

# The Meeting of *Changgeuk* and Greek Tragedy: *Transcultural and Transhistorical Practice of Korean Pansori-Changgeuk and the Case of Medea\**

CHOE Keysook

## Abstract

*This article aims to shed new light on the experimental changgeuk Medea with reference to the concept of transcultural/transhistorical practice. First, it argues that the changgeuk entitled Medea restructures the tenets of Greek tragedy while respecting both the original Greek narrative and Korean historical/cultural mentality. Second, it shows how the changgeuk Medea creatively reimagines performance mode through the mixing of two theatrical genres. Third, it highlights the way in which Medea instrumentalizes the history of East Asian performance art. Fourth, it argues that Medea is the outcome of a harmonious conceptual collaboration between Greek pathos, the so-called han of pansori, and the grotesque. Fifth, it hypothesizes that, at the culmination of the grotesque mood in Medea, the audience experiences a dramatic turn that is effective because it is in full accord with the affective structure of pansori, a process defined herein as reflective catharsis. Finally, it calls for a reflective process of creative artistic innovation and globalizing modernization in Korean traditional theater in order to transcend simplistic Orientalism, wherein Asia is appropriated as merely an object of a fixed tradition or past.*

**Keywords:** *Medea, changgeuk, pansori, pathos, han, grotesque, tragedy, transcultural/transhistorical practice, reflective catharsis, aesthetics*

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CHOE Keysook is Associate Professor in the Institute of Korean Studies at Yonsei University.  
E-mail: befriend2@hanmail.net.

## Introduction: The Perspective of the *Changgeuk Medea*

In the era of globalization, all modern societies face the challenge of negotiation and communication across diverse cultural regions. Voices in the East Asian cultural sphere are particularly critical of West-centric globalization and the fitting of Asian culture into the cultural norms of Western societies (Jeon 2012; Ju 2007; Kang 1997).<sup>1</sup> It is claimed that collaborative works between Asia and the West, especially those initiated in the West, pursued biased cultural hegemonism and imperialism from the perspective of Western enlightenment but in the name of globalization (Barker 2012; Ferguson 1997). Deconstructivism, interculturalism, and postmodern eclecticism are used to support this *modernization of tradition* in encounters between Asia and the West (Yang 2010). This reflects a narrow viewpoint wherein *Asian* is taken to mean *Asian tradition*, while *globalization* signifies conforming that tradition to Western modernity, thus revealing an epistemic contradiction: the meaning of Asia is appropriated as an object of the past, while modernization and globalization are defined in terms of Westernization. In this light, Edward Said's Orientalism continues.

Encounters between Asia and the West can only be equitable when this binary link between Asia as past and tradition and Westernization associated with globalization and modernization is broken. There is no fixed object between Asia and the West. As the sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2000) puts it, all things exist as liquid, not as solid. In other words, genuine encounters between Asia and the West will lead to perfect communication only when both sides embrace the other's history and cultural shifts within the contexts of regional historicity and cultural interchange.

The aim of this article is to analyze the aesthetic vision of one artistic performance text that innovatively embraces this type of communicative approach between Asia and the West, between the past and modernity. To

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1. Neo-Orientalism, portrayed as a counterargument to Orientalism and including, for example, Zen, yoga, and Taoism (elements of positive interest to the West), is merely an amended version of Orientalism. For more on neo-Orientalism, see H. Park (2007).

do so, I posit the concept of transcultural/transhistorical practice. This term, derived from translanguaging practice and conceptualized by Lydia Liu (2005), aims to avoid the articulation of unilateral hierarchies that assign one axis as fixed and/or perfect and the other as inferior. Instead, it emphasizes interactivity, considers historical change in each field, and consciously avoids acts of “otherization” (Said 1978). This works in three dimensions: transhistoricality/transculturality (mentality and culture), formal/rhetorical cross (mode), and interreference of Asian/worldwide performance art history (experience and cultural heritage).

This article analyzes the *changgeuk* opera *Medea*,<sup>2</sup> which was performed in 2013 at the National Theater of Korea and directed by Seo Jae-hyeong.<sup>3</sup> The narrative comes from the Greek tragedy *Medea*, written by Euripides. *Changgeuk* 唱劇 is a retransmitted and restructured form of *pansori*, a Korean traditional theatrical form performed by one singer and one drummer. In *pansori*, the singer performs the songs (*chang* 唱), dialogue (*aniri*) and gestures (*ballim*), and a single drummer plays a Korean traditional drum called a *buk* and responds with simple emotional exclamations called *chuimsae*. In *changgeuk*, however, there are multiple actors and actresses, various musical instruments, and intricate stage settings. This results in an expanded performance form and an experience enriched by the combination of acting, dancing, and elaborate audio-visual effects. The transformation from *pansori* to *changgeuk* occurred in the twentieth century as the open-capacity format of *pansori* as a theatrical form, which embraced contemporary popular songs (*jangga* 雜歌) and folk songs (*minyo*

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2. To avoid confusion and the repetitive use of a paraphrase to refer to the *changgeuk* play *Medea*, this article only calls it *Medea*. When referring to the original Greek text, expressions like “the Greek *Medea*” or “the original text” are used.

3. Seo Jae-hyeong is also its lighting designer. Han A-reum is its script writer, Hwang Ho-jun its musical director, Yeo Sin-dong its stage designer, and Kim Ji-yeon its costume designer. This performance is a part of the National Theater of Korea’s project on the globalization of Korean *changgeuk*, headed by Kim Seong-nyeo, the theater’s chief art director. Kim indicated that the decision to perform *Medea* was made by director Seo Jae-hyeong. According to Kim, Seo deliberately chose *Medea* amongst the world’s great classical plays for its potential to contribute to *changgeuk* (Kim Seong-nyeo, interview by the author, Seoul, June 10, 2016).

