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Korean Folklore and Implications for Korean American Women

We are shaped by what our parents and grandparents impart to us through story. Our very identity formations rest upon traditions embedded into collective memory. Korean folklore, the shaman's sacred text, once celebrated feminine power, but through patriarchal reinterpretations and the emergence of new Confucian folklore traditions, the shaman and the women who resemble her in independence, influence, and sexual liberation are no longer venerated but vilified. Though the primordial shaman is long forgotten, Korean folklore remains a part of Korean American women's patriarchal recollection. By examining the narratives of Korean American women¹ and the folk traditions of the filial woman, spirit, and fox, this paper argues that Korean folklore continues to disseminate Confucian and patriarchal values into the lived experiences of Korean American women, warning against the emulation of her shaman counterpart.

Shamanism:

Shamanism is key in Korean folk tradition. The female shaman is an indigenous Korean religious symbol responsible for using folklore to enter sacred space "... bring[ing] its wisdom back to the profane world".² The concept of the honorable and sacred shaman is lost among Korean American women. Though interviewees admitted to

¹ All names have been changed.

² Jonghyun Lee, "Shamanism and its emancipatory power for Korean women," *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work* 24, no. 2 (May 2009): 186-198. doi:[10.1177/0886109909331756](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109909331756). [accessed March 5, 2010]

having little to no official knowledge of the shaman, they harbored strong feelings against her. Interviewees referred to shamans as “not to be trusted”, “low class”, and “godless”. There was no mention of her historic spiritual and political importance to community and nation. No remembrance of her life as an example of female agency. No familiarity with her traditionally honored independence. Why this biased perspective?

Folklore transmitted to Korean American women encourages the internalized assertion that innate feminine spiritual and sexual agency carries with it the potential to destroy society, therefore necessitating taming through male dominance. These conventions hark back to the Yi Dynasty(1392-1910) when Korean oral tradition, a legacy of female and shamanistic folk ritual, was turned on its head. The era ushered in a thorough Confucian transformation of Korean society as well as the later introduction of a syncretic Confucian Christianity. These religious changes resulted in the simultaneous repression of female spiritual authority and the demonization of the shaman. The shaman became the ultimate symbol of the horrifyingly anti-Confucian and later anti-Christian woman. The traditionally subtle women’s ‘Yin’ was dark and explosive in the Shaman. She threatened Confucian society with her propensity for hysteria, ‘nolda’ or play with the dead, predictions, and spirit possession³. She transformed from a goddess figure into a symbol of living shame immortalized in a new tradition of folklore. It is *this* version of Korean folk tradition that Korean American women remember today.

Filial Women:

3 Laurel Kendall. *Shamans, Housewives, and Other Restless Spirits: Women in Korean Ritual Life*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, Studies of the East Asian Institute, 1985) 24.

The Filial Woman is prevalent in Korean folklore. She is the antithesis of the wild and shameful shaman. Her life adheres to the Confucian trajectory of ownership, first by father, then husband, and lastly as a widow, by her son. Korea's most popular filial women stories reflect similar aspects of Confucian womanhood: filial in death, afterlife, and rebirth. These stories expose Korea's patronage of female self-sacrifice, an ideology still submerged in the identities of Korean American women.

Women internalize filial stories divergently from men. Heinz Insu Fenkl, a Korean American folklorist, recalls that while he and his sister heard the same stories growing up they perceived them differently. While he heard stories of heroic men aided by clever wives or devoted mothers, she heard stories of women who endured insurmountable hardship to purchase a small bit of joy for fathers, husbands, and their children⁴. Many interviewees recalled stories venerating filial women. Usually the filial woman dies at the hands of a wicked individual and her sacrifice prompts a deity, community, or family to immortalize her. When asked what types of morals they remembered from this genre a significant number of interviewees made connections with what they understood as the Korean Christian community's expectation of women. Anna, 35, recalls fondly the story of Shim-Cheong who saves her blind father by sacrificing her life, "Shim-Cheong is like the women I see at my church...they sacrifice...for everyone else's well being. I admire them."⁵ Anna's interpretation and internalization of Shim-Cheong's filial role is affirmed by her patriarchal experiences in her Korean American

⁴ Heinz Insu Fenkl, *Korean Folktales: In the Old, Old Days, When Tigers Smoked Tobacco Pipes*. (Bo-Leaf Books, January, 2008).

