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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Goethian Name as Korean Commodities

Dr. Kyung Lee Gagum

Department of World Languages and Cultures, MSU Texas, USA

Corresponding Author: Dr. Kyung Lee Gagum, E-mail: [lee.gagum@msutexas.edu](mailto:lee.gagum@msutexas.edu)

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| ABSTRACT

The Lotte Group is a diverse conglomerate empire in the South Korean business market, with businesses and investments in multiple sectors located in South Korea, other Asian countries, and the US. It is becoming a global market leader in the world economy; in fact, Forbes magazine ranked the Lotte Group's retail division as the world's number three department store in 2013. The focus is the proper name of this group, Lotte. The founding group's president, Kyuck-Ho Shin, has stated that he wished to channel his admiration for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe by branding his merchandise, supermarket chain, and hotels with the name Lotte, the diminutive form of Charlotte, in a direct reference to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Consumers encounter the Lotte logo daily, and this feminized encounter pacifies any possible suspicion that a giant corporation may indeed be engulfing the Korean citizens' physical and linguistic landscape. Drawing on communication studies and linguistic landscape studies, the focus is on the role of the proper name "Lotte" in South Korean advertising to uncover the multivalent, mythic power of German classical female archetypes in contemporary Korean circulation.

| KEYWORDS

Lotte Group, South Korea, Germany, Goethe, linguistic landscape

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### 1. Introduction

I have no name for it. The feeling's all there is:  
The name's mere noise, and smoke-what does it do  
But cloud the heavenly radiance?  
-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (*Faust I*)

The Lotte Group is a diverse conglomerate empire in the South Korean business market, with holdings that include businesses and investments in multiple sectors. The Lotte Group was founded in Japan but expanded to South Korea, other Asian countries, and the US. This Korean retailer is becoming a global leader in the world economy. In fact, according to Andre Koh (2015), Forbes magazine ranked the Lotte Group's retail division as the world's number-three department store in 2013 (p.24). The proper name of this group, namely Lotte, is the focus of this research. As the quote above from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe states, a name is composed of multiple human senses. According to Business Korea's special report "Home away from home"(1993), the important matter is the feeling that comes from the name, and it was the feeling of admiration for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that Kyuck-Ho Shin, founding president of the Lotte Group, wanted to channel when he branded his merchandise, supermarket chain, and hotels with the name Lotte. The proper name Lotte is a diminutive form of Charlotte, who is the female protagonist in *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*). The focus of this research is on the role of the proper name Lotte in the linguistic landscape of advertising. Important to point out here is that Lotte is not a brand name and is identified as a proper name due to its unique connection to Goethe's work. Also, it is the name of the company and designates the company, as opposed to a common noun, which refers to any one of all things. The main focus of this research is how that proper name plays a role in uncovering the multifunctional aspects of the name and the connotation associated with it. Thus, in this research, the role of the proper name Lotte is investigated through the linguistic landscape of advertising to uncover the multifunctional aspects of the

name and the connotation associated with it. This research uses Landry and Bourhis' (1997) definition of a linguistic landscape, which includes elements of the digital landscape, such as the company's website, since the "language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p.25).

The concept of the linguistic landscape will be discussed as it relates to the notion of the following. First, a brief history of the Lotte Group, naming its company after Lotte from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and the motto developed by the company. Second, a public art piece, "Rubber Duck Project," was financed by the Lotte Group and drew both positive media coverage and negative critique. Taken together, the visibility and salience of the Lotte logo in South Korea are explored to present the informational and symbolic functions of the logo as a marker of the soft power of the Lotte Group's image inhabiting the territory of the linguistic landscape.

## **2. The History, the Name Lotte, and the Motto**

Kyuk-Ho Shin encountered the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* during his study in Japan in the 1940s. He admired Goethe's work, and to display his admiration; he named his company Lotte. The Lotte Group was founded in June 1948 as a confectionery manufacturer in Japan. According to Schlothauer and Wilhaus (2016), Shin expanded his business to South Korea with the company's early profit; thus, the Lotte Group has two headquarters, one in Seoul and one in Tokyo. Since its inception, the Lotte Group has expanded to hotels, supermarkets, and retail stores with locations in 19 countries. The Lotte Group is a conglomerate business structure controlled and administered by one family; a system known in South Korea as *chaebol*. *Chaebol* literally means a group or party of wealth. Schlothauer and Wilhaus (2016) explain that the system is associated with a management style based on Confucian values and influenced by family relations as well as relations among alumni of schools, regions, and the government (p.241). A single *chongsu*, which translates to a general head, makes the final corporate decisions for the entire firm. Kyuk-Ho Shin, as the founder and *chongsu*, decided to name his firm Lotte, which is the name of a female protagonist. By choosing Lotte, Shin connected the connotation of a Western female figure to his firm. He even provides an explanation for the name on his various companies' websites. He also uses the name Lotte as a major component of the group's advertising through its motto.

