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The Lotus Flower

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The Lotus Flower

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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And Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Television Radio & Film

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Abstract

“The Lotus Flower” is an animation based on the epic story of Shimchong, a girl who overcomes her poverty due to her devotion to her family and later marries into the royal family. This Cinderella story is a famous Korean tale that has been told and re-told for centuries. By bringing this story to an international audience, I hope to bring at least a small awareness of the cultural and historical value of Korea.

The script was adapted and written by me, taking various versions of the folktale into account as well as putting my own details

and embellishments to the story. The narrative was fully voice acted by students in the drama department of the College of Visual and Performing Arts. The animation was created using Adobe Flash, a professional animation tool.

The purpose of this animation is to entertain an audience as well as spark an interest in Korean history and culture. The story is reminiscent of the Disney princess stories, where the focus is on a female protagonist who is the center of the story. The animation can be enjoyed by a wide variety of people, both young and old. By bringing these elements to light, a greater appreciation for this often-ignored region of the world can be gained.

Table of Contents

Reflective

Essay.....1

Sources

Cited.....

..16

Summary.....

.....17

“The Lotus Flower” is an animated short film based upon a well-known Korean folktale. This re-telling of the classic story will allow those unfamiliar with the narrative to discover its beloved characters. The animation will depict the beauty and richness of traditional Korean culture.

This animation project was started in the fall of 2009. I began writing the script for “The Lotus Flower” even before my capstone proposal was submitted. The spring semester was dedicated towards casting and recording the voices of the characters. Since this would “finalize” the script, I decided to delay this until after my trip to Korea so that changes could be made reflecting my first-hand experience of the source of the story. The dialogue tracks were then assembled from the many takes of each line.

A goal that I had when creating this project was to make sure that no copyright infringements were incurred. It is unfortunately common for students to use music or footage in their work without permission from the copyright owners. It is slightly forgivable, since students do not have the huge budgets that major production studios can devote to a film, and it is used in an arguably educational way. However, I feel that it can be a bad habit, since in the world of

independent filmmaking one must clear everything used to avoid a lawsuit and legal fees. "The Lotus Flower" uses the work of others, such as in the sound effects, but I have used material that is in the public domain or that I have been granted a license to use.

The creation of the animatic, or storyboard set to the dialogue, began in the fall of 2010. My teachers and advisor were concerned about the length of the project and the lack of time I had to complete it, since I had not originally planned to graduate early. However, I decided that it was more important to tell the entire story, even in a limited fashion, rather than focusing on creating one small segment of beautifully rendered animation that did not mean as much to the audience. Animation production and then post-production was completed at the end of November of 2010.

The original story of Shimchong, or the story of the blind man's daughter, has as many variations as it has storytellers. While traditionally told as a *pansori*, or an epic sung as a musical performance, the story has been reinterpreted for the stage and the screen in widely varying ways ("Traditional Korean Music"). The basic traditional story tells of a girl named Shimchong who took care of her poor, blind father. One day, a monk tells her father that if he gives 300

bags of rice to Buddha, he will restore his eyesight. Shimchong's father promises these 300 bags, even though he cannot afford them.

Meanwhile, some merchants were eager to placate the Dragon King, who was sinking ships in the ocean. In order to pay the debt of 300 bags of rice, Shimchong offers herself as a maiden sacrifice in order to appease the angry dragon king. She was bound by the sailors and thrown into the ocean.

In the ocean, Shimchong is thankfully rescued by the dragon king in his underwater palace. She is eager to return to the surface due to her devotion to her father, so the dragon king transforms her into a lotus flower. The flower is discovered on land by a king, who admires its beauty. After taking the blossom home, the flower returns to Shimchong's true form. The king falls in love with her and marries her. As queen, Shimchong requests that a banquet be held for all the blind beggars of the kingdom, in hopes of finding her father. The two are happily reunited, and Shimchong's father's sight is miraculously restored.

When writing the screenplay for my adaptation, I strived to make a new version while staying true to the more traditional retellings. The father's desire for money in order to cure his blindness

has been replaced by Shimchong's drive to improve their situation by taking out a high-risk loan from a loan shark. I wanted to keep this element of greed, but by transferring it to Shimchong, giving her a more active part in her fate.

