

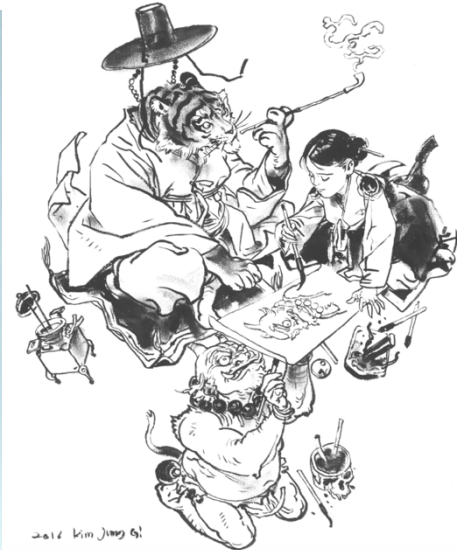
Dokkaebi in Korean Folklore

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도깨비: Dokkaebi in Korean Folklore



Above: Figures 1, 2 and 3 (bottom creature) all show visual variations of dokkaebi

이상하고 아름다운 도깨비 나라
 방망이를 두드리면 무엇이 될까
 금 나와라 와라 - 똑딱
 은 나와라 와라 - 똑딱

*Strange and lovely, the dokkaebi's world
 What will happen when he waves his magic club?
 Gold, come out – ddook-ddak
 Silver, come out – ddook-ddak*

Romanized pronunciation:

Ee-ssang ha-goh ah-leum da-oon dokkaebi na-la
 Bangmang-ee-leul doo-deuh lee-myun moo-ut-ssi dwel-kah
 Geum nah-wah-lah wah-lah – ddok-ddak
 Eun nah-wah-lah wah-lah – ddok-ddak

Abstract

The overall purpose of this research topic is to examine a folk belief within Korean culture. Essentially, the design of this paper starts off with this researcher's initial understanding of *dokkaebi*, then develops the popular cultural symbol through personal interviews and academic literature. Finally, this paper will discuss the greater implications of the *dokkaebi* as a cultural symbol in terms of group philosophy and historical context.

Introduction

In a sense, the role that dokkaebi play in Korean folklore is comparable to that of leprechauns for the Irish. Dokkaebi are goblin-like spiritual creatures with supernatural powers and skills. They are central to Korean culture because adults tell children stories about them as a communal mechanism to promote good behavior always. Furthermore, the mischievous, trickster figure involves an element of restorative balance that emphasizes the spectrum of their significance as a Korean folk belief; it is understood that dokkaebi can either positively or negatively affect an individual, directly correlating with one's intentions and deeds. For the most part, these creatures are considered harmless – just very playful. In fact, these supernatural figures enjoy playing with people (and their lives), and reward humans for good deeds as they generally like making them happy. The central motif surrounding traditional dokkaebi folk tales is that adults mainly use oral narratives to teach children to well-behave as if someone is always watching.

Without question, the history of Korea is fundamental for understanding the context in which the dokkaebi emerged and developed as a cultural symbol. In this paper, I will discuss how the dokkaebi has evolved as a central component of Korean culture through Confucian-based communal recreation. Beginning with Korea's history of Japanese colonization, a summarized version of the country's story includes: the separation of the state into North and South, violent political turmoil in both sides' attempts to establish self-government in the aftermath of the war, and the revitalization of the S. Korean (hereinafter Korean) economy in a phenomenon deemed as the 'Miracle on the Han River.' During the 1990s, a Korean author wrote that what "is even more interesting is that we are now faced with a resurgence of Confucian culture, despite the fact that Korea has undergone the modernization process, with

successful economic development and industrialization” (Kim 204). The context in which the country evolved from a developing country to a developed one by the 21st century is significant in appreciating the means in which Koreans preserved the dokkaebi folklore to maintain group values and traditions even after Japanese rule.

At the end of the 19th century, internal turmoil within the (then still-united) country made it growingly become an area of conflict between China and Japan – eventually it was annexed by Japan and would not become independent until the end of World War II. By the start of the 20th century, Japan had completely taken over militarily and economically, establishing institutional dominance over Korea; the pro-Japanese colonial education system perpetuated repercussions that have lasted even today, as the tensions between Korean nationalism and independence are at the core of the development of the Korean education system. Later this paper will discuss how the Japanese had taken the dokkaebi and misrepresented the motif as a remake of its own supernatural symbol – perhaps, this is why there has been a proliferation of the symbol in literature, film, and other popular culture in the 21st century.