According to German Studies scholar Wee-Kong Koh (2007), Goethe's work *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is his most read and admired work in South Korea. In fact, according to anthropologist Choong Soon Kim (2002), Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was very popular among young Koreans during the 1960s. It was due to having read Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* that Shin was granted admission to a distinguished law school in Korea. He scored the highest among all applicants on the entrance exam due to a passage from *The Sorrows of Young Werther* that he translated from German to Korean for the test. This presents just one example of the significance of knowing German in South Korea, but also of having read *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Based on Kim's and Koh's research, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is not only the most read German work in South Korea but also one of the most important. Therefore, by presenting the origin of the company's name for anyone to see, the Lotte Group not only displays knowledge of western literature but specifically targets the German literary figure, Goethe. On the website for the Lotte Group in Japan, the origin of the company's name is provided in English.

Company name "LOTTE" comes from Charlotte, the heroine in the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, written by a notable German author Goethe. LOTTE envisions to be loved by everyone by enriching their lives, just like she has done (Lotte Co, 2022).

The above statement from the Lotte Group informs the reader of the origin of its name and its vision; thus, the reader recalls this information when encountering the logo since the Lotte logo is placed on all merchandise and on various Lotte subsidiaries, such as supermarket and hotel chains, and even on a Lotte Group's movie theater. The logo is also printed on chewing gums, stationaries, candies, and pastries, which are purchased and then brought to the consumer's private space. The reader is surrounded by the presence of the logo, and the statement takes the role of an omnipresent being. Then it educates the reader about the origin of the nickname for Charlotte, namely Lotte, and introduces her as the heroine of the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Herein lies the mortal fallacy of the Lotte Group's statement: Lotte is the catalyst for the suicide of Werther, the novel's protagonist. Werther falls in love with Lotte, and he describes her as the embodiment of unattainable love and desire, which leads to his self-destruction. Werther is even warned not to fall in love with Lotte since she is already taken. Thus her love is unattainable to other men. By calling Lotte the heroine rather than the source of Werther's downfall, the Lotte Group repurposes her original position to place her on the same plane as Werther. This didactic statement aims to expose the significance of the nickname in relation to the German author. Once this statement grasps the attention of the target reader, a local customer, a connection to Western literature is established, especially since the Lotte logo is pronounced the German way without any Korean pronunciation interference. Also, with this statement, an endearment is revealed and suggested since Lotte is a nickname. By using the diminutive form of the name Charlotte, the Lotte Group connects intimately with their customers by assuming the role of a small, harmless girl named Lotte in order to disguise the reality of a conglomerate corporation taking over their lives through their products and

shopping centers. The Lotte Group also complies with the desire of Koreans, whose goal is to access Western goods. The motto, or catch phrase, is also explained and suggests that everyone shares the eternal love of Charlotte. By taking part in the act of knowing about the company's namesake, the reader is given a sense of belonging to the Lotte Group and also to the group of Charlotte's admirers not only in South Korea but worldwide.

With the explanation of the origin of the group's name, the Lotte Group establishes a connection with its customers and presents itself as a desirable girl from a western literary work—a connection based upon the assumption of shared emotion. The group knows that consumers encounter its logo on a daily basis; to soothe any possible threat of a giant corporation overtaking the consumer's physical and linguistic landscape, the Lotte Group presents itself as akin to the beholder's sweetheart. The logo symbol 'Lotte' itself is also non-threatening due to its simplicity of bold, standard letters. The simplicity of form is matched by the colors of the logo. When the logo is displayed on the Lotte Group's website, it is either red or white, depending on the background. These are also the standard colors of the logo displayed in supermarkets and retail stores. Any sub stores will first display the Lotte logo, then its specialization, such as Lotte Department Store or Lotte Mall. Lotte Group also operates an amusement park named Lotte World. The color schematic may present a neutral image that is not invasive; thus, it is rather acceptable and easily recognized since all of the Lotte Group's subdivisions use the same logo. This leads to fast name recognition and easy accessibility. But note that red and white are colors shared by both the Japanese flag and the Korean flag.