民謠), combined with growing global experience in theater and performance (modern Western drama and Asian theater).<sup>4</sup>

This research primarily considers the ways in which the generic mode and aesthetic of *changgeuk* are influenced by historical and cultural context (director, script, production, etc.). Openness is the dominant force in *changgeuk* creative innovation.<sup>5</sup> Borrowing from Hans-Thies Lehmann (2013, 63), if Greek tragedy represents “pre-dramatic (*prä-dramatisch*)” theater, *Medea* performed in songs alone (in the so-called “song-through” mode) is a post-dramatic theater.<sup>6</sup> This is an outcome of the modernization and globalization of traditional theater.

According to Mira Felner (2013), regional examples of the modernization and globalization of traditional theater contain generic innovations and interculturalism derived from collaborations between Western classical drama and Asian traditional theater. There are several examples of this: the Theatre du Soleil’s production of *The Oresteia (Les Atrides)*, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine in 1990–1994, used acting styles, costumes,

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4. For analysis of the relationship between *pansori* and *changgeuk*, see K. Kim (2011, 125–133) and C. Park (2003, 85, 106–113).

5. According to Baek (1996, 9), openness is “on-going.” For a period classification and evaluation of the historical achievements of *changgeuk* opera at the National Theater of Korea, see Yu (2010). According to Yu, *changgeuk* were performed at the National Theater a total of 147 times till June 5, 2014. Among these, 117 performances were based on traditional *pansori* texts, while 30 texts were original texts or based on Western plays (K. Kim 2014, 7–20; Yu 2010, 145, 149–153). Prior to this, the Joseon Vocal Music Research Group (Joseon Seongak Yeonguhoe), which was organized in the 1930s, played the role of teaching Korean traditional theatricals as well as producing *changgeuk* (Baek 1996, 138–147, 190). These performances were called *geukchang* 劇唱, *gukgeuk* 國劇, *madanggeuk* 마당극, and *eumakgeuk* 音樂劇 (Korean opera), but the superordinate, academic term for all these plays is *changgeuk*. *Changgeuk Medea* is a “historical practice” produced against this Korean contextual backdrop. For the case of changeover of *pansori* in the era of globalization, see the examples of C. Park, who sings a *pansori* in English, and Hervé Péjaudier, who performs *aniri* of *pansori* in French (Choe 2012, 361).

6. Lehmann termed “post-dramatic theater” the newly-created formal experiments of modern theatre, including deconstructivist theatre, multimedia theatre, retro-traditional theatre, conventional theatre, and mime theatre/gesture theatre, etc. (2013, 63). Applying his dramatic categories of pre-drama and post-drama, Greek tragedy and *pansori* can be classified as pre-drama, while the *changgeuk* production of *Medea* can be classified as post-drama.

makeup, and musical instruments and rhythms inspired by Asian traditions. Suzuki Tadashi's interpretation of *The Bacchae* by Euripides utilized the slow movements and sculptured poses of traditional Japanese theater. Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen has created productions that mix Western classics with an array of traditional Asian theatrical forms. Bertolt Brecht designed an entire theatrical theory that considers both Asian and Western theaters, giving theatrical inspiration to later generations (Brandon 2002, 345; Felner 2013, 197; Myeong 2003, 232–235; Thornbury 2002, 231).<sup>7</sup>

Collaborations between Western directors and traditional Asian play texts at the National Theater of Korea in the twenty-first century include German opera maestro-director Achim Freyer's *pansori* opera *Sugungga* (2011) and Andrei Serban's *changgeuk* opera *A Different Chunhyang* (2014). However, *Medea* is the only one thus far produced by a Korean director. The rationale for this research is therefore clear: each of the above two collaborations produced an aesthetic interpretation of Korean contents (*changgeuk*) by a Western director, but *Medea* dealt with a Korean perspective, or aesthetic interpretation, of Western contents (tragedy). *Medea* laid the foundation for a balanced collaboration between Korea and the West, a kind of *inter-reference* of artistic interests that harmoniously deflected any suspicion of Orientalism that might occur when adapting Western dramatic contents to a Korean form.

In addition, previous research into theatrical collaborations between Asia and the West focuses on Chinese, Japanese, and Singaporean cases; Korean cases of globalized traditional theater have not been studied. This article analyzes Korean elements as well as a Korean case that highlights the meaning of broader Asian cultural heritage. It pinpoints the way in which this particular encounter between Greek tragedy and Korean *changgeuk* constituted a new transmission of a play's text and performance through unbiased inter-referencing and an exchange between Asian and Western cultures and histories.

I analyze *Medea* from three dimensions: (1) Korean performance history (the modernization process of traditional theater); (2) global perfor-

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7. See also <http://www.scot-suzukicompany.com>.

mance history (encounters between Korean/Asian traditional theater forms and their Western counterparts); and (3) a modern interpretation of the text of a Western classical play.

Prior research dealing with *changgeuk* tends toward a biased regionalism that treats it solely as a Korean regional cultural form. Conversely, I argue that *Medea* is one part of a global trend of modernization and globalization in performance of traditional theater. With this in mind, I analyze the aesthetics of *Medea* through the lenses of gender studies, aesthetic approach, and affect theory to shed new light on the following question: How does *changgeuk* (reflecting the regionality and historicity of Korea) encounter Greek tragedy (reflecting the West and *classical* form) as a result of the pursuit of modernization and globalization? At the same time, I consider the Korean historical and social contexts in order to explain the sympathetic solidarity Korean audiences felt toward the production. By revealing the aesthetic achievements of Korean/Asian transcultural/transhistorical practice, I suggest a new vision of the globalization and modernization of Korean traditional *changgeuk* opera.

### **Transcultural/Transhistorical *Medea* and Aesthetic Practices**

Greek tragedy and Korean *changgeuk* have much in common. Greek tragedy derived from *dithyrambos*, which was performed on an open stage with a chorus (Aristotle [1975] 2000, 38); *pansori*, the progenitor of *changgeuk*, is performed in the form of an open theater, such as upon a “straw-mat stage” or in a “broad yard” (C. Park 2003; Ryu 2009, 74). The structure of the text of Greek tragedy is composed of *prologos*, *episodion*, conclusion, and chorus songs (Aristotle [1975] 2000, 70); *changgeuk* incorporates narration led by a chief *dochang* 導唱 (the lead narrator), songs and dialogues sung by actors and actresses, and the acting itself. The two forms are both composed of songs (*chang*, a Korean traditional vocalization method and chorus) and *dialogue* (*episodion* and *aniri*). In terms of representation method, the modes share the following: both *dochang* and chorus perform songs and dance, affecting the senses of sight and hearing. When *changgeuk* was combined

with Greek tragedy in *Medea*, the mixing of the two modes generated inter-reference and interchange in text and genre. This phenomenon is examined through the conceptual lens of transcultural and transhistorical practice.