Shimchong's motivations for taking the loan are discussed with her friend, Jisoo, allowing us some insight into her actions. Jisoo is depicted as mischievous, suggesting a side to Shimchong that is risk-taking. As Jisoo is discovered shirking her duties by the neighborhood matron, Mrs. Kim, Shimchong also must eventually pay her dues to the thugs from which her loan came.

Her father's illness is a way to show how devoted Shimchong is to her father. Spending her hard-earned money for her father's health at the risk of being unable to pay her debts is her way of sacrificing herself, as in the original story. In some versions of the Shimchong story, she finds herself tossed in the ocean by force. I feel that the protagonist in my story is too strong to give up her life by will, plus I wanted to avoid the unpleasant topic of suicide.

I chose to depict the dragon king as a benevolent, yet irreverent character in contrast to the typical depiction as a wise, old king. His streak of rebellion speaks to his independence, as well as a reflection of

his ability to create deadly storms in the original Shimchong tale. The dragon king is in human form since according to mythology, the dragon king can shapeshift from dragon to human form (Xu). I chose to depict his attendants as small dragons, in order to emphasize his true form as a dragon.

The large turtle that the dragon king owns is inspired by the turtle ship, an iron-spiked ship with a large dragon head historically used by the Royal Korean Navy ("Korean-Arts"). I had seen a replica of a turtle ship, and I wanted to bring this element to my story, although as a real, giant turtle. This turtle adds history as well as some magical whimsy.

I chose to have a prince find Shimchong (as in some retellings of the original) rather than a king, so that the power balance between them would be slightly more even. I gave the prince an overbearing mother in order to give him someone with whom he can conflict. Although Korea traditionally has a patriarchal society, I wanted Shimchong and the prince to be equals to one another to reflect the growing feminism in Korean culture today.

The banquet is given for all the people, rather than just the blind, in order to bring all of the characters together at the end, not just

Shimchong and her father. By defeating the villain, her father is also given a stronger role in this version as a kind of bumbling rescuer.

Shimchong is not only devoted to her father, but her father is similarly doting on her.

One of the biggest changes I have made to the original is that Shimchong's father's sight is never restored. The emphasis on my version is not on her father's blindness, but rather how they must struggle through life. Through circuitous means, Shimchong eventually gives her father and herself a better life through her familial devotion. If not for her concern, Shimchong would have stayed in the ocean forever.

There exists a feature-length animation based upon the story of Shimchong called *Empress Chung*. A joint effort between North and South Korean animators, the film has won several awards for its unprecedented amount of collaboration between the nations. Although I read about the interpretations of the story the writer gave the folk tale in order to adapt it to a longer form, I decided not to watch this feature so that I can focus on creating my own version of the tale. However, this version helped to influence some of the decisions I made in my own production. Shimchong in this version is richer, to be more

realistic in terms of the rigid social stratification of the era. I decided to keep Shimchong as a poor beggar as in many versions of the story, so that her transformation through the lotus blossom is more apparent.

In order to give Shimchong's world an ancient feel, I primarily based the setting on kingdom of Silla, which existed from 57 BCE to 935 CE ("Life in Korea"). This also ties into how Shimchong was rescued from the ocean by royalty, since the capital of Silla was Gyeongju, near the coast. One can see the Silla influence on the royal outfits donned by the prince and the queen. However, I have intentionally muddied the time period from which it came. The characters wear clothes from varying time periods in order to depict Korea throughout time rather than a specific dynasty. Also, not much information survived from these earlier time periods, so it was necessary to include elements from later time periods.

After finalizing the script, the next step to bring the animation to life was to record the dialogue. I auditioned and casted students from the drama department at the College of Visual and Performing Arts. I chose to use mostly acting majors in order to give clarity to the storyline through the performance. The dialogue was recorded in studio using Pro Tools so that I could work with high-quality sound

files. The microphone used was a Neumann U 87, a professional microphone well-suited for speech recording. I placed a great importance on recording the dialogue because in film and video, bad sound is often more noticeable than bad picture.

Music plays a large part in establishing the setting of “The Lotus Flower.” Due to the lack of true Korean music in most stock music libraries, I created my own musical motifs to underscore the narrative. The use of poongmul, or Korean folk drumming, shows the main character’s upbringing as a peasant. The non-percussive score was created by Annie Youn, a Korean-American who was familiar with the story of Shimchong and composed from her own interpretation of the narrative. Both Western orchestral instruments and synthesized traditional Korean instruments such as the *gayageum*, *saepiri* and *daegeum* are used to evoke the atmosphere of authentic Korean music.

