

“The Arabian Nights” , the Silk Road, and erotic motif in ‘Cheoyongga(處容歌)’

Korea Cyber University  
Academic department; Creative Writing  
pr. Huh Hyejung

## 1. Introduction

This article aims to explore eroticism in Cheoyongga and "The Arabian Nights" and also to elucidate its possible relationships with the Arabic culture represented in the work. Cheoyongga is a Korean poem of 8 characters, a kind of tetrametre, where Cheoyong, one of the seven sons of the King in Donghae (East Sea), comes to the capital with King Wongang in 879, and becomes a high and distinguished official, finally marrying a very beautiful lady in return for his achievements and supporting the government of the country. One day, while serving the government as a minister, called a "Keupgan" in the period, he comes back home late and finds a scene of adultery between his wife and Yeoksin, one of the evil spirits. Instead of becoming furious, he performs a song and dance which ultimately touches the bottom of the evil spirit's heart making him regret his inappropriate demeanour. This poem is not merely a simple literary work for it has now become a very important cultural asset as a crucial part of court-feasts in Korea, and has been developed into multi-dimensional texts throughout history. Therefore, there has been much consideration regarding the origins of the powerful tradition of Cheoyongga. One possible answer stems from the aftereffect of the cultural impact caused by the Arabs, whose foreign culture had much influence in Korea directly and indirectly. In this article I would like to examine Cheoyongga in relation to "The Arabian Nights" and shed light on an influential Arabic factor, Sufism ([Persian: ????????](#), [Arabic: ????](#)), represented in the poem.

In two of my previous articles, I suggested reading Cheoyongga and appreciating its aestheticism not from the limited perspective of a Korean folktale but in a wider narrative paradigm of Asian culture. In this kind of study, the spread of Medieval Asia and Arabic culture should be taken into account to grasp the true significance of the poem. In a word, Cheoyongga should be reread in consideration of the Arabic culture that was imported through the Silk Road. A comparative reading of the poem in conjunction with The Arabian Nights will help to realize such peculiar literary and cultural features of the work.

## 2. A Bard in the Silk Road, Cheoyong

As well known, the Silk Road was not only a major trade route between the Far East and Europe from the first century B.C. but was also a passage that enabled an exchange of science, religion and technology between the two worlds. It is not difficult to infer from the many historical documents that Shilla, which produced Cheoyongga, was a country replete with exchanges with Arabic culture via China. It has been proven that this culture even greatly influenced Buddhism in this period and that it saturated into many aspects of culture of the later Korean dynasty.

Given that many Asian countries are eager to import new foreign cultures, the powerful attraction of Cheoyongga might have originated from its exoticism based on Arabic culture. One of the greatest contemporary influences was definitely from China but what is important is that China had a very close relationship with the Arabs and played the role of bridging them with Korea. It is not easy to find a concrete document to prove the direct connection between Cheoyongga and The Arabian Nights but an example of cultural interchanges between them can be inferred from their music. As proven, the formation of the culture envisaged in Cheoyongga was clearly administered by the exchange of music via the Silk Road. For example, a few western musical instruments were seen in Shilla following the model of Goguryeo, which imported western music through Tang. A percussion instrument called a "Bakpan", string instruments such as "Tangbeepa" and "Gongwho" and wind instruments like the "Piree" and the "Hoengjuk" were used in the music of mid-Shilla. According to *Hyang-ak Japjung Osoo*, a book about major forms of entertainment in those days, there were five popular pastimes, including Keum Whan (Golden Ball: a ball-throwing game) and they originated from the West. In particular, Sanye is practiced as a kind of traditional Korean art even in the present day and age. These facts are enough to demonstrate the influence of the West during Shilla and consequently enable us to draw an inference of their cultural connections in the formation of Cheoyongga.