*Historical/Cultural Crossing: Korean Recontextualization of Greekness*

When *changgeuk* opera encountered Greek tragedy in *Medea*, new elements in the historicity, genre, and affective sentiment emerged from differences of era and place (ancient Greece and modern Korea). The original play's text was abbreviated and revised in accordance with the historical and cultural context of modern Korea. The story of *Medea* focuses on a conflict between Medea and Jason.<sup>8</sup> Premised upon this conflict, peripheral stories address clashes between human beings and god, reflections on faith, moral arguments about punishment, and Greek historical/cultural narratives. For example, the episode wherein Medea makes an appointment with Aegeus<sup>9</sup> to help him give birth to a baby and gain refuge (lines 657–791) is cut,<sup>10</sup> and so is some dialogue between Medea and King Creon (lines 271–356).

Of all the creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate. First, at an exorbitant price, we must buy a husband and take a master for our bodies. For this is what makes our misfortune

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8. Medea was a princess of Colchis in Persia, and Jason was a prince of Iolcos in Thessaly. Jason courted *Medea* and married her after he obtained the precious Golden Fleece. Medea killed her brother and betrayed her father in order to marry Jason. After leaving Colchis, for a while the couple lived happily with their two sons. However, upon King Creon's suggestion, Jason eventually decided to marry Glauke, a princess of Corinth, to secure stronger political power. Medea became desperate and decided to take revenge on Jason. She presented Glauke with a poisoned dress as a curse token and then killed her sons to upset Jason and make him feel guilty.
9. Aegeus, a king of Athens, was an old friend of Medea's. He was childless and had always mourned it. Medea advised him on how to have a child, and she asked that he grant her asylum in Athens in return.
10. As texts for analysis, I used an English version (Euripides 1994) and a Korean one (Euripides 2009). The numbers in parentheses indicate the line of the original Greek text in the aforementioned English version.

even more galling: to suffer loss and be insulted to boot. (Greek *Medea*, lines 230–235)

Female *dochang*: It is man who commits the crime, but woman who is punished.

Chief *dochang*: It is a powerful principle even after all this time.

Female *dochang*: It is man who commits the crime, but woman who is punished. (*changgeuk Medea*)

As we can see in the first above, the original text speaks of the social and public suppression of women in the Greek context, but in the second quotation, the *changgeuk* version adopts a new rhetorical form that emphasizes contemporary Korea. The theme of the second constitutes the main leitmotif of *Medea*. It reflects the resentment felt by women in modern Korea, who still suffer from unfair treatment in a state that has the highest divorce rate of all OECD member countries.

Medea's ethnic identity is emphasized at first as an irrational and illogical form of otherness (Yim 2007, 462).<sup>11</sup> However, in the *changgeuk* interpretation, *Medea* is portrayed as a betrayed woman, a victim of passion, and an emotional subject caught in a conflict between political power and love.<sup>12</sup> *Medea* is designed with a sympathetic structure that substitutes out the Greek context (history, culture, belief, narrative, and sentiment) and recontextualizes it with scenes intended to elicit pathos from a Korean audience.

There are interpretive differences between the Greek and Korean versions concerning the personality of Medea. In the original Greek, she is portrayed as a cruel and revengeful woman. When she is banished from Corinth, she begins to agonize over how to kill Jason, exposing her vengeful passion. However, Medea in the *changgeuk* opera is portrayed as a woman who bears a grudge (*han* 恨), but not one who harbors vengeful passion.

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11. For more on the structuring of otherness, see Said (1978, 2–3). For more on the binary between Greek and other ethnicities (barbarian), see Cartledge (1993, 36–62) and Yim (2007, 46, 462).

12. Of course, in *changgeuk* form, the meaning of Otherness reflected in Medea's identity is not completely erased, but is lessened compared to the original.



Korea has long maintained a general sentimental structure whereby a woman who can endure hardship yet maintain her virtue obtains happiness in the future. This idea allows for belief: if someone is able to endure his or her vengeful mind, righteous law will eventually punish the bad (Choe 2010, 78–80).

As such, the scene of Medea murdering her brother is substituted in *Medea* for the one in which Jason does the killing. Considering the Korean tradition of primogeniture, it would have been difficult to acquire audience sympathy for Medea if she were to kill her brother, the family heir. Instead, in the *changgeuk Medea* is misunderstood as having murdered her brother, even though she did not do so. Therefore, the dramatic pathos increases and Medea is positioned as a victim. This dramatic situation plays a decisive role in generating audience sympathy for Medea.

These differences between the two versions show that *changgeuk* is not simply a translation of a Greek tragedy. Rather, it is a remake that actively addresses the demands of the Korean sympathetic context.

#### *Formal/Rhetorical Crossing: Creative Crossover of Chorus and Dochang*

The performance form and text representation in *Medea* innovatively mix the *dochang* from *changgeuk* with the chorus from Greek theater. The lead *dochang* is the overall narrator. The role of *dochang* differs from the multiple roles played by one performer in *pansori*.<sup>13</sup> The *dochang* must explain not only the actor's situation and inner thoughts but also the development of the episode and the story (Baek 1996, 109), add expressions concerning dramatic incidents, and express his or her interpretation of the various scenes. By doing so, the *dochang* guides the coherence of the drama, fine-tunes the relationship between actors and actresses, and imparts essential information to the audience.

The chief *dochang* (single) and a group of subordinate male and female

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13. The arrival of *dochang* in *pansori* can be found in the *pansori* record and oral texts from the 1920s. The lyrics use the term *seol* 說, however, instead of *dochang* (Baek 1996, 109). For more on the history of the term *dochang*, see Ryu (2012, 108n1).