I had a very short amount of time to complete the animation, considering the length of the story. Animation productions with large staffs and ample amounts of time are able to create what is known as full animation, or a series of techniques which produce detailed and realistic visuals. Due to necessity as well as a fondness for the technique, I decided to use limited animation, which is a style marked

by fewer drawings and a stylized approach. The characters are often split into parts, so that if I had to create arm move I only had to redraw the arm while the rest of the character stayed static. Limited animation allows for much more rapid production of animation, allowing me to tell the entire story of Shimchong rather than a short segment.

Although my animation background is primarily in the creation of 3D computer animation, I chose to create “The Lotus Flower” in 2D. I felt that the look of 3D did not match the organic, traditional atmosphere of the world of Shimchong. It is very difficult for 3D animation to transcend its smooth, “digital” look. The flatness of the animation is closer to a traditional painting, which I wanted the work to echo.

The animation was created within the program Adobe Flash, an animation tool that became immensely popular as digital entertainment grew. This program was used due to its ability to produce animation quickly and easily. Originally for web productions, Flash still has a stigma as being a program used for crude, cheap animation for websites. However, the television animation industry has embraced the software, creating shows such as *Home Movies* and *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends*. Animators for television often

incorporate techniques from traditional cel animation in order to create a higher quality animation. I emulated this in order to create a more visually interesting piece.

My choice of a line with varying thicknesses is to mimic black-and-white wash paintings. Created using a brush and black ink, these paintings are synonymous with East Asia and can instantly evoke the setting. The black outlines of the characters were created with this aesthetic in mind in order to give the piece an “Asian” feel.

The backgrounds consist of a single painting by Clay Strange, an artist who emulates traditional Korean arts. I asked to use this painting so that Korean landscape painting can be evoked in the background of the animation. The setting is also established for each of the scenes by the use of the elements of the illustration.

“The Lotus Flower” is largely influenced by my trip to Korea. Through the Crown Award, I was granted the opportunity to experience the country through my own eyes. With the materials and experiences I gathered, I was much more able to weave authenticity into my project.

I visited a wide variety of Korean museums in order to observe actual artifacts from the history of Korea. The National Folk Museum

of Korea contained many of the everyday items that would be used in a historical context. I also studied artifacts from the kingdom of Silla at the Gyeongju National Museum. The pottery that Shimchong creates is based off of ancient Silla pottery. These museums helped to further my understanding of Korean history.

I chose to observe many Korean experiences in order to infuse some authenticity into my work. I stayed in an old Korean house built in the traditional style so that I might learn the architecture.

I visited a number of Korean parks in order to learn more about nature in Korea, a large part of my piece. The prince in “The Lotus Flower” has a large appreciation for gardens. In Korea, palace gardens were largely untamed, allowing one to fully connect to nature. Ponds, featuring lotuses, were often a feature. My visits to parks and gardens helped me to synthesize the landscape of Korea into my own piece.

I attended performances of Korean performing arts. Watching skilled players of Korean musical instruments was a great source of inspiration for the soundtrack of the animation. The performing arts, from the court dances to the folk performances, allowed me insight into the traditions that I must depict in my project.

I also wanted to gain a background of Korean illustration and animation. I visited the Seoul Animation Center to witness contemporary Korean art in the form of animation. I found a variety of styles, from soft and watercolor-like to stylized, exaggerated comic-book forms. These character and scene designs were great influences on how I created the design of my animation.

I watched a wide variety of Korean historical television dramas in order to gain insight on a Korean depiction of Korea. How Koreans viewed their own history in an entertainment setting was very important to me. The dramas *Queen Seondeok* and *The Ballad of Suh Dong* gave me a popular look into the Silla dynasty. *Emperor of the Sea* was a great inspiration for some of the costuming of the characters.

The summer before “The Lotus Flower” was to be completed, I was an intern at Turner Studios. The animation department of the company was a great help in allowing me to understand Flash animation and how to successfully use it in terms of television animation. Everything from character design to movement was directly influenced by how these professional animators create their work.

Traditional Korean paintings were a large influence on the style of the piece. The coloring is reminiscent of the soft colors found in the works of Hyewon, whose depictions of everyday life in his time can be seen in the opening credits of my animation. The rich dark lines of my animation were inspired by the works of Danwon, especially in the painting "Mudong," where a great sense of the movement can be seen in the line work.

