

The Folktale “Hokpuri Yongkam” and the Visual Representation of the Korean Dokkaebi

abstract

The *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi* are mythological characters in Japan and Korea. The question of the originality of the *Dokkaebi* has been raised because, although the *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi* are certainly different in many respects, the image of the *Dokkaebi* today is described as being identical to that of *Oni*. A prime example cited is an illustration for the folk story “Hokpuri Yongkam” [The Old Man with a Lump] in school textbooks during the colonial period (1910–1945). Almost all scholars insist that this illustration is evidence of an affection for Japanese colonial unification ideology and that the image thus has to be corrected urgently. Moreover, some of them also insist that the folktale itself is Japanese. In this paper, I want to show another possibility for the origin of this folktale and its visual representation of the *Dokkaebi*.

keywords

Dokkaebi, *Oni*, representation, visualization, colonial period

Introduction

The current visualization of the *Dokkaebi* has one or two horns and a long tooth, wears tiger-skin pants and carries a magic stick. While there are variations on this appearance, the horns and tiger-skin pants fundamentally symbolize the *Oni*, as well (Yanagida, 1951) and are used in many designs of *Oni*-based characters.

The *Dokkaebi* is a beloved symbolic icon of Korean culture, showing up in animation, comics, soap operas, and movies. It is also used in shop and product names, and even as a metaphor in everyday language.

Since 1990, the theme of Japanese colonial influence on the *Dokkaebi* has been debated in the Korean media—an argument that continues to this day. In the words of Jong-dae Kim (1995), “The well-known actual visualization of the *Dokkaebi* is very similar to the Japanese *Oni*. The *Oni* is a kind of monster in Japanese folktale such as Korean *Dokkaebi* but certainly different in many respects. This is evidence that the colonial period is still influencing Korea, which has to be corrected urgently.”

This problem of cultural and visual origins became the subject of debate in 2007 when the South Korean Ministry of Education and Science was gathering illustrations for school textbooks, leading to the ministry even holding a debate about the issue. (Yoon, 2007)

Past research on the *Oni* and *Dokkaebi* has referred to Korea's and Japan's shared folkloric heritage and monster legends. This visual unification of mythical characters from two different cultures described above is viewed by many scholars as primarily influenced by

colonial unification ideology. Many Korean scholars support this perspective, but others have discussed their view that this scholarship may be inappropriately based on an anti-colonial or nationalistic point of view. While many researchers, authors, and artists have shared their positions on this subject, the debate about the originality of the *Dokkaebi*'s representation is still ongoing and hotly contested.

1. Discourse on the representation of the *Dokkaebi*

Although the *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi* are different in many respects, a number of scholars describe the contemporary image of the *Dokkaebi* as being identical to that of the *Oni*. However, Kang-hyun Joo first mentioned doubts about the *Dokkaebi* representation's colonial-era origins, stating that, "the representation of the *Dokkaebi* has an unclear relationship to that of the Japanese *Oni*." (1995) Jong-dae Kim pointed out that there is no literature regarding the Korean visualization of the *Dokkaebi*, so it is impossible to suggest its 'true image'; the only information that one can obtain is from the folktales themselves.

There is another reason for challenging the dominant story of colonial unification ideology. A prime example used to back this theory up are the illustrations for the ancient story "Hokpuri Yongkam" [The Old Man with a Lump], which appeared in illustrated elementary school textbooks in Japan, and subsequently in Korea, during the Japanese colonial period. This very first illustration, from a 1923 textbook, is the most important example cited. In it, the *Dokkaebi* looks like the Japanese traditional mask known as "Hannya." Scholars, including Jong-dae Kim, insist that this picture is evidence of affection for Japanese colonial cultural policy. [Figure 1]

However, a second example from the colonial period is an illustration from a school textbook in 1933; in this visualization, the mask shown is drawn in the traditional Korean style. [Figure 2] This illustration is, effectively, a Korean *Dokkaebi* illustration. School textbooks were an especially effective medium for such images at that time, so these pictures may have affected other illustrations of the *Dokkaebi*. It is, however, difficult to argue that the rendering of the *Dokkaebi* in the Japanese style was intended colonial policy, because there exists this 1933 example of an illustration that does not look at all like Japanese *Oni*.