*dochang* (group) perform theatrical conventions, including offering high moral commentary and communication of the main ideas in the drama (Carlson 1984, 24), identifying the principles of social morality, and putting forth conventional expressions (W. Park 2009, 27). They also work to raise the general level of concentration focused on the drama by substituting for the supporting actors and actresses. These roles of the *dochang* can be summarized as: quotation, application, and creative mixing.

(1) Quotation: The typical role of the chorus is to link scene and scene, actor and actor, and stage and audience (Carlson 1984, 291; G. Kim 1999, 131; Lee 2012, 158). *Medea* incorporates male and female *dochang* into the drama and has them forestall<sup>14</sup> and control<sup>15</sup> the pace of dramatic development, indicate the main themes, and help the audience to understand the dramatic narrative, much like the chorus does in Greek tragedy. In the first scene of *Medea*, when two children ask what a certain sound is, the female *dochang* (group) sings: “This is the moaning sound that is slipping from the fingers that cover her mouth.” This dialogic scene is similar to that of the chorus in the Greek original.

(2) Application: *Medea* incorporates a fruitful understanding of Greek chorus in its dramatic structure, accumulated through the history of chorus use in Western performance history. The lyrics of the male chorus (e.g., “Oh, no! Oh, no! A Golden Fleece he should get! We need the Golden Fleece to finish the war. Oh no! Then is his marriage invalid?”) raise a question about a given scene and hint at the tragic irony to come. This example shows how the *dochang* holds interpretive power in the theater and leads the audience to the dilemmatic topic of ambition versus love.

(3) Creative Mixing: *Medea* mixes *dochang* and chorus. The *choregos*,

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14. For example, “Sun rises; day breaks.” The *dochang*’s singing alludes to the story.

15. For example, a group of female *dochang* gives a warning by singing together, “Medea! Medea! Medea! She is a murderer, murderer! Leave and leave in the name of the king! Leave by the order of the king!” Here they make note of the murder of her uncle. Later, a group of male *dochang* sings, “Bravo, bravo! Glorious bravo! The war is finished. Now all pains are ending. The war is finished. Now all pains are ending.” This song indicates a dramatic turn.

who stands alone in the Greek tragedy, plays the role of chorus leader, reminding us of the modern conductor of a symphony orchestra (Calame 1997, 49). However, the chief *dochang* is the leader of the drama itself, as evidenced by the following quotations.

- Ⓐ Chorus leader: “Terrible and hard to heal is the wrath that comes when kin join in conflict.” (lines 516–518)
- Ⓑ Female *dochang* (group): “Misfortunes never come in singles. For *Medea* it is a catastrophic order; to Jason it is the ultimate comfort. *Medea*’s anguish is Jason’s pleasure at his new marriage. What on earth is it! *Medea*’s tears are Jason’s wedding champagne!”
- Ⓒ Chief *dochang* (single): “Is it advantageous for a woman to meet a father and acquire a brother, and to meet a husband and acquire children? Alas! How much pain can one person endure?”

The chief *dochang* conducts the theater, delivers messages about life (Ⓑ), and compels the audience to think metaphysically by offering questions about the dramatic scenes (Ⓒ). The chorus leader in the original plays this function, but the role is more emphatic in *changgeuk* because the chief *dochang* performs the dual role of chorus leader and narrator, a dual role that originates in *pansori*.

The *dochang* in *Medea* plays collective character roles similar to those in Greek tragedy (G. Kim 1999, 130), but these are not concentrated exclusively on women (Calame 1997, 21, 25, 30), nor do they portray neutral characters (G. Kim 1999, 130). In *Medea*, a group of female *dochang* represent the position, inner mind, and emotions of *Medea*, while a group of male *dochang* perform those of Jason. This symbolic matching replaces couple conflict with genderization.

In terms of theatrical roles, *dochang* and the chorus are greatly similar, but in some cases their functions contradict one another. In these instances, *Medea* gives priority to *changgeuk* principles. For example, in the original text the chorus intervenes in the scenes and directly communicates with the audience and other actors and actresses (chorus and nanny in lines 203–212; chorus and *Medea* in lines 244–270). However, in the *changgeuk* a dialogue never occurs between the *dochang* and the actors or actresses, with the exception of the chief *dochang*. The theatrical conventions of *changgeuk* are

prioritized over those of Greek tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, it is essential to obtain a positive response, *chuimsae* in Korean, from *pansori* and *changgeuk* audiences. *Chuimsae* is a theatrical sign expressing sympathy through which the audience sends its energy to the performers on stage by voicing short exclamations or clapping. *Changgeuk Medea* was designed to expand this dialogic function by letting instrumental players play the same role. The antiphony of the gendered *dochang* and response of the actors and actresses take this position.

In short, the form of *Medea* is innovative in terms of mixing the chorus and *dochang*, which results in an emphasis on communication between the performers and the audience, hinting at what is forthcoming in the dramatic narrative, tuning the audience to complex thought, and generating sympathy for the theme.

#### *Transcultural/Transhistorical Practice: Use of East Asian Cultural Assets*

*Medea* realizes the idea of transcultural/transhistorical practice through the traditional assets of not only Korean performance history (*pansori* and *changgeuk*) but also actual histories worldwide and in East Asia.

First, *Medea* makes creative use of the Japanese theatrical convention of the *kuroko* 黒子, a black-robed stage assistant in *kabuki* 歌舞伎 theater and *bunraku* 文楽 (Japanese traditional puppet show). The *kuroko* highlights the main characters' roles, while the *bunraku* stresses symbolic expressions. Theatrically, these are regarded as invisible performers (Hujisaki 2009,

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16. Conventionally, the *dochang* of *changgeuk* differs from the narrator of *pansori*, who does not manage total narratives. *Dochang* explains the dramatic background and situation to the audience, reports on the course of events, give notice of the next scene, and represents the actor's feelings (Jeong 2004, 184; Ryu 2009, 66). According to the author of the Korean *Medea*, Han A-reum, the chief *dochang* plays the role of storyteller, while an actress represents *Medea*'s position. The dialogue of the *dochang* is directed toward the audience rather than the actors on the stage. Though *Medea* thoroughly maintains this theatrical convention, since *changgeuk* continues to shift, a more thorough investigation of all *changgeuk* performances is required to determine whether theatrical form always abides by this rule.

