

**Review**

# Yaksungga: Rhyme of medicinal herbs in Sugungga, Pansori. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INLGcaGiLJE>)

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## ABSTRACT

Pansori is a unique genre of Korean art music. Sugungga is a form of Pansori that is so famous as to be included in the representative five texts of Pansori, and is also a fable about a Dragon King who lived in a palace on the water. The Dragon King had a disease and the major plot of the story is the finding of a cure for his illness. At the beginning of Sugungga, Yaksungga appears on the scene in the form of an ascetic who has knowledge of various herbal medicines. By reciting and singing this medical knowledge, Yaksungga functions as an effective mnemonic technique to aid memorization of the herbs and their properties. Yaksungga exists only in Korea, and functions in Sugungga not only as a dramatic factor in the play, but also as a tool that allows people to easily learn professional medical knowledge during those times, not by books, but by funny rhymes, which gave people the opportunities to apply such knowledge in useful ways.

**Keywords** Yaksungga, Sugungga, rhymes of medicinal herbs, Pansori

## INTRODUCTION

### What is Sugungga of Pansori?

Pansori is a unique genre of Korean cultures and arts combining music, literature and drama. "Pan" of Pansori refers to a place where many people gather together, and "sori" means a song. In the performance of Pansori, a singer and a Korean traditional drummer tell a story accompanied by music. The Buk is a Korean traditional drum. The sound of a Buk has been found to help to reduce agitation and may promote relaxation (Kim et al., 2015). Pansori has been used as a tool to express the joys and sorrows of the people during those times and to criticize the yangban and ruling-classes using metaphors and humour.

According to the report by Sang-Woo Ahn (Honamunwhayeongu), Pansori lyrics reflected the language systems and social conditions of the people at that time, and it is thought that the contents of the lyrics could represent universal knowledge.

Of the representative works of Pansori in Korea, Sugungga originated from the story of "The Monkey and the Crocodile" found in ancient Indian and Chinese Buddhist scriptures. "The Turtle and the Monkey" story in Samguk Sagi (1145) was modified to "The Turtle and the Rabbit" story in the Joseon Dynasty (the 14th to the early 20th century), and it is now performed as Sugungga Pansori. The front phrase is referenced in the master's degree thesis of Seong-Hee Park (Pusan National University Graduate School), and the next phrase is referenced in the book by Dong-Kun Kim (Minsokwon). 'Sugung' in Sugungga is a Chinese word meaning a palace on

the water. In a Buddhist legend, the Dragon King had a mysterious power and ruled water-related things, such as clouds, thunder and rain, and lived in a Sugung. Historically, Sugungga seems to have been formed between the late 17th and the early 18th centuries. Although there cannot be a definitive conclusion, due to the absence of Sugungga-related literature or records on singers by the end of the 18th century, it is speculated that the initial Sugungga was a simple Pansori singing of the cleverness of the rabbit. Records on singers of Sugungga have been found dating from the 19th century. During the mid-late 19th century, the music and lyrics of Sugungga were advanced in a more refined way, making people pay more attention to Sugungga. According to the report by Sang-Woo Ahn, (Korean Studies), between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, during which time printed copies of Sugungga were being read widely, some Pansori singers started to pass Sugungga with fixed lyrics down to their apprentices. The lyrics of Sugungga were documented and transformed into novels, such as Toggi-jeon (The Rabbit Story) and Byuljebu-jeon (The Retainer Turtle Story). At present, there are about 60 different versions (different editions) of these stories.

### Introduction of singer in Youtube URL (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INLGcaGiLJE>)

His name is Hyun-Bin Im, Pansori singer (Fig 1). He was graduated in Seoul Institute of The Art. He had been a member of National Theater of Korea. Now, He is the head of singing club in the Namwon Municipal Orchestra for Korean Traditional Music.

### The story of Sugungga

Once upon a time, the Dragon King in the Sugung had a disease. An ascetic appeared and told the sick king about medicines to treat the disease. Of the medicines, the best one was the liver of a rabbit. Thus, the Dragon King commanded one of his retainers, a turtle, who was able to move on land, to

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Fig. 1 Hyun-Bin Im.

find and coax a rabbit to come to the palace. After many twists and turns, the turtle was able to bring a rabbit to the palace, where the rabbit found out the reason why he had been brought, which was to have his liver cut out and given to the king as medicine. The rabbit said that he usually kept his liver outside of his body, because of the fact that it was such a good medicine, and that he did not have his liver inside his body at that moment. Although the turtle did not believe the rabbit, the king did, because the rabbit's claim seemed plausible. So, the king commanded the turtle to return to land with the rabbit and bring the rabbit's liver back. Thus, the turtle did so, carrying the rabbit on his back. In this way, the rabbit was able to escape from the palace with this trick that saved his life. The subjects of Sugungga can be interpreted in many ways depending on the viewpoint. Sugungga is a fable showing a characteristic, antagonistic relationship between the strong and the weak. The rabbit represents the subordinate class and the weak, whereas the Dragon King and the turtle are the dominant class. In other words, ordinary people criticize the dominant class sharply and mock it with a defiant satire. Despite being weak, the subordinate class overcomes life's troubles with wisdom and optimism, just as did the rabbit. In contrast, the turtle fully obeyed the command of the king, exemplifying the concept of Confucian loyalty, by which a retainer is forced to be loyal to a king. The turtle symbolized loyalty, an absolute concept in the feudal society at that time. Ironically, the turtle can also be considered as a symbol of the meaninglessness of such loyalty.