⁵ Anna, interview by author, November 15, 2011.

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religious community. Women's notion of self and gender within family, society, and religious tradition are developed, internalized, and cemented through stories grounded in the still Confucian Korean American community experience.

The Spirit Woman:

Spirit women stories warn Korean American women to dutifully uphold Confucian traditions of marriage and motherhood. Without husbands spirit women wander ancestor-less, unable to rest, creating havoc for the living⁶; their spirits seeped in resentment posing threats not only to their natal families but society at large. The Yi Dynasty's patrilineal culture deemed women as persons destined for marriage, a 'chul-gah-weh-in' or 'going away foreigner'. Yet even in marriage, she was denied official acceptance into her husband's family. Only through death could she become a permanent member of her husband's ancestral home.⁷ If a woman died before marriage she became a transient spirit. As Fenkl puts it, "...the most frightening ghosts are the ghosts of young women who have not fulfilled their feminine potential"⁸. These woeful single women tales mirror the fear and suspicion surrounding the shaman's traditionally unmarried status. Furthermore, due to social stigma, Yi Dynasty shamans often found themselves disowned by their natal families. Her unmarried and family-less state overflowed with destructive potential turning an ordered society on its ear.

6 Kilsŏng Ch'oe, "Male and Female in Korean Folk Belief," *Asian Folklore Studies* 43, no. 2 (1984), 227-233. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.libraries.claremont.edu/stable/1178011>. [accessed March 10,2011]

7 Ibid., Pg 227-228.

8 Heinz Insu Fenkl, "Fox Wives and other Dangerous Women," The Endicott Studio, <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/fordangr.html> [accessed March 20, 2011]

The affliction and fears of wandering spirit women are echoed in the lived experiences of Korean American women. Women who attain success materially yet remain unattached garner suspicion and social stigma like the Shaman before her. Sylvia, 28, laments her single status, “Even though I’m successful...I’m not married...so my mom is embarrassed...as long as I don’t give her grandchildren I’m not doing right...”.⁹ Sylvia’s perception of her familial value and identity being tied to matrimony and motherhood mirrors what folk tradition taught her about the dangers of living outside Confucian societal order. She goes on to state, “In the stories I remember, all the women were married off as a reward...I never heard stories where women in my situation were the heroes.”¹⁰

In addition to the values of matrimony and motherhood, Korean American women also observe and learn Confucian principles regarding the body and sex implicitly through the transmission of spirit women folk traditions. The woodcutter and fairy folktale is one such story that most interviewees remembered. A woodcutter saves a deer from a hunter and in return the deer informs the woodcutter about a lake where fairies bathe. He instructs the woodcutter to steal a set of undergarments to prevent the fairy from returning home. Predicting the woodcutter’s pending infatuation, the deer instructs him to make sure the fairy bears three children before he confesses his misdeeds. After the fairy gives birth to two children, the woodcutter returns her undergarments. The fairy

⁹ Sylvia, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

¹⁰ Sylvia, interview by author, October 25, 2011.

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promptly gathers her two children and ascends to heaven.¹¹ It is revealed later that only when a woman has a third child is she able to give up her independence. Having only two arms, one arm per child, once saddled with a third, she can never depart.¹² Anna stated that the story has always disturbed her, especially since the ending she recalled included the fairy taking back her captor.¹³ Janice, who owns a children's book of this story shared how it had always made her feel 'dirty', particularly when the fairy is naked and helpless before the Woodcutter.¹⁴ Several of the women felt the story had sexual undertones they could not pinpoint. Samantha, 26, recalled the way the fairy's nakedness made her feel embarrassed. She reflected on what that meant for her as a Korean American woman, "My parents never gave me the sex talk...a culture thing, Koreans don't talk about sex. Instead, I got stories that told me a woman's body is weak and vulnerable because it can be taken..."¹⁵ This astute reflection reveals that though she lacked formal sex education in the home, she developed an understanding of her body, sexuality, and even the dangers of sexual violence through story.