46–52).<sup>17</sup>

Applying the tenets of *kuro-ko*, the assistant actors on stage move the puppet-children (Fig. 1). At the climax of *Medea*, where Medea kills her two sons, the robes of the puppet-children handlers change to a bloody red. Subverting the theatrical principle of invisibility reveals a hidden truth; paradoxically, puppet-children notify us of their *life* at the very moment they are killed.



**Figure 1.** A scene from the 2013 staging of the *changgeuk Medea*.<sup>18</sup> In this scene, Medea is crying after killing her sons.

Source: Courtesy of National Theatre of Korea.

Second, *Medea* appears to have been inspired by the stage setting and affective design of the actors' and actresses' roles in Chinese Peking Opera. Conventions of Chinese Peking Opera include *lianpu* 臉譜 (Felner 2013, 114; Song 2004, 38, 76; Xu 2008, 12–19), a form of iconographical makeup, and color-coded costumes known as the “upper five colors” (*sangosaek* 上五色 in Korean) and the “lower five colors” (*haosaek* 下五色 in Korean). These symbols represent the characters' roles, personalities, and social and dramatic statuses.

*Medea* structures the characters' roles and affective settings through color. Because symbols marked by certain colors are common cultural knowledge in both Korea and East Asia as a whole,<sup>19</sup> this mainly refers to the symbolism of the Five Elements (*ohaeng* 五行 in Korean).

17. Sometimes the main assistants wear a splendid white kimono, but co-assistants who wear black bandanas on the stage are regarded as invisible to the audience.

18. Unless specified otherwise, all the following photographs in this article are scenes from *Medea*, directed by Seo Jae-hyeong and performed by the National Theatre of Korea, May 22–26, 2013 (Seoul: National Theatre of Korea, 2013), DVD, 100 min.

19. In Korea, third-graders learn the concept of the “five colors” from a textbook (Shin 2003, 56–63). Chinese traditional costumes and architecture usually make symbolic use of the five colors (Y. Kim et al. 2004, 105). According to the research of Y. Kim et al. (2004, 106), Koreans and Chinese prefer to use the “five pure colors” (blue, red, yellow, white, and black), while the Japanese use both pure and muddled colors.



**Figure 2.** Jason is walking out. The actors' sculpture-like slow motion can be construed as inspired by the Suzuki Method.

Source: Courtesy of National Theatre of Korea.

Third, *Medea* partly uses a Japanese directing technique influenced by Japanese traditional theater. The last scene of *Medea* presents an impressive finale with the extremely slow-moving Jason (Fig. 2). This seems to be derived from the Suzuki Method, a unique physical training method used by Suzuki Tadashi, the well-regarded contemporary Japanese theater director. He created a unique mime technique called “slow

*ten tekka ten*”—which references Japanese traditional theater—in which an actor moves the whole body such that it seems to be like a sculpture at every moment (Jang 2012, 52; M. Kim 2013, 45–46; Suzuki 1993, 86).<sup>20</sup> Presumably, the staff and director of *Medea* wished to pay homage to the Suzuki Method.

The examples above demonstrate how *Medea* creatively references Korean traditional theater as well as East Asian traditional cultural heritage and theatrical history.

### ***Medea* and the Grotesque: The Fusion of Pathos and Han**

The plots of Greek tragedies are developed via *anagnorisis*, *peripeteia*, and pathos to evoke fear and pity. *Pansori* is designed as a double structure of *pleasure and sorrow* (*heung-han* 興-恨), which causes the audience to feel catharsis through “tension-relaxation” and “flow-emancipation” (H. Kim 1975, 139). *Medea* creates an encounter between tragic pathos and *han*, a specifically Korean aesthetic emotion.

20. This type of theater has also been performed in Korea; for example, the *changgeuk* version of *The Trojan Woman* by Euripides was performed in September 1986.

*Pathos, Han, and the Grotesque*

The affective essence of Greek tragedy, as discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, comes from mimicry of behaviors that induce fear and pity. Pity is brought about when the audience sees characters wrongly suffering misfortune. Fear is evoked when the audience watches a common character face a miserable situation. The development of the plot, from recognition to reversal to pathos, shows the process of "wounding, pain, and death" (Aristotle [1975] 2000, 69, 73–74). Aristotle mentions *Medea* as an example of this ideal form of tragedy.

The pathos of Greek tragedy is similar to the *han* of Korean *pansori*. Korean *han* has been defined as affective resentment and bitterness (Y. Kim 1991, 93). It can also be defined as a complex affection interlaced with such emotions as lament, regret, self-condemnation, resignation, grief, a sense of shame, remorse, pity, melancholy, pain, and revenge (Cheon 1993, 12–52; D. Kim 2015, 294; H. Kim 2012, 162–163; J. Kim 1997, 75–79; Min 1997, 45; Rhee 2011, 152–160). The main affection of *han* consists of lament, grudge, and sorrow. The word *han* is common to China, Japan, and Korea as a general feeling of grudge and lamentation, but it is reflected uniquely in Korea as also including sorrow and a sigh of resignation, reflecting the peculiarities of its historical culture (Cheon 1993, 13; H. Kim 2012, 163). The senses of betrayal, revenge, hatred, and frustration found in Greek tragedy are all familiar to and communicable with *han*.<sup>21</sup> The main difference between the two is the exciting feelings of delight and pleasure followed by desperation and sorrow in *pansori* year. *Medea* finishes in catastrophe, without catharsis through emancipation.<sup>22</sup>

21. Approaching personal blogs for a different perspective on this question, one can readily find a discussion of *han* as the main sentiment of *Medea*. Example entries are: "Changgeuk-gwa opera, geuriseu bigeuk-ui yeojuingong-eul geurinda! Gungnip changgeukdan-ui 'media'" (*Changgeuk* and Opera, Portraying a Female Heroine of Greek Tragedy! *Medea* at the National Theater of Korea), October 5, 2014, <http://blog.naver.com/mabotora?Redirect=Log&logNo=220141678320>; and "Changgeuk media—seoyang yeonguk media-ga changgeuk media-ro taeonada" (*Changgeuk Medea: Western Theater Medea Is Reborn as Changgeuk Medea*), May 24, 2013, <http://hjej0303.blog.me/130168772881>.

22. An anonymous audience member (signing as *zzak*) wrote a critique of the play on the



However, it would be wrong to conclude that *Medea* simply follows the theatrical principles of Greek tragedy and not those of *pansori*, or that it assimilates Greek tragedy, because *Medea* fuses a tragic emotional structure with the *han* of *pansori* and the aesthetic concept of the grotesque, not the affective style of Greek tragedy. The concept of the grotesque is linked to ideas of strangeness, terror, mystery, embarrassment, surprise, confusion, creepiness, hatred, devilishness, and cruelty (Kayser 2011, 29–61, 103–105). It deconstructs the dichotomies of same/different, familiar/strange, good/bad, rational/irrational, normal/abnormal, beautiful/ugly, sublime/vulgar, inside/outside, and barbarism/civilization and crosses continuously between them. By breaking down conceptual barriers, the grotesque draws out subversive thoughts and evokes fear (Choe 2003, 132; Minn 2014, 186).

*Medea* adopts the coexistence of agitating sentiments as an affective and aesthetic concept. The grotesque aesthetic in *pansori* narratives is generated from the tragic climax. *Pansori* narratives structure a grotesque atmosphere by having characters straddle the line between life and death. *Chunhyangga* and *Simcheongga*, the best known of the *pansori* repertoires, contain impressive scenes of the main female characters experiencing pseudo-death at the point of extreme anguish. These instances are found in the songs “Okjungga” (Prison Song) and “Ssukdaemeori” (Disheveled Hair) of *Chunhyangga*, and “Beompijungnyu” (Floating toward the Middle of the Ocean) of *Simcheongga*.

In these scenes, both main characters, Sim Cheong and Chunhyang, meet and converse with historical ghosts. Chunhyang hears a ghost crying while she is alone in prison and begins to scream like a mourning ghost. Sim Cheong begins to see and talk with the phantoms of dead men and women who are floating on the sea, such as Ahwang 娥皇 (Ehuang in Chi-

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National Theater of Korea's homepage: “The theme and atmosphere of *Medea* not only reflects the Korean proverb, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” (*yeoja-ga han-eul pumeumyeon onyuwol-edo seori-ga naerinda*), but also allows the female audience to delight in revenge and the male audience to experience a thrilling and threatening affection.” See <http://www.ntok.go.kr/user/jsp/board/view.jsp?bidx=1004&idx=79253&pageNo=1&ing=I&searchType=ALL&searchKeyword=%EB%A9%94%EB%94%94%EC%95%84>, accessed October 1, 2016.



nese) and Yeoyeong 女英 (Nüying in Chinese), two consorts of Sun 舜 (Shun in Chinese), Gul Won 屈原 (Qu Yuan in Chinese), O Ja-seo 伍子胥 (Wu Zixu in Chinese, a prisoner of the state of Chu 楚), etc. All the ghosts Sim Cheong encounters have suffered injustice in their lives. They were killed because they became involved in an unjust incident or committed suicide. The female characters and the spirits of the deceased share feelings of unfairness and extreme sorrow. They signal their sympathy in their vocal laments. Living characters in fact are no better than the dead. They hover between life and death. Such transbordering experiences stimulate grotesque sentiment by threatening any sense of real life or safety. Aesthetically, this is defined as a sentiment of the grotesque (Choe 2003, 112–113, 125–133; Minn 2014, 186).

*Medea* comprehensively realizes the grotesque aesthetic of *pansori*: the affective structure of *pansori* is a cross-repetition between *han* and *heung* (exhilaration), such that representation of *han* during a *pansori* performance is a partial signal of the imminence of the climax. However, *Medea* designed the grotesque sentiment to be present from the first scene to the last.<sup>23</sup> As a result, it maintains an anxious, dark, and mournful atmosphere from beginning to end. On stage, *Medea* evokes an ominous, gloomy, desperate, and fearful atmosphere by flying between gods and humans, life and death, good and evil, caring maternal figure and baleful witch. The grotesque mood is *Medea*'s main and consistent sentiment, unlike *pansori*, which is only partly explained by the grotesque. *Medea* differs from the tragic sentiment that attends a fall from happiness to misfortune, and it also differs from the effect of *pansori*, which repeatedly juxtaposes delighted mood with sorrowful scenes.

*Medea* fuses the *han* of *pansori* with Greek pathos and dramatizes dilemmas of life and fate in order to promote the eerie feeling that the more one tries to escape trouble, the more one becomes mired in difficulty, which, conceptually, presents a perfect picture of the grotesque.

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23. According to my interview with the writer, the main sentiment of *Medea* is *han*, not the grotesque. The grotesque aesthetics of *Medea* is my critical interpretation (Han A-reum, email interview by the author, April 8 and 17, 2016).

### *Theatrical Devices of the Grotesque: Set, Lighting, and Costume*

Discovering how the grotesque aesthetics in *Medea* is represented physically on the stage involves aesthetic design as theatrical device in the areas of set design, lighting, and costume.

#### 1) Set Design: Space Implementation of Anxiety and Turbulence

Haeoreum Theater, the stage within the National Theater of Korea that hosted *Medea*, used a proscenium arch, separating the audience from the stage. This set-up manifests such notions as: “a stage setting is not a background; it is an environment” and “a good scene should be not a picture, but an image” (Jones 2008, 24, 25). The structuring elements of set design are focus, balance, proportion, rhythm, and unity (Felner 2013, 268–269). The slanted stage of *Medea* symbolizes a broken balance between couples, family, human beings and god, and life and fate that cannot be recovered, and heralds unavoidable catastrophic anxiety. It evokes anxiety, nervousness, and fluctuating sentiments. It does not flatten out until the conclusion of the performance.

*Medea*, obsessed with passionate love, leaves her brother’s death and kills her sons. Her emotions seem to be crashing onto the steep stage like a roaring wave. This hints at the fact that the dignity and power of the king are doomed to be upset, and the ambition of Jason will be cut low. The sloping set is an affective device that spatially represents the risky fate of human beings with disturbed minds.

#### 2) Stage Lighting: Aesthetics of Anxiety and Contrast

The director of *Medea* also designed the stage lighting, indicating that the lighting was seen as a weighty part of the performance. As Felner has noted, the intensity, distribution, color, and movement of the stage lighting decide the affective tone of the performance and create a unique atmosphere (2013, 311). When the curtain goes up, the slanted stage is dimly lit. A group of female *dochang* chants a lament in a sepulchral tone while holding red lanterns. The dim red glow acts as a warning curse and is not intended to light

up the dark; catastrophe will come soon, and no one will escape misfortune.

After this point, light never again brightens the stage. Even when the group of Corinth's male *dochang* sings the song of praise, "Now the agony is over. Now the war is over," the lighting casts a gloomy orange on the red walls and black platform. It forebodes an unstable future. When the songs

recede and crying resumes, the set lighting promptly changes to a cool tone of white and blue, which reminds us of a pale reality. Red light symbolizes Medea's passions, and blue those of Jason. The set is mixed and juxtaposes only dark and gloomy lighting, producing a horrible, odd, and grotesque atmosphere.



**Figure 3.** Medea is stricken with grief after Jason's betrayal.

Source: Courtesy of National Theatre of Korea.

### 3) Costume Design and Color: Dramatic Contrast

Traditionally, stage costumes transmit important information, such as a character's age, personality, social status, and relationship to others. A stage costume is a creation of the theater and is designed to enhance the particular quality of a special occasion (Jones 2008, 91–93). *Medea* maximizes colorful symbolism through effective theatrical design and appropriate costumes. Matching red and blue with woman and man, respectively, makes use of a contrasting effect in color psychology.<sup>24</sup>

Medea's costume is a bloody red, which symbolizes destructive passion. Red is common in Medea's family (her father and brother both wear it), where it represents fatal passion, blood, desperation, lamentation, resentment, and revenge. A group of female *dochang* who represent Medea's emotions and thoughts wear ivory dresses at the beginning, reminding us of

24. According to color psychology, red symbolizes the extrovert-sensitive type while blue the introvert-rational type (S. Yi 2005, 133).

mourning.<sup>25</sup> When Medea decides to kill her sons, these change to red. Here, red represents destruction and desperation.

Jason and the male *dochang* predominantly wear blue. Blue symbolizes ambition, the will to power, and well-organized rationality. When a group of male *dochang* enters upon the stage, they wear gray-blue tops with white bottoms. Upon turning around for a dramatic façade, their costumes change to white, hinting that Jason's ambitions will come to nothing. White dolls representing Medea's two sons are controlled by black-robed assistants, the color of their clothes meant to symbolize angels of death. These dolls are controlled by adults and represent living children, but they cannot exist of their own free will.

The bloody dress of the Corinthian princess represents the haunted costume that the princess must wear and symbolizes the catastrophe that Medea has already suffered (Fig. 4). When the princess experiences expectation, romance, and joy, the audience comes to be obsessed by the grotesque mood: there is fear, anxiety, and trembling as they watch the scene. Then nervous pink light and the sound of a siren warn of her misfortune, collapse, and eventual death.



**Figure 4.** Medea in bloodstained wedding dress lets out an anguished scream after having cursed the Corinthian princess.

Source: Courtesy of National Theatre of Korea.



**Figure 5.** The chief *dochang*, dressed in a chief mourner's robe, summarizes Jason's betrayal.

Source: Courtesy of National Theatre of Korea.

25. The traditional mourning costume of Korea is white.

The ivory color of the chief *dochang*'s costume represents the chief mourner at a Korean traditional funeral and recalls the shaman who supervises the cleansing of a dead person's soul in *ssikkingut* (shamanic ritual of purification) (Fig. 5). Set, lighting, and costume are theatrical devices that express the grotesque in *Medea*, and these draw sympathy from the audience.

### *Practice of the Audience: The Reflective Grotesque*

The main aesthetic achievement of *Medea* is its powerful dynamic, which links strong, unstable passion with philosophical thoughts about the text inside (the drama) and outside (society and the world). After murdering her sons, Medea weeps alone for more than five minutes. This lamenting, wailing cry calls to mind fear, like the oral sound of *sinawi* or *salpuri*—music and dance performed during exorcist rites by a shaman—and creates a tragic energy. The audience is rooted to their seats. Only when the lights come up in the auditorium to signal the end of the spectacle does the audience come to notice that they must now make up their uneasy minds and clarify their drifting emotions.

Tragedy performances gave Greeks who attended representations the opportunity to debate and argue about life, reality, and the public values attached to Greek citizenship (Goldhill 1997, 67).<sup>26</sup> This theatrical effect is also present in *Medea*. In this case, the general effect of the performance and

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26. As explained by Simon Goldhill (1997, 55–67), drama festivals such as the Great Dionysia were institutions that allowed the civic identity to be displayed, defined, explored, and contested. Therefore, the major drama festivals were also social dramas themselves. As the city and its citizens were ceremonially on display on stage during the Great Dionysia, the audience constituted what may be called “the civic gaze.” In Greek theatres, the seating was divided into wedges of seats for the *bouleutikon* (policy-making assembly), and the *dēmos* (citizens). In addition, there were two special types of honorific seats for war orphans and scholars, as well as separate seating for four groups of non-citizens: *xenoi* (foreigners), *metics* (resident aliens), slaves, and women. The scenes of debate and deliberation that were played out on theatres' semicircular shapes clearly invited audience engagement. Moreover, the plays themselves offered a fascinating insights into the dynamics between the actors and the audience, as the collective on the stage (the chorus) repeatedly dramatized the response to the action, and the collective in the theatre (the audience) issued its own response.

the aesthetic effect of *changgeuk* (dialogue between text and audience or between world and ego) are augmented for an audience that has knowledge of *pansori*.

In *pansori*, the climax is developed via the grotesque and shifts into subversive reverse: at the climax of anguish and desperation we experience change, and then the change takes on vital power in our lives. This affective structure of *pansori* is also found in other premodern Korean narratives, like hero fiction and domestic fiction, folktales, four-character idioms, and proverbs.<sup>27</sup> Also, this thought is similar to the four-character Chinese idiom, “When things reach an extreme, they must of a necessity be counteracted” (*mulgeuk pilban* 物極必反 in Korean), an expression from the *Zhouyi* 周易 (Book of Changes). This means that common Korean sentiments on life also exist in the broader East Asian context. When Chunhyang and Sim Cheong reach the border between life and death, they pass through the ultimate sorrow and come to join hands with joy and happiness. The zenith of pain is not connected to the passage toward death; it is linked to signs of oncoming happiness, rebirth, and vital life.

The overall dynamic of traditional *pansori* is structured around the balanced repetition of *heung* (pleasure) and *han* (sorrow). However, *Medea* only represents *han*, not *heung*. In *Medea*, dramatic reverse is developed after the end of the show, which maintains a grotesque mood from beginning to end. Korean audiences, accustomed to the narrative grammar of *pansori*, exchange delight (*heung*) and sorrow (*han*) and are faced with affective anxiety when the curtain descends. They may feel that the show is not over, nor should it be.

When the lights rise in the auditorium, the audience recognizes that aesthetic catharsis must be realized in their ongoing real lives, not on the stage. According to the structure of *pansori*, scenes of happiness, vitality, and life force should ensue, and therefore must be searched out and created

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27. The examples are: the anonymous fiction *Yuchungnyeoljeon* (The Tale of Yu Chungryeol); Kim Manjung’s novel *Sassi namjeonggi* (Record of Lady Sa’s Trip to the South); the folktale “Kongjwi and Patjwi”; the four-character idiom *gojin gamnae* 苦盡甘來 (“After bitter comes the sweet”); and the Korean proverb “The calm comes after the storm” (*gosaeng kkeut-e nak-i onda*).

outside the theater by the audience. Pleasure can only be achieved when the cause of *han* is resolved, and it can be experienced off-stage by the audience's behavior in relation to the solution of *han*. *Medea* has consistently been performed in a grotesque mood. This affective structure brings new insights to the audience, suggesting that they could experience pleasure in their lives if they found a way to overcome this type of tragedy and resolve the problem.

When the audience reaches reflective enlightenment, they come to feel a sense of aesthetic stability. Happiness is never gained alone. It is only available when the audience responds to the theatrical questions that linger: "What is the right behavior for Medea?" "How should a human confront god?" "Has our society completely overcome sexual discrimination?" "Can we challenge the dis-eternity of love?" and "Which side should we choose in the conflict between happiness and power?" Experiencing this cognitive process of reflective enlightenment, they feel *reflective catharsis* stemming from the viewed performance.

Drama performed on stage may be tragic, but when performed as *changgeuk*, the audience sees that hope and joy should be realized in their daily lives. Therefore, they are reminded of how they should live and what they should pursue in everyday life to alleviate their and others' suffering. When the recognition and thoughts of the audience reach this point, *Medea* successfully accomplishes the true meaning of theater. The audience recognizes this reflective idea because they already know the affective narrative structure of *pansori*. It is the interpretation of Greek tragedy recontextualized in Korean history and culture, and also the result of an encounter between Asian tradition and the classical West.

### **Conclusion: *Medea* and Koreanness**

*Changgeuk Medea* is collaborative: a Greek tragedy placed within a Korean/Asian cultural context. It illustrates the idea that a Western original text can be a non-fixed, *liquid text*. It reveals that the *changgeuk*, a Korean traditional theatrical genre, is a theatrical form flexible enough to embrace a Western

theatrical genre that is historically and culturally different. In sum, it is a harmonious encounter between Greekness and Koreanness, and also between the West and Asia. This research has shown that as a performative experiment, *Medea* reflects an in-depth understanding of the aesthetics of Greek tragedy, sound knowledge of Western artistic and theatrical history, rich empirical know-how from traditional East Asian forms of theater, and the historical and cultural experience of Korean *pansori* and *changgeuk*. All of these artistic assets are employed in the performance. The facilitating factor for contemporary *changgeuk*'s ability to embrace the collaboration and encounter between the West and Asia naturally originates in the open characteristics of *pansori*, the theatrical forebear of *changgeuk*.

Modern societies all face the challenge of communication in many different cultural areas. Such communication will not be realized effectively if the values of the West conspire to make Asia the Other or to bring Asia over to their side as a subordinate. Similarly, it is impossible to reach a harmonious expansive mutual understanding between Asia and the West if Asia recognizes exclusively the West or treats it as hostile. Globalization biased toward the West is doomed to lose Asian sympathy and solidarity and to make Asia subordinate to the structure of Western power. Unchecked, this will lead to oppressive culture and art. It would be a hegemonic ruling over culture and art by the political, not by affective communion or artistic sympathy.

No less true is that from the Asian perspective, unilaterally arguing for de-Westernization and excluding Western culture and art bring isolation and are no less than a form of reverse Orientalism. Mutual exclusion between Asia and the West reduces the value of all cultural assets and runs counter to the very essence of artistic endeavor, which is premised on communication and sympathy.

Western and Asian cultural/artistic works are produced based on historical and regional contexts. Both can progress expansively through artistic innovation and inter-referentiality. Modernization and globalization should not be fixed on a timescale or special continuum or axis. By crossing historical and cultural borders based on historicity and regional traits, mutual understanding accomplishes the goal of artistic achievement.



This article addresses the question of how *changgeuk Medea* encounters Greek tragedy, and how it results in a new reflective opportunity for twenty-first-century crosscultural and historical practice. It puts forward a new concept, that of *reflective catharsis*, a reference to the authentic aesthetic of Korean traditional *pansori* theater, and offers a creative and practical vision for the modernization and globalization of traditional theater.

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