One of the most crucial underlying factors of Korean tradition that continues to develop the dokkaebi as a cultural emblem is, arguably, Confucianism. Among all the dynasties, the long-lived Chosŏn (Joseon) in Korea (1392-1910) was “undoubtedly the most thoroughly Confucianized;” in fact, “even today – as manifested in political behavior, legal practice, ancestral veneration, genealogy, village schools, and student activism – the vitality of the Confucian tradition is widely felt in South Korea” (Weiming). This paper maintains that the spiritual nature of the dokkaebi only makes it *appear* as if religion (e.g. Buddhism) is ‘*the*’ determining factor for its continued use but finds that the Joseon dynasty adopted a new Confucian ethical system to replace its corrupted Buddhist forerunner (Lee et al.).

Essentially, this paper's argument is based upon Confucianism as the underlying basis as to why Koreans have preserved dokkaebi folk beliefs through *communal recreation*, or the process in which the community acts as a group to revise traditions to keep them relevant. The oral tradition of dokkaebi tales has led to variations in the framing of the folk superstition's significance within Korean culture. However, the fact that the dokkaebi is still a beloved cultural icon today shows that the group (read: Confucian) mentality of Koreans as a folk group recognizes the importance of preserving group traditions, especially when they are threatened by an external actor. Ultimately, the growing influence of Confucianism is why there was division amongst the intellectuals and officials running Korea's affairs towards the end of the Joseon dynasty, as there were ideological differences in how the country's future should go.

This paper aims to look at how accurate representation matters in terms of social, cultural, and political repercussions, since the effects of Japanese colonization are crucial in understanding the current political climate of the two Koreas.

Initial Findings

At the start of my ethnographic exploration, I first inquired my immediate (Korean-native) family members since they had raised me on stories of dokkaebi as a child. Considering the rhetorical context of academia, these preliminary interviews did not seem as conducive to the ongoing conversation due to language and generational barriers causing both sides to misunderstand. That is, the grandparents who raised me based on traditional Korean values had learned and spoke Korean at a time when the language of power was Japanese in Korea; later, this paper will discuss and examine the effects of the colonial Japanese education system on Korea in the academic review section.

To knock down any barriers that could lead to misunderstanding, the subjects of this paper's interviews are considered *1.5 generation* immigrants, a term used to describe people who arrive in the U.S. as children or adolescents (Rojas). Generally, members of this generation are bilingual and depending on a variety of confounding variables, the way they perceive their immigrant-American identities will widely differ. For this paper's research, I reached out to bilingual interviewees who I have known all my life, though I have never explicitly spoken with either of them about dokkaebi or Korean culture in general.

First Interviewee – Brian Kim:

“Dokkaebi are freelancers who are more independent and mischievous than other Korean spirits. Whereas other supernatural creatures have more serious and specific roles, dokkaebi are merely bound to earth and essentially carry out karma's job with more of an emphasis punishing bad behavior than protecting those who are just good. They are thought to be extremely clever, as they are into numbers and counting. For instance, as one story goes, Koreans would put out household items like sieves for very fine noodles outside of their front gates. Since the physical appearance of dokkaebi would scare people, the spirits would generally come out at night as to go unnoticed. In evenings, when dokkaebi would come out, they would start counting all the holes in the sieves and spend all night doing so. By the time they were done, it would already be morning and so they would sneak away before humans found them outside of their houses.

Second Interviewee – Seonghoon Lee:

“When I was growing up, most of the stories I heard about dokkaebi came from my grandfather. As a child, my grandfather used to tell me that there were good dokkaebi and bad ones. Dokkaebi are spiritual beings that can possess both humans and inanimate objects. Some

people will act however they want precisely because they think nobody is watching, but there is a shared belief amongst Koreans that there is *always* someone or *thing* watching you. I was under the assumption that if I did anything wrong, a dokkaebi would be there to see it and I would get in trouble for my bad deed in turn. Because of their powers, they could be anywhere at any time.”

“The beliefs surrounding the dokkaebi could certainly be related to karma.” Going back to the point about the Korean folk belief that someone is always “watching you to pay back with whatever you put in.” In that respect, “there definitely seems to be an aspect of karma in that process.”

