



## UNDERSTANDING KOREA: PANSORI, THE KOREAN BLUES

by  
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Today, K-pop is appreciated all over the world, and it is often asked why Korean performers are so good at singing and acting on stage. Without being directly related to it, [pansori](#), an ancient art form, might be one element that serves as a background phenomenon.

Pansori is a story performed, both spoken and sung, by a single performer, a *gwangdae*, or *sorigun*, woman or man, who usually stands and is accompanied by a drummer, a *gosu*, who sits down. The spoken part, called *aniri*, and the sung part, *chang*, are mixed in the performance, and some *gwangdae* may be particularly praised for their spoken performance, while others may be better known for their singing. The drum, a *buk*, is not of the type used to create deep and powerful resonance, but rather emits a kind of rattling sound. The drummer has a drumstick in one hand but also uses the other hand to create rhythmic sounds. The rhythm is very special and difficult to imitate. Both the drummer and the singer need several years of training, and what may look easy is in fact very difficult.

The singer and storyteller also uses various gestures, often with the help of a fan held in one hand. The words that come out of the singer's mouth are not just words; the way they are performed is just as important. If you sing about a waterfall, you should sound like a waterfall, and also make it clear whether it is a large or a small waterfall; if you sing about the wind, you should sound like the wind. Anger should be expressed angrily and sadness sadly. Sometimes it can be difficult to hear what is being said, but those listening should still understand the content through the way it is performed. The fan is also used to reinforce the story.

### Origins and Development of Pansori

The word pansori consists of two parts, *pan*, usually explained as the place where the song is performed, while *sori* means “sound.” Originally, pansori was performed in public places in rural areas, and it is not too bold to guess that pansori developed from the songs and rituals performed by shamans in the villages. But while the shaman's story was about the background to why a certain spirit behaved as it did, or why supernatural phenomena could be observed in a place, pansori was about ordinary people's everyday worries, love, sorrow, despair, or stories about a cunning rabbit that did not want to be sacrificed so that a disease in the royal family could be cured with its liver.

It is said that pansori was formed around twelve stories, called *madang*, but each story had many versions and interpretations depending on who performed them. These twelve stories were reduced to six during the nineteenth century, and today only five are performed. The stories could also be performed in other ways, not least as written prose, and their origin was probably in various folk tales. One of the five has its origins in a Chinese story, “The Battle of the Red Cliff” from the 14th-century novel “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” ([Sanguo yanyi](#)). Today's pansori differs in several ways from the original, but perhaps most notably in that the performances are much shorter. An original *madang* could take a whole day to perform. Today, only short pieces, often the most popular parts, are performed.

The first documented text of a pansori dates from 1754, but pansori probably began to be performed in its pure form as early as the end of the 17th century. Being a shaman was a respected and feared profession that was passed down within certain families. Others close to them could imitate their singing or develop the drumming that accompanied the shaman's singing and dancing. Both the shamans' songs and early pansori also contained spoken sections, which is why the transition from one to the other came quite naturally. In practice, however, pansori distanced



itself from the shaman's complex communication with the spirit world and instead borrowed expressions from both advanced Chinese poetry and popular humorous expressions and sayings. In this development, pansori acquired a complexity and required a certain level of education to be fully appreciated, which led to the *yangban* class (or elite) also becoming interested in the phenomenon.

Not surprisingly, different schools have formed within pansori. During the 19th century, there was talk of an eastern and a western school. Pansori performed east of the Seomjin River in Jeolla Province in southern Korea came to be called *dongpyeonje*, and that performed west of it, *sopyonje*. The eastern school was characterized by a distinctive, more powerful voice, while the western school was more plaintive and sorrowful. Another school, *junggoje*, or "middle school," was more melodic.

#### Pansori in Film and Modern Performance

[Sopyonje](#) is also the name of an internationally acclaimed film directed by Korean filmmaker Im Kwon-taek. The 1993 film is based on a novel by Lee Cheong-jun and is structured around flashbacks and an adult man's search for his half-sister. Most of the film takes place in the past, where two children are raised by their temperamental father, who teaches them pansori. The brother learns to play the drum, but is considered to lack talent for singing and is somewhat despised by his father for this. His sister, on the other hand, has a natural aptitude for singing, but in order to become truly good at pansori, her father believes that she needs a large dose of *han*, a feeling of bitterness and despair that has accumulated over a long period of time without finding any means of expression.

In order for his daughter to develop a true and deep *han*, he admits on his deathbed that it was he who had blinded her by tricking her into drinking a potion that caused blindness. Her brother had previously left home because their father was too violent and the family had no means of income. Later, after being separated for several years, her brother finds his sister at an inn, and is shocked to discover that

she is blind, but he accompanies her singing without revealing who he is. They sing and play all night before the brother sadly leaves the inn in the morning. When asked by the innkeeper if she knew who was playing the drums, she explained that she immediately recognized him by the way he played. The entire film is permeated by *han*.

Another successful film on the topic is *Hwimori* (1994).

Pansori today can be performed wherever there is an interested audience. A *gwangdae* often traveled to fishing communities and farming villages to sell his or her stories, or performed them at banquets for the wealthy, for example when someone in the family had passed the national exams. No special stage was needed. A straw mat laid out on the ground together with the drummer was enough, but the performer could also stand on a larger raised stage.

A performance, in earlier times as well as today, often begins with a short song to accustom the vocal cords of the *gwangdae* to what is to come in the main story. The important thing about pansori, however, is that there should be a good deal of suffering, and the stories generally have a sad content, even if there are also humorous elements, just like in a tragicomedy.

Pansori also has what researcher Cho Dong-il calls "episodic independence," meaning that it is performed in episodes, each with its own distinct character and special content. Often, the episodes contradict each other and it can be confusing if you analyze the piece as a whole. The moral of the story is important, but the episodes themselves illustrate the complexity and vicissitudes of life. Pansori contains great variations between high and low, rich and poor, and educated and uneducated. It was a very popular art form towards the end of the Joseon period and also contributed to the popularization of prose in Korean literature. It is still very popular, and a *gwangdae* can have idol status.

Today, Pansori is recognized as one of Korea's representative forms of intangible cultural

heritage and was inscribed in 2003 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Pansori is sometimes described as a Korean form of opera, but a much more accurate description is to call it a Korean form of blues. Without a certain amount of suffering, blues is not blues. The same applies to pansori.

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