According to Schlothauer and Wilhaus (2016), the logo sign for the Lotte Group "serves as a representative symbol that reminds consumers of the values associated with the company (p.248)." The success of this kind of image is displayed by the Lotte Group's lucrative expansion and the positive infiltration into almost all aspects of South Korean everyday life. The Lotte Group continues to present this image of Lotte globally in its expansion into other Asian countries, Europe, and the United States. The success of the conglomerate Lotte Group is credited to its family-controlled industry, which is first and foremost Confucian business values. The cores of the Confucian values are incorporated into the group's management system: centrally important are hard work, respect for education and family prestige, and heritage. The Confucian value also dictates that a female may not be the head of the family, which was a law abolished only in 2008 in South Korea. The Confucian-centered *chongsu* of the Lotte Group, who has been since its inception a male, gave his firm a female diminutive name, which presents an image of intimacy with consumers and innocence; thus, the group's invasion of the private and public spheres was not only a success but also took place without any resistance.

### 3. Rubber Duck Project Financed by the Lotte Group

A friendly yellow duck in the shape of a child's bathtub rubber duck toy, with an orange beak and two small black circles within white dots for eyes, towering in a massive size of 16 and a half meters and weighing 7 tons, adorned the unpleasant construction site of the Lotte World Tower in Seoul, South Korea, from October through November 2014. The Lotte Group did not publicly state this, but the Lotte Group utilized the innocent image of a rubber duck in the linguistic landscape of downtown Seoul to distract the residents from the ongoing construction, which was met at first with resistance by the locals. The Lotte Group often employs the strategy that works best for the company, which is using a western object and presenting it as an innocent product, such as the company's name Lotte, thus displaying soft power. Joseph Nye (1990) defines soft power as the way in which "one country gets other countries to want what it wants ...in contrast with the hard or command the power of ordering others to do what it wants (p.154)." The company convinces the public to want what it wants, which is to communicate with the Lotte Group, thus redirecting their attention away from the construction site to the rubber duck. In his article "The Seoul Rubber Duck Project: An Ideological Dichotomy," Andre Kok (2015) states that this childhood connection, rubber duck as an artwork, was used to communicate between the Lotte Group and local residents and to divert them from the construction. Since its 1970 television debut on Sesame Street, the rubber duck has become an icon of childhood happiness and comfort around the world. And a rubber duck is an object which is not left behind once people enter adulthood. It is an image that connects adults to the nostalgic simplicity of childhood in a way that temporarily draws them away from adulthood. The Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman created the rubber duck sculpture, and according to Koh (2016), Hofman makes it clear that "the sculpture is intended to provide some sort of relief or escape from the realities faced by those who view it (p.29)." The Lotte Group had a variety of choices of art projects to display close to the construction site, but by using a childhood object, the company attempted to sidetrack the locals from the building site.

The Lotte Group utilizes western iconic goods to distract its customers from its own invasion of their linguistic landscape. With its proper name, the Lotte Group connected to itself a feeling of admiration for the legendary Goethe's work; and with the rubber duck project, the Lotte Group attempted to provide a distraction from the environmental complications--in the form of sink holes—that formed in and around its construction area during the construction of Lotte Mall and Tower. The artist of the rubber duck project clearly states that the sculpture is intended to provide some sort of relief or escape from the realities faced by those who view it, with no political ties or messages. Yet the Lotte Group's financial support for the art project visually attempts to disguise the noticeable environmental destruction created by its construction project. The diminutive form of the name Lotte, combined

with the rubber duck, presents the Lotte Group not only as innocent but also infantilizes the image of the large economic powerhouse. The group's choice of western goods to represent itself serves two purposes. First, by branding the group's products and company with the diminutive form of a western female character's name, the Lotte Group distinguishes itself from other Asian products, thus providing access to the desirable West by virtue of the company's name. Second, the Lotte Group displays South Korea's connectivity to the West by sponsoring a Dutch artist with the ultimate goal of providing an escape from the reality of Asian daily life under the guise of a western cultural artifact.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In sum, the Lotte Group connects to Western literature with its company's proper name, but also through Western culture, to display to its customer that the Lotte Group's will to fulfill his or her desires of attaining western goods because the company is globally connected to both East and West. The company also attempts to disguise its intention through western entertainment in the form of literature and art in an attempt to lighten the consumer and resident's mood when, in fact, the group means serious business through global expansion. The mortal fallacy, however, lies in the proper name of Lotte, which foreshadows a doom: the environmental destruction caused by the Lotte Group. The construction project of the new Lotte mall in downtown Seoul destroyed the surrounding environment, sort of like how Lotte drove Werther to suicide. Both are destructive endeavors but disguised by love/passion and youth/innocence.

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