Seong did not ask his grandparents where they got these stories from as “they don’t teach it in schools. It’s folklore that’s mainly passed down from parents to children, especially if they want a certain behavior as the outcome.” He emphasizes that “this is a story for children. My grandpa always made it seem like dokkaebi were grotesque ghosts or bad beings, since they can instantly disappear and reappear. Children associate this to a spiritual-type of being or thing.” However, as he grew older, his “grandfather told him more stories about good dokkaebi. In a sense, they’re like demi-gods.” He went onto say that others besides his grandfather have told him stories where “dokkaebi would possess humans, but these stories are centered around dokkaebi helping those humans instead of hurting them.” Dokkaebi can be better understood as maintainers of the “natural balance of the world. Adults tell [these stories] to children to maintain this balance. Even if you are doing good deeds and it seems like no one is watching,” there is a shared cultural understanding in Korean folklore that “some *thing* will reward you for your good deeds.”

Lastly, a huge component of the dokkaebi is their bat, which is like a magic wand. It “grants people wishes and is the source of their magic.” The interviewee was not completely sure but he vaguely remembers stories about “people trying to steal those bats for their own advantage. The bat is like a genie’s bottle” or in other words, a magic item that can grant the wishes of its user.

Interpretative Interviews

In consideration of what the interviewees chose to share (and not), providing context would be helpful for better interpreting the similarities and differences in what they had to say. As a child, Brian immigrated chronologically earlier to the U.S. during the mid 20th century whereas Seong came to the country towards the end of it as a young adolescent. While Brian emigrated from South Korea, Seong came from Saipan, which is a part of the Northern Mariana Islands in the Pacific Ocean. Lastly, Brian discussed that he has learned more about dokkaebi in Korean literature since hearing about them as a child while Seong disclosed that most of his knowledge is from the oral narratives others have told him. Despite these differences, both individuals identify themselves Korean-Americans.

Both interviewees emphasize that Korean folklore believes that there is a natural balance in the world that is maintained by spiritual figures. Although their focuses differ, these accounts highlight the versatility in which the dokkaebi can operate as demi-gods within the human world. Furthermore, Lee’s discussion of the dokkaebi’s magic item emphasizes the mysticism of these creatures, leading to the question – *what is a typical dokkaebi?* It would seem as if the oral tradition of dokkaebi tales leads to a variation in the inclusion of magic items, depending on what behavior a parent is trying to get their child to exhibit.

On the other hand, the concept and significance of karma, which is fundamental to many ancient and modern Asian belief systems, is supported by both the interviewees' anecdotes. Karma is the spiritual principle of cause and effect where intent and actions of an individual influence their future (Olivelle). Dokkaebi stories teach children about behavioral norms since the moral of these stories stress that those with good intentions and actions will be rewarded, while those without will be punished. In this sense, the primary school golden rule of 'treating others how you want to be treated' integrates karma so that dokkaebi folk beliefs are a reinforcement for *prosocial* behavior, which will be further examined later in this paper. The personal interviews provided a fundamental understanding of the Korean folk group philosophy that someone or something is always watching you.

Academic Research

To set the groundwork for examining the development of dokkaebi as a cultural symbol today, the origins of the folk belief are examined, and then the paper engages in the literary conversation to interpret the evidence in terms of this paper's overarching claims about the influence of Confucianism and Japanese control.

The origins of the dokkaebi first appear in the *Samgunyusa* (1235; *Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms*), which is a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts relating to the three tribal kingdoms that preceded the Joseon dynasty (Chong). Stories of dokkaebi reflects the notion that "human wisdom and good deeds are the driving force behind the advancement of civilization" (National Folk Museum of Korea 356). The current academic debate on Korea suggests that the development of its ancient states incorporated Buddhist beliefs that were prerequisite for the institutionalization of Confucianism. To illustrate, the pre-Joseon Goryeo

“aristocracy embraced Buddhism as the religion for spiritual fulfillment and Confucianism for its political precepts and ethical principles. The same was true of the government” which built institutions based on these views (Lee et al.). However, during the Goryeo era, Buddhism started to reveal itself in secular activities, such as fortune-telling and rituals for success in non-religious endeavors; this corruption led to the growing population of monks and nuns with questionable motives. After seeing how Buddhism corrupted the nation, the Joseon government took charge and collaborated with other institutions to make the learning of Confucianism “not only a political ideology but also a common creed in Korea” (Weiming).