One of my greatest influences was early television animation from the fifties and sixties. Animation had to be done cheaply and quickly for a show to survive the rapid climate of television. *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* is an example of a show where the audio and story were much more important than the choppy animation. These shows were great models on how technique can be limited, but the overall work is appealing. This concept allowed me to work on an animation without large teams of people or long amounts of time.

Modern television animation was also a great influence on how I worked on my animation. The workflow of the show *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* from script to sound to animatic to animation production directly impacted my approach in creating "The Lotus Flower." Animation for television often includes stock drawings of characters

and movement that is re-used repeatedly throughout the show. The animator needs only draw a character walking once, then re-use that animation sequence whenever that character walks. Special sequences unique to a scene are then animated specifically for that sequence. The mix of re-used and new animation is a hallmark of television animation from its inception until the modern era.

I also was interested in the work of popular Flash animators, whose work can be seen across the internet. Minimalism is often a feature of these works, seen in the works of Jonti Picking in his work *Weebl and Bob*. A hand-drawn look can be found in the obscure Japanese Flash animation *Bang Bang Bumpy*. The ability of Flash to create cinematic-quality work can be seen in *The Last of the Dashkin* by Adam Phillips, an ex-Disney animator who uses his traditional background to stretch the medium. Watching the works of these artists allowed me to see what was feasible as well as appealing in the world of Flash animation.

Unlike most Flash animation, which has a clean graphic style, my animation was drawn in a rough, sketchy way. This is deliberately to evoke the ancient feel of the story, as if it were rapidly sketched with a paintbrush in ink on a scroll. A computerized look would diminish

the context of the story in a visual way. I also wanted to distance myself from the idea that Flash creates animation that is artificial and sterile in form and style.

The animated film created mostly in Flash, *Sita Sings the Blues* was what originally inspired me to create a piece consisting of 2D animation. This feature was created by one artist, Nina Paley, over a period of several years. *Sita Sings the Blues* is a modern fusion of the *Ramayana* and the artist's own experience. Like *Sita Sings the Blues*, my animation is also a re-telling of a valued cultural text by an American. Whereas Paley's work is a *mélange* of styles and versions of the story, "The Lotus Flower" has a singular look and focus. I felt that changing the style would distract the audience from the narrative, and I wanted to achieve an overall unity in the piece. After watching this feature, I learned what the efforts of one artist can achieve.

It is nearly impossible to create an animated work without being influenced by the cultural juggernaut of Disney. The Disney films are a standard when creating a piece of narrative animation, especially when retelling a fairy-tale story, such as Shimchong's Cinderella-esque tale. The original idea that started this project was in reaction to a Disney film. I had read the announcement of the film *The*

Princess and the Frog, where Disney's first black princess would make her debut. I started thinking about all the cultures that still did not have a Disney princess representing them. Where was the Indian princess? Where was the Latina princess? Many cultures have stories of strong female characters, and I felt that they needed to be told. When remembering the story of Shimchong, I realized that she would make an excellent representative as a Korean princess.

The purpose of this animation is to visually depict a beloved folktale to a larger audience. Unlike the cultures of neighboring China and Japan, much of Korean culture is largely unknown outside of Korea. By re-telling this folk story, others can have the chance to hear it and be inspired by it. Nearly every Korean knows the story of Shimchong, and gaining common ground is a large part of connecting differing people together.

I hope to speak to an international audience who can be enriched by the cultural and historical content of my animation. The story was written to appeal to all ages so that it can be enjoyed by a large audience. By bringing this story to many people, I hope to inspire as many as possible to learn more about the world they live in.

The lack of Korean cultural information was apparent while working on this project. When I was searching for stock music to use as the soundtrack, I searched several professional libraries used by the entertainment and news industry. Finding music that evoked China and Japan was extremely easy, and I had hundreds of compositions to choose from. If I did find a single tune even tangentially relating to Korea, it was often part of an Asian-fusion work that encompassed many countries. The lack of music from Korea showed me how the cultural works of this nation were largely ignored and underappreciated. My animation can hopefully foster an awareness of the richness of historical Korean culture.

Personally, this animation was created due to my experiences as a member of Cheon Ji In, the Korean traditional drumming group of Syracuse University. Cheon Ji In plays poongmul as well as samulnori, an intricate style of drumming played sitting down. Before joining this group, I was largely unaware of Korean culture. After learning so much after four years playing *janggu*, a traditional Korean drum, I wish to share the knowledge I have gained through the Korean Cultural Outreach Network with others.