In the medieval age when the Arabs technically dominated the world, and their culture was imported into Shilla and Korea via China, the most conspicuous clue that confirms the inter-relationship between

Cheoyongga and Arabia can be found in the fact that Korean songs of the period followed the format of the songs from the Song and Yuan dynasties which were in turn influenced by Islamic music. Korean popular songs originated and flourished with the help of Yuan songs that emerged as a result of the close relationship between China, Arabia and the Mongol empire. Myungjoon Kim documented in his book *Akjanggasa* a demonstration of the "fusion of Korean folk music with foreign musics in Tang and So dynasties." He says that their relationships were very close. In this respect, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Cheoyongga was born as a result of the influence of Chinese songs which were rich with Arabic tones and tints.

### 3. The Motif of Eroticism in Cheoyongga

In Korean literature, Cheoyongga was the first poem that had ever adopted a male soliloquy to include a sexual motif courtesy of an exotic figure such as Cheoyong. Without a doubt, Eroticism is the most conspicuous theme within the work - but where is it rooted? This article makes the supposition that it stems from the sexual mood and motif of *A Thousand Tales*, which is the prototype of *The Arabian Nights*. In general, *A Thousand Tales* is believed to have its origin stemming from India even though there are many controversies surrounding the origin and formation of *The Arabian Nights*.

Indian folk tales started to become embellished with Islamic colour in the eighth century which was actually a century earlier than Cheoyongga. India was the mecca for Buddhist pilgrims from China so there were a great number of Koreans who travelled to the West or at least to the Western part of the world. Indian culture, which absorbed a wide range of Islamic culture, gave birth to Sufism, which forms the core of Islamic mysticism. This mystic Sufism constituted the undercurrent of the literary atmosphere that produced *The Arabian Nights*.

The Abath dynasty, the time around which *The Arabian Nights* was written, existed for approximately 500 years until the Mongols seized Bagdad in 1258. Its history can be divided into two major periods - the Golden period that flourished in politics and culture from 750 to 1055 and the Silver period that faded from 1055 to 1258 (Heuman Sa 249). The Golden period was a contemporary time for Korea which enjoyed carnival-culture and consequently went on to produce Cheoyongga. Given that the influence of Yuan (the reign of Mongol) was widely demonstrated in aspects of history, literature and culture, there must be many historical events and places which share a close relationship with Cheoyongga. In particular, Samarkand, which covered the Middle East and parts of China, demands much attention with regard to the places mentioned in *The Arabian Night* and Cheoyongga. The Sasan Dynasty, which was reigned over by King Shariyar, is the main setting for the stories, and is actually located in an area of China and the name of China is clearly mentioned within *The Tale of a Hunchback*.

In terms of the story's construction, there are numerous similarities between Cheoyongga and *The Arabian Nights*. *The Arabian Nights* exists in various versions and texts due to its oral tradition. When both are categorized into a few groups by theme and motif, the similarities between them become clear. *The Arabian Nights* has a story structure in which a wife betrays her husband and is involved in sexual relationships as shown in "King Shariyar and his brother." This motif literally is the main theme of Cheoyongga. In terms of narrative aspect, *The Arabian Nights* features a story within a story, a mixture of prose and verse, and colloquialism, all of which are again the characteristics of Cheoyongga. From the perspective of content, a few of the most conspicuous similarities are the voyeurism of the King and Cheoyong, the adulterous behaviour of the female characters and the descriptions of the female body. Cheoyongga includes pornographic descriptions called "Garari Nehierha", which are shocking, even to many modern readers. Likewise, *The Arabian Nights* assigns much space to describe female bodies in detail. In particular, the sexual intercourse between a human being and a god is a common trait which has a culturally significant meaning in terms of the mixture of the secular and the religious. The fact that a character who was in sexual aberration comes to realize the mystery of life and the importance of truth is also one of the most meaningful similarities between them. Last but not least, an important similarity is that they both overcome the erotic problem with language, or the power of words, and not by physical power.