The Fox Woman

The sexual undertones in spirit women folk traditions are blatantly obvious in Korean foxlore. Though prevalent in Korean folk traditions, Korean American women

¹¹ In some traditions the woodcutter is instructed to wait for four children. In the end, the fairy carries the third child between her legs.

¹² Heinz Insu Fenkl, *Korean Folktales: In the Old, Old Days, When Tigers Smoked Tobacco Pipes*. (Bo Leaf Books, January, 2008), 165-169.

¹³ Anna, interview by author, November 15, 2011.

¹⁴ Janice, interview by author, November 09, 2011.

¹⁵ Samantha, interview by author, November 02, 2011.

are not as familiar with foxlore, yet the term for fox, or ‘yuh-woo’, is widely recognized as a derogatory term specific to women and has become part of cultural vernacular.

Almost all the women interviewed understood, had used, been called, or had heard the term yuh-woo. Some stated they heard yuh-woo used affectionately to chide a young woman behaving mischievously. Most commonly, the interviewees felt the term represented adult women who were devious and manipulative.¹⁶ Though fox stories have not survived as pervasively through oral transmission, their message about the dangerous nature of female agency and the feminine propensity for masculine manipulation through sexuality has survived in colloquial speech.

In Korean folklore the fox is female, sexually deviant, a demon, and a cannibal.¹⁷ She is a genuine man-eater consuming men’s flesh literally and figuratively. Her overt sexuality is something that men cannot control, so they seek to eliminate her.¹⁸ Men will also sexually assault her in order to reveal her animalistic nature. Some stories use the symbolic ripping of the fox-woman’s clothing to portray this.¹⁹

Several types of foxes appear in Korean folklore, the most famous being the ‘kumiho’ or nine-tailed fox. The kumiho is able to transform into a beautiful woman,

¹⁶ Anna, interview by author, November 15, 2011.

¹⁷ Charles LaShure, “Kumiho,” Encyclopedia Mythica, <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/k/kumiho.html> [accessed March 5, 2010]

¹⁸ Primordial shamanism regarded sex as one of the most significant duties of humankind. According to Guisso and Chai, sexual acts leading to procreation were considered acts of heroism for both genders. It was not until Confucian thought began to meld with commonly held Shamanistic beliefs that female sexual freedom became understood as a manipulative tool luring men to spiritual and physical death.

¹⁹ Heinz Insu Fenkl, “Fox Wives and other Dangerous Women,” The Endicott Studio, <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/fordangr.html> [accessed March 20, 2011]

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kills men with her bare hands then devours their livers, often during a sex act. It is no coincidence that foxes are predominantly female, evil, hyper-sexualized, and magical. Foxes *are* the shaman incarnate, only with pointy ears, sharp teeth, and long tails. Her spiritual power is linked to her uncontrollable sexuality let loose in the world without proper Confucian restraints. Korean foxlore is the most transparent example of the blurred lines between women and shaman. They are examples of an attempt to brand all aberrant women as a type of shaman who like the fox, hide their magic, tails, and sharp teeth until it is too late. Though Korean American women do not recall much foxlore, when they hear and use the term yuh-woo they still garner much of what foxlore originally taught about the destructive dangers of woman with untamed sexual energy.

Conclusion:

Korean folktales are literary maps of female identity formation. Once a vehicle for the emancipated Shaman, they now teach submission, restraint, self-sacrifice, motherhood, and sexual purity as virtues. Times have changed but these stories and their messages linger in our collective memories. We interpret and internalize their Confucian implications for a new world and time. We hear them as girls and let them define us as women, often to our detriment. Folklore is not a figment of our past but remains very much alive within our community walls and is manifested in the lives of the women who inhabit them.

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