#### **Yaksungga: rhyming song of medicinal herbs, a part of Sugungga**

At the beginning of Sugungga, Yaksungga appears when an ascetic informs the sick Dragon King of a medicine to cure his illness. Before the ascetic declares a rabbit's liver to be the best medicine, the ascetic describes various other medicines in the form called Yaksungga. In general, Yaksungga is sung in Jajinmori rhyme (eight-twelve time in Western music) and its content is complex. In addition to lyrics about medicine, Yaksungga is composed of lyrics describing the symptoms of various diseases, a diagnosis made by feeling the pulse, and the

administration of acupuncture. In a section on medicines, the lyrics of Yaksungga contains the names, as well as efficacies and the concoctions of the medicines, as well as the prescriptions of medicine for diseases. The names of the medicines contain names of herbal medicines, prescriptions, pills and folk remedies, while the lyrics on the concoction of the medicines states the methods of processing and the dosages. Lyrics on prescriptions present the particular prescription for each symptom. In addition, lyrics on the efficacies of medicines explain the properties (coldness or warmth), such as the tastes, including sourness, bitterness, sweetness, spiciness and saltiness, of each herbal medicine, as well as its efficacies.

'Yaksungga' is a type of mnemonic technique using song and rhymes to facilitate the memorization of the properties and efficacy of drugs. Mnemonic songs have been used in many areas of Oriental medicine, which includes the 'Poems of acupressure points' for the easy memorization of meridians and acupoint streams, and 'Tangdugagyol' for the composition of drugs. Yaksungga is mostly found in Sino-Korean Poetry with 4 words and 4 phrases or 7 words and 2 phrases for reciting, enabling the easy memorization of the properties and efficacies of drugs. The front phrase is referenced in Kwon-Whan In (The Korean Language Society). Yaksungga is a uniquely Korean art form.

In addition to Pansori lyrics, traces of Yaksungga can also be found in medical books during the late Joseon dynasty. <New Edition on Universal Relife (1799)> is a medical book presenting the initial form of Korean Yaksungga. Yaksungga was also documented in medical books, such as <Gains and Losses of Medical Orthodoxy (1868)>, <Compilation of Formulas and Medicinals Addendum (1885)>, <Dongmu's Posthumous Manuscripts> and <Double grinded Medical Mirror (1908)>. Despite the fact that Korean Yaksungga is referred to in <Recovery from All Ailments (1587)> in China, the contents were not copied, but modified in various forms, based on the pharmacognostic tradition of Korea. For example, only the names of medicines that were used only in Korea appear. Yaksungga was edited focusing on medicines that were easy to obtain, and new comments on those medicines were stated in detail. The front phrase is referenced in Chae-Kun Oh (Journal of Oriental Medical Classics). These reflect that Yaksungga had been carefully made suitable for the actual circumstances of the Joseon Dynasty.

#### **A part of Yaksungga's Lyrics in Sugungga**

The ascetic says Dragon King is severe disease because seven kinds of impairment. Please take this medicine. The prescription is Bojungtang. Bojungtang includes prepared rehmannia root five don (don is Korean unit of weight, 3.75 gram). The dosage of Crataegi Fructus, Asparagi Radix, Asari herba cum Radice, Cistanchis Herba, Alisma Rhizome and Papaveris Fructus are one don respectively. Glycyrrhizae Radix's dose is seven pun (pun is Korean unit of weight, 0.375 gram). All these medicine are one cheob (cheob is Korean unit of a wad of Korean medicine). Dragon King takes the medicine for about ten days. It's about twenty cheob. But this drug has no effect.

#### **DISCUSSION**

Ko (2016) recently reported that famous Korean traditional music, Arirang could have healing impact on Koreans. Sugungga is a Pansori that is so famous as to be included in five texts of Pansori in Korea. Pansori was enjoyed as a part of the universal culture of the ordinary people to yangban in the

late Joseon dynasty. The front sentence is referenced in Kwon-Whan In (The Korean Language Society). In Sugungga, Yaksungga plays a role in emphasizing the severity of the Dragon King's disease and in showing the seriousness of the situation by the description of how the ascetic tries to diagnose the king by feeling the pulse, by prescribing medicines and practicing acupuncture, all of which also raises the tension in the story. In addition, Yaksungga also has exaggerative references to human and toad urine as medicines for humor. At the beginning of Sugungga, Yaksungga brings about tension in the play and functions as a dramatic tool in a humorous way. As such, Yaksungga was partly referred to in Sugungga. Thus, it is speculated that Yaksungga was popular with the class that enjoyed Pansori to some extent during those times. In addition, through the expression of professional knowledge of medicine in a way that was easy to recite, Yaksungga allowed people to obtain and retain information about medicines.

Therefore, Yaksungga used in Sugungga functions not only as a dramatic factor of the play, but also as a tool to impart professional knowledge of medicine, not by books but by funny rhymes, which gave people the opportunities to apply the knowledge in useful ways.

Since herbal medicine-related contents were featured in a song to make it easy for remembering and utilizing, Yaksungga is a precious heritage, demonstrating how Korean poetry was enjoyed.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors have no conflicts of interest.

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