“The Lotus Flower” is an animation that can bridge cultural boundaries by telling a beloved folktale tied to its country of origin. By bringing people closer to the history of Korea, a more complex understanding of the region in contemporary society can be achieved. Through Shimchong’s story, Korea can be seen as much more than a region beset by political strife in the news.

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Summary

“The Lotus Flower” is an animated adaptation of a well-known Korean folktale, the story of Shimchong, the blind man’s daughter. In this animation, I aim entertain as well as depict through visuals and audio the rich culture of Korea. I hope to express what I’ve learned pursuing my Television degree by engaging in the timeless art of storytelling.

Shimchong’s story begins with her own self-sacrifice into the ocean for the benefit of her blind father. Fortunately, she is rescued by the Dragon King, who transforms her into a lotus blossom. Due to her beauty as a flower, a prince falls in love with her, and marries her when she is transformed back into a human. A royal banquet is held in order to find Shimchong’s father again. After a dramatic search, both Shimchong and her father are happily reunited.

Each retelling of the story is unique, and I have aspired to combine each of the common elements in my own. Like the storytellers who have come before me, I have added my own elements and twists on the story. In contrast to the traditional “passive” Shimchong, I have

created a stronger heroine who is more identifiable in our modern era. In most versions, Shimchong casts herself in the ocean in order to appease the Dragon King and gain enough money to restore her father's eyesight. In the version I have created, Shimchong is forced to drown by criminals as a result of giving her father all of savings. I hope to keep the original themes of the story while adding depth to the characters while writing the script.

The story portrayed in the animation is a universal one of devotion and self-sacrifice. All around the world, Cinderella stories of good people triumphing over circumstances reinforce values we have in our societies. Even though the story of Shimchong is unique, it is part of the rich tapestry that makes up the universal human experience.

In an animation, the entire setting is created from scratch. Unlike recording on film, every sound, color, and light must be manually placed, including even the sound of the air in the room. I chose to do an animation so that I can have the experience of creating every aspect of the world in which the story takes place.

The animation was created using Adobe Flash, a popular animation program prevalent in the industry. I hoped to create an ink-

style look to my characters using the program's drawing tools.

Although the animation is digital, the techniques I have used in the animation are more reminiscent of traditional 2D animation. Each character is composed of several layers, allowing motion to occur to some parts of the drawing while others stay static.

The visuals were inspired by traditional Korean painting styles. The opening sequence shows some examples of this style of art. The objects and outfits that are depicted in "The Lotus Flower" were based on photographs of source material taken while in Korea. I have strived to include as many Korean visual motifs as possible in order to lend authenticity to the piece.

Each character in the animation has dialogue voice-acted by mostly acting students in the College of Visual and Performing Arts. After an extensive casting process, I recorded every line from the script in the recording studios at Newhouse, directing the actors as needed. Sometimes the actors added motion to their performance, which was used when animating the characters. The hand movements that the villain used were originally the idea of the actor portraying him.

The music is a combination of live instruments recorded as performed by Syracuse University's Cheon Ji In, the Korean percussion

ensemble, and synthesized instruments. The melodies were composed by Annie Youn, the current president of Cheon Ji In. With the use of traditional Korean instruments, I have hoped to give the viewer a visit to the musical history of Korea.

The ambient sound used in the piece, such as birds chirping or wind rustling bamboo, is composed of stereo sound recording made in isolated Korean parks and temples. Even though it is a small detail that is easily overlooked, I wanted to give an almost unconscious aura of the real Korea.

Unfortunately, most Americans, myself included for a majority of my life, don't know much about Korean culture other than enjoying Korean food at a restaurant. Largely overshadowed by the powerful neighboring countries of China and Japan, most of the focus on Korea is on the political turmoil surrounding the DPRK, which is a shame. Through my project, I hope to shine a light on a culture which is almost largely ignored in this country compared to other areas in Asia.

Through entertainment and engaging the audience, this film might inspire some to broaden their cultural horizons. Even though I lived in a city with a large Korean population, all I knew about Korea was kimchi, the national dish. When I joined Cheon Ji In out of sheer

curiosity, I learned and appreciated so much more. Knowledge truly can open doors, and through this project I aim to share some of the richness that I have gained through my time here at Syracuse.