First, there is a catalyst to connect Cheoyongga and *The Arabian Nights* in motif. The sexual aberration and the betrayal of the spouse in Cheoyongga was the first appearance of such a concept in Korean literature. It is a matter of a love triangle and a theme of "the seduction and loss of the beloved." In this respect, there is a concrete example demonstrating the motif which bridges the two works, moving eastward through the Middle East. The geographical line from Iran, through the West and the Middle East to China and Korea was envisaged in the story called "Seorim". The popular story of a legendary beauty

Seorim includes the theme of seduction and loss of one's beloved along the Silk Road from Persia through Iran to Singang in China in the seventh and eighth centuries. The theme itself was also very common in these places even though Cheoyongga is the only one that remains in Korea. A love triangle formed the backbone of many stories in those days, including *The Arabian Nights* of Persia courtesy of the influence of Arabic culture, and *Seorim* of China, due to the influence of Persia.

From a thematic respect, the question of what comprises a woman is one of the crucial elements in *The Arabian Nights* and *Cheoyongga*. The absence of Cheoyong, the invasion of the evil spirit and the betrayal of the wife during her husband's absence raised a question of mystery about female sexuality and this question resulted in many similar stories about permanently incomprehensible femininity. The quest to understand the mystery of female sexuality and men's unavoidable destiny of female betrayal, led to an attempt to solve mysteries in life and in the cosmos. This quest eventually ended up with the realization of futility in such sexual aberrations and foolish behaviours. This enlightenment usually resulted in the termination of those fruitless adventures. In short, the question about women concerns an understanding of life and the world, which consequently returns the protagonist to a state of good will and behaviour after the defeat of evil by a wise endeavour. Such a question about women is not just a matter of ethics but plays a role in leading human beings to enlightenment. In this respect, Cheoyong's reaction to his wife's betrayal epitomizes this process with great success.

The third significant similarity is the introduction of a dark character to administer to the realization of mystery in the world. The evil spirit which occupies a core part in Cheoyong's conflict is similar to a black slave or supernatural Jinnis and has a crucial role in the motif of the love triangle in *The Arabian Nights*. In *Seorim*, the dark existence is played by the King's nephew. They appear to be varied and different in detail but can be regarded as mere variations of an evil spirit that commits illegal adultery. The evil spirit in *Cheoyongga* is not unlike the black Jinnis who holds the female character in custody. The Jinnis wears a black robe which is regarded as the color of religious godliness. This kind of blackness, which was sometimes represented by a black man, has religious connotations in Sufism. In *Cheoyongga*, Cheoyong's blue robe can be interpreted as the colour of the son of the sea, and superior to the black colour of the evil spirit.

Such elements of Sufism begin to have a more convincing relationship when the descriptions of erotic pleasure in *Cheoyongga* are compared to those in the poems written by Islamic Sufi poets. In fact, the erotic descriptions are very similar to those in Sufi poems. The main theme of these poems is love. "This is a love with a human and a variety of humans are represented as symbolic existences in them." Particularly, the love triangle is one of the common themes in the poems written by Muslim Sufis. The "Complicated relationships and love stories" contained within them are often transformed into a great number of different stories about a woman's beauty and her courtiers but there the motif of the love triangle still remains. The love triangle in *Cheoyongga* can also be seen as an influence of the motif of "the seduction of the beloved" which moved eastward from Persia through to China and eventually to Korea.

#### 4. Cheoyong's culture and Sufism

The eroticism in *Cheoyongga* is not just a matter of ethics and social justice, which is the usual interpretation by lay people since it can also be regarded as the cosmological symbol of overcoming hardship. In this respect, Cheoyong culture translated into a ceremony of "Byeoksajinkyung" and so becomes significant. In the Dance of Cheoyong during the ceremony, what is emphasized is the colour of his robe. The "Ohbansak" (five multi-colours) of his robe, which is a way to express the order of the universe, has a very peculiar sexual connotation. According to Honggu Lee, the robe was decorated with flowers such as peach flowers and tendrils as though to suggest a festoon of flowers scattered on the dress of mother earth. In addition, Cheoyong's attire, like his square hat and accessories, are very feminine and decorated with peach flowers which are a symbol of female sexuality. The intention of using such a sensuous and female-oriented costume can become more apparent when we take into account the atmosphere of Sufi literature such as *The Arabian Nights*.