Additionally, in the colonial ideology argument regarding the *Dokkaebi* and the *Oni*, a further issue exists: the fact that both Korean and Japanese versions of "Hokpuri Yongkam" [The Old Man with a Lump] were cross-translated throughout the period.

"Hokpuri Yongkam" is a very popular story in both Korea and Japan, published frequently

¹ This is a tale about an old man who had a lump on his cheek. One day, the old man climbed a mountain to gather firewood. When it began to rain, he sought shelter in an empty house nearby, singing a song to dispel his fear. Some *Dokkaebis* nearby enjoyed his song. The chief *Dokkaebi* said, "You are a wonderful singer. Where did the song come from?" The old man joked, "It's coming from my lump." The *Dokkaebi* took his lump away and gave him treasure in return. When the old man returned home and told his wife the story, another old man (who also had a lump on his cheek) overheard it. That night, the second old man went to the same house and waited. Soon, many *Dokkaebis* began to gather. He too sang a song, but because he sang poorly, the *Dokkaebis* became angry and attached the first man's lump to his other cheek.

in both countries. During the colonial period, many children's books as well as world folk tales were published. Thus, the *Dokkaebi* was translated into the *Oni* in Japan, and the *Oni* was translated into the *Dokkaebi* in Korea. This may contribute further to the belief that the two creatures are identical.

2. The origin of the folktale “Hokpuri Yongkam”

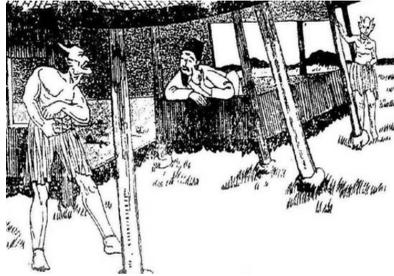


Figure 1.(1923)
Joseon Language



Figure 2. (1933)
Joseon Language

Jong-dae Kim has insisted that the famous folktale “Hokpuri Yongkam” also came to Korea from the Japanese in the colonial period through school textbooks. Kim backs his argument by stating there is no proof of this story existing in Korea prior to the colonial period, and that all versions of the story are published after 1910. In Kim’s opinion, the false image of the *Dokkaebi* is actually the *Oni*, and was implanted to encourage the ideology of unification during colonization. However, a lack of written evidence does not imply that there could not have been oral transmission of the folktale. Furthermore, Yong-ui Kim, though agreeing with the argument that the visual image of the *Dokkaebi* was implanted in schoolbooks during colonization for the goal of unification, also brings up, along with Jeong-hee Chang, the folktale cross-translation complication mentioned above. (Kim, 1999; Chang, 2012)

In addition, there is a book called “The Green Fairy Book” edited by Andrew Lang, who was a writer, folklorist, and anthropologist in the UK not mentioned by any of the above scholars. The book contains a very similar story to “The Man with a Lump” called “The story of Hok Lee and the Dwarfs.” This book claims the story was collected in China but it is hard to find any difference between this story and the ones from Japan and Korea. However, this story might be the very first literary document of the Korean version of the folktale “Hokpuri Yongkam.” Usually, the name of a folktale protagonist holds some meaning with respect to the character. This is a very rare example of a specific name without any deeper character meaning. This got my attention. The most interesting thing is his name. His name is Hok Lee and this is the name in the title. In Korean, “the Man

with a lump” is Hokpuri. The word “hok” means lump and “puri” means person in Korean; “yongkam” means old man in Korean. The full title of this story, Hokpuri Yongkam, thus means “the old man with a lump.” It is thought that this book was published in 1892, and was based on material from 1892 or earlier.

