her husband's steely adherence to justice and law, based on anger and jealousy. I assert that just as Desdemona connected herself with another woman called Barbara by the "Willow Song" recited before her death, as Emilia recalled Desdemona's "Willow Song" before she dies, so Dan's narration of *Pansori Othello* associates herself with the female characters she embodies with sympathy and compassion. Desdemona grieves over the change in her husband's disposition and tells Emilia about Barbara, who was her mother's maid, "She was in love, and he loved proved mad/ And did forsake her. She had a song of 'Willow'" (4.3.26-27). Likewise, Emilia dies singing the Willow Song—"I will play the swan and/ or die in music. 'Willow, willow, willow'" (5.2.254-56)—as her husband stabs her for disclosing his deception, asking her dead mistress, "What did thy song bode, lady?" (5.2.253). In *Othello*, women are linked in subjectivity with each other by this song and the handkerchief that Iago ordered Emilia to steal from Desdemona and then dropped in Cassio's room, which Cassio found and then asked his courtesan, Bianca, to copy the pattern of. Taking pity on these women, who are killed by the patriarchal narrow-mindedness of men such as Iago and Othello, Dan wants the audience to take a lesson from Cheoyong's generosity followed by Yeokshin's repentance, dreaming of a better future in contemporary society where tragedies such as that in *Othello* recur in every part of the world. If *Othello* presented a universal potential for a decent society through his death, Dan reveals her aspiration for a virtuous world in which people can cooperate as universal singular entities beyond gender, nation, ethnicity, and class differences by offering *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*.

## V. Conclusion

Im's *Pansori Othello* does not simply receive Shakespeare's *Othello* as a yardstick of Western cultural prestige by which his production can flaunt a Korean cultural heritage, *pansori*, with traditional Korean music, costume, and setting. It actively interprets, intervenes, and even provides a way to ameliorate Othello's tragedy by bringing out one of the Korean *hyangga* called *Cheoyong ga* from the ancient times of the Three Kingdoms and likening it to *Othello*. It parallels these two works—*Othello* and *Cheoyong ga*—in which the title characters, Othello and Cheoyong, both husbands with exotic features from foreign lands, both encounter their wives going to bed with another man, in imagination and in reality. However, by introducing Cheoyong's unusual demeanor at the scene of his wife's adultery with a stranger, presenting magnanimity, in contrast to Othello's harshness combined with anger and jealousy, *Pansori Othello* attempts to subvert the primacy of the West over the East that is often presumed in the discourse of interculturalism, even in the assertion that intercultural Shakespeare performance in Asia is resistant to Europeanization. I initiate my interrogation of *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*, and the different stances and bearings of their central characters, Cheoyong and Othello, in connection with the discussion of religions—Buddhism in the case of *Cheoyong ga* and Islam and Christianity in the case of *Othello*. I argue that, although *Pansori Othello* seems to mediate interculturally between the poem of the East, *Cheoyong ga*, and the drama of the West, *Othello*, it needs to be scrutinized with subtle inquiries into the religion of Buddhism and two monotheistic religions, Islam and Christianity. Following Lupton and Hammill's idea of religion, I maintain that religion, though in some sense participating in culture, carries a universally singular characteristic that is not relegated to

cultural differences and disseminations.

This investigation of *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*, with the examination of religions providing a backdrop for the social, historical, and political context of each work, showed that Cheoyong's situation in Shilla society is completely different to that of Othello in Venice. Cheoyong is not exposed to the loathing of the Shilla people, although it is possible that he is not a subject of the Shilla kingdom; he is welcomed and is granted a beautiful wife and a high office by the Shilla king, Heongang. *Cheoyong ga* manifests that Buddhism not only influences Cheoyong's magnanimous response to his wife's going to bed with a demon of pestilence called Yeokshin but also works in harmony with other religions like shamanism that still exists in Shilla society, and with sovereign governance as the protective spirit of the nobleman and the commoner alike. However, in the Venice of *Othello*, where religion dominates the citizens' minds so much that it is indistinguishable from politics, Othello, though he professes his Christianity before his fellows, falls into trouble because of his otherness in terms of religion—that is, he is a circumcised Turk. Othello's tragedy, therefore, unfolds as he is becoming identified with Islam, as Iago entices him to be, by turning himself into a model of justice based on anger and jealousy, not moderation and mercy. All this occurs in the Renaissance-era Venetian Republic, in which Christianity and Islam are in sharp conflict, especially with Christians' fear of conversion facing the Turk's dominion over European territories. This religious and political strife between Christianity and Islam deeply complicates Othello's request to be included in Venetian citizenship, though he attempted to prove his qualification through his baptism of Christianity, military service, and marriage to Desdemona.

A solo female *pansori* singer named Dan proposes to the audience an ethical direction for the reciprocal dwellings of the people, surpassing their

particular affiliations to nation, ethnicity, class, and gender, by entering into and withdrawing from each character in both *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*. Dan is one of the *kisaeng*, who performed *pansori* when there were only a few female *pansori* singers in the late Joseon dynasty of the 19th century, compared to the many male master singers, who helped sustain *pansori* entertainment during the Japanese colonial regime, when many *pansori* male singers were enlisted in the Japanese army. Though female *pansori* singers were popular enough to be featured in contemporary Japanese music recordings, those who participated in the *kisaeng* association were often regarded as inferior to male *pansori* singers in the history of *pansori* heritage. Sometimes their vocal sounds were seen as compromising the legitimacy of *pansori* sounds, which were thought to reside in the sounds of male *pansori* singers. Other times, they were disparaged because of their social status as courtesans to the upper class, especially under Confucianism, which tended to discriminate against women outside of familial norms. *Pansori Othello*, by letting a female *pansori* singer who survives adversities deliver and mediate between *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello* with her insight and compassion, succeeded in presenting a voice of potential ethics that resonated beyond specific times and places.

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Key Words: Shakespeare, *pansori*, *hyangga*, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, *kisaeng*

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*Pansori Othello. Othello with Korean Hyangga, Cheoyong ga***Abstract**

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This paper argues, first, that Im Youngwook's *Pansori Othello* subverts the primacy of the West over the East presupposed in the theoretical foundation of interculturalism or postcolonialism, a predominant discourse in the investigations of Asian Shakespeare performances. Second, it contends that a proper understanding of *Pansori Othello* requires a close examination of the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam that set up the background of literary works, *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*. Furthermore, I attest that, as Im's performance is approached not with the discourse of cultural differences but with the interpretation of religion, we can grasp the universal potential for a better world both in literary works and in his production. This paper traces this universal potential, especially in Dan's unique status as a female *pansori* singer, or *kisaeng*, in the Joseon dynasty, and then in the early 20th century, who performs both *Cheoyong ga* and *Othello*, connoting the ethical meaning of coexistence.

Key Words: Shakespeare, *pansori*, *hyangga*, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, *kisaeng*

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