In contemporary Korea, there are few who identify as Confucians when asked, but this is difficult to define since is not like religious or party affiliation (Koh 192). Despite what is seemingly Confucian on the surface, Confucianism as a moral teaching and a way of life has by no means been discarded altogether and can still be perceived in today’s daily life (Koh 194). Likewise, Weiming upholds that even today “the vitality of the Confucian tradition is still widely felt in South Korea.” This point is reemphasized because it further supports this paper’s overarching claim that Confucian values promote the proliferation of more accurate representations of the Korean dokkaebi especially after Japanese control. As “Confucian ethics gained increasing influence” in the country, “ghost tales became more diverse,” proving that there is a direct link between the proliferation of Korean supernatural beliefs with the increasing influence of Confucian ethics (National Folk Museum of Korea 356). Essentially, Confucianism provides a collective framework that allow Koreans to give more cultural significance to the dokkaebi since it is perceived as a ‘true Korean symbol.’ This helps frame dokkaebi folklore so that it is passed on through communal recreation beyond the oral tradition, especially considering today’s advancements in technology.

Amongst the scholars in the dokkaebi discussion, Park Ki-yong has several recent works accessible through the UMD database of databases. In 2010, Park examined how the representation of dokkaebi has been affected in Korean language textbooks because of Japanese colonial rule. From 1910-1940, the Japanese government had created arbitrary standards for Korean schools that resulted in many to close. Subsequently, the colonial authorities used their own school system as a tool to assimilate Korea to become pro-Japanese, “placing primary emphasis on teaching the Japanese language and excluding from the educational curriculum such subjects as Korean language and Korean history” (Lee et al.). Park’s 2010 study finds that Korean language textbooks from the Japanese occupation period up to recently show that there is a close affinity in the Korean dokkaebi and the Japanese *oni*, or ‘monster.’ The author asserts that a “group’s certain archetypal complex creates their own imaginative products,” yet cites that the Korean language department continues to teach students with literature that have *oni* figures instead of the Korean dokkaebi. All in all, this paper agrees with Park’s convincing case that the current literary situation in Korea distorts and damages Korean tradition and identity, especially considering that it has been almost a century since Korea’s independence.

Adding onto previous research, Park conducted a follow-up study in 2011 that examines 96 dokkaebi tales from Korea and 123 from China in attempts to better solidify the archetype of the Korean dokkaebi. The similarities and differences in these tales allow Park to make suggestions on how to better represent non-Korean dokkaebi motifs to ensure the modeling of a Korean archetype. The researcher’s previous study ends on a similar note by proposing the recreation of a new dokkaebi figure so that students in Korea can better understand the Korean identity through it in popular culture.

Another approach in examining the significance of the dokkaebi is through the visual

representations of the folktale creature in children's picture books. Ultimately, children are the intended audience for dokkaebi folklore; for children, the dokkaebi is not just any *oni* (read: monster), but a central cultural creature that stretches the imagination and uses fear to teach moral lessons (Seo). There are proponents for teaching the Korean language to children through dokkaebi tales who say that it will boost their understanding of Korean culture as well (Seo). Moreover, there are researchers who have already proposed different visual prototypes that promote a growing sense of culture in that there is more than just one type of dokkaebi, as seen in Park, Kim, and Nam's creative research proposal (see references).

All in all, Korean culture and daily life are saturated with Confucian notions, revitalizing the academic pursuit in reclaiming the dokkaebi as a Korean cultural symbol as a means of prosocial traditions (Koh 199). For this paper's purpose, I argue that Confucianism is inherently prosocial because it promotes good behavior to benefit other people or society as a whole; children learning tales that promote prosocial behavior can help them understand and appreciate the notion of the individual within a larger community. That is, the mere knowledge that your people or 'folk' have been sharing these stories for as long as they can remember can create a sense of belonging and group mentality.

Mainly, the literary discourse is on the symbolic visualization of dokkaebi, but that is because the oral tradition of the folk belief is not as easy to pinpoint, especially when considering the limited amount of English scholarly sources on the matter. The intellectual attempt for Korean scholars to uncover the 'authenticity' of the dokkaebi archetype is completely valid as they have been comprehensively going through the visual representations of dokkaebi folklore outside of Korean literature as well. By doing so, these literary contemporaries are nuancing the traditional character development of the dokkaebi in today's world and

incorporating solutions for the future to ensure more representation for the emergence of different dokkaebi types.

Concluding Claims

The underlying group harmony and filial piety of Confucianism are tested and true