Figure 3. (1892)
The Story of Hok
Lee and the Dwarfs



In Figure 3, an old man with swollen cheeks dances, surrounded by dwarfs. This figure does not look Korean, but as the author is a Westerner, he may not have been able to distinguish between Chinese and Korean pictorial characteristics at the time when he selected artwork for his volume. Another example, the first illustration of a Japanese man, was depicted very similarly to this man in “Punch.” The weekly satirical magazine “Punch” was first published in 1841 in the UK and used many satirical images that attracted wide international attention. The representation of a Japanese man in illustrations of Punch and Hok Lee is very similar. Both have a long knife and a fan and are wearing similar clothes. (1858) In other words, it is possible that the oral story from the old Korean tale was transmitted to the West, and that the “story of the old man with lump” became the “Hokpuri story,” thus providing evidence of a Korean version of the story prior to the colonial period.

3. Un-drawing culture and drawing culture

Despite the presence of these illustrations from the colonial period, few visual images were created in Korea for a long time during the post-colonial period. There was no attention paid to visual images of monsters and there were only a few children’s picture books. More frequent creation of the *Dokkaebi* image only began to occur in the 1990s. Thus, I believe that there is a more realistic reason why these two monsters have similar visual images. (Bak, 2012)

Why do Koreans not draw the *Dokkaebi*? The *Dokkaebi* is a frightening image in folk religion—a being between god and human, possessing superpowers. There is a possibility that these illustrations were meant to refer to Japanese *Oni* because they did not have a reference image of their own. During the Joseon Dynasty (which lasted approximately five centuries, until 1910) visual culture was regarded as vulgar or only for children. In Confucianism, which is the central philosophy of Korea, there is a teaching that “men of virtue do not mention inconceivable things,” so it was once taboo to depict demons or evil beings in art. “The existence of things whose existence cannot be proved” was not recognized, which means that evil beings such as monsters—even those worshipped as folk gods—were not evoked in a material way. This kind of Confucian thinking on the part of the upper class had a strong impact on the common people, as well.

Conversely, Japan has had a rich history of images of monsters and gods. Given the vacuum of visual culture created by the Confucian cultural conditions described above, it would not be surprising that Japanese imagery of the *Oni* would be drawn upon in certain illustrations of the *Dokkaebi*.

A further factor of shared Buddhist imagery may deepen the explanation of the acceptance of the Japanese *Oni* image in Korean culture. *Oni* images are based on Buddhist visual images; these Buddhist images exist in much the same form in both Korea and Japan, which imported Buddhism and Confucianism from China and developed their own styles of both philosophies. The Korean *Dokkaebi* is a totally different being from a Buddhist demon; however, because Korean Buddhist painting contains images similar to that of the Japanese *Oni*, this could have led to the easy acceptance of the *Oni* image by Koreans.

Conclusion

This paper examined the theory that “Hokpuri Yongkam” and the visual representation of the *Dokkaebi*'s origin is not Korean but Japanese. First, this paper has discussed a *Dokkaebi* image from the colonial period that is not Japanese in origin and bears Korean characteristics. Second, the originality of an oral legend will always be difficult to pinpoint, but this paper has presented new evidence to prove the possibility of a Korean version of the story before the colonial period. This paper has also argued that Korean cultural characteristics under Confucianism may have created a 'visual vacuum' into which more readily-available Japanese monster imagery easily entered into Korean culture – especially given that Japanese *Oni* shared Buddhist artistic characteristics shared by both Korean and Japanese culture.

To seek to uncover “authenticity” in the image of the *Dokkaebi* of Korea is a valid pursuit. However, it would be inappropriate to deny the complexity of the constellation of influences on the visualization of the Korean *Dokkaebi* – including those influences stemming from the colonial era. It would also be inappropriate to repudiate those images wholecloth, rather than recognizing that elements of Korean culture were present in folklore published during that era and that the question of influence is a complicated one. It is, therefore, not productive to limit the visualization of the *Dokkaebi* to an idealized point of view.

This kind of debate is an ideological conflict, caused by specifics within Korean society, a society that still depends upon the authority of literature but at the same time tries to be a society in which visual images are the leading cultural output

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