Costumes, dance and prayer, all of which are highlights of Cheoyong culture, also have special significance in Sufism. Sufism absorbed both traditions of folk beliefs in the Near East that worshipped earth and of mysticism in India so that it possessed different traits from orthodox Islam. One of the differences is dance. Sufism places emphasis on the sacred movements and dancing as a way of ascetic mental practice to unite with godliness. This dance performed with the chant of Zikr is based on the

aboriginal culture known as "the Dance of Earth" that helps to reach a state of trance. It is Whirling Dance that represents the circle or gyre of the cosmic order of the soul. Some monks walked round and round as part of their ascetic mental practice of enlightenment. Such circular movement is the main element of Cheoyong's dance, too. Martin Lings said that "the body symbolizes the axis of the universe, it is nothing but the Tree of Life. Dance is a ritual of immersion and a taste of lost center."(84) The tree of worship in the Kuran is the olive but it is represented by a peach or bamboo tree in Cheoyong culture. Cheoyongga, a Korean song which parodied Shilla's folk song, includes a great number of sexual metaphors using tree-like images. Like Cheoyong's costumes, the tree metaphors can be interpreted as another tradition to refer to the sacredness of the earth through sexual ritual. Like a ritualistic dance in Sufi, the dance expresses the unity of oneself with sacredness, amid the passion of elated love.

Another connection between Sufism and Cheoyong culture is their movements. "Sufi dance has the very strict movements of the rhythmic ups and downs of body"(Lings 85). Cheoyong's dance also includes some very similar vertical movements. According to a document, as soon as the drummer hits the side of the drum in the middle of the music, five Cheoyong dancers have to bend their backs forwards, raise their arms up high and then lay them on their laps. Such vertical movements during the circular progress of round-dance and lineal steps, are emphasized in Cheoyong dance.<sup>1)</sup> Many documents including "Gunahang" in *Mokeumjip* 21 and 33 reiterate the importance of circular movements in Cheoyong dancing, which are similar to those found in Sufi dance. To enhance existence and to unite oneself with the universe is the true purpose of both Cheoyong and Sufi dances. When Sufism was combined with Buddhism, it evolved into ascetic practices to reach Nirvana by cleansing souls from evil. In Cheoyong dancing, the ritual of the body to be freed from trouble and to reach godliness emphasizes the clothes as a substitute for the mind. Therefore when Cheoyong performs the dance and chant in a similar fashion to the movements depicted by Sufi dancing, he can be regarded as a Sufi monk.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has attempted to illustrate the possible relationships between Cheoyongga and Sufism, one of the Arabic cultures. The inspection of the significance of the motif of the love triangle in the seduction of one's beloved, the sexual aberration of the female character and the demonic mysterious existence of the evil spirit in Cheoyongga and *The Arabian Nights* is intended to reveal the various forms of cultural exchange between the two worlds. In many respects, they have a great number of similarities as a way to deliver a message about human nature and mysteriousness in the universe. Eroticism represented in both works provides a mechanism to enlighten the character against evil. To show these close relationships between the two, this article examined the style, the theme, the narrative structure of Cheoyongga in light of *The Arabian Nights* and also compared the dance and costumes of the Cheoyong dance with those of Sufism. At the end of the article I boldly stated that Cheoyong is another Sufi monk. This was because I aimed to highlight an interchange of Asian cultures represented in Cheoyongga. The intent was also to shed light on the importance of cultural communication and complete absorption of exoticism as a crucial part of Cheoyong culture and its attraction through long history in Korea. Finally, I hope this article may encourage the reader to reconsider and re-evaluate the global trait of medieval Asian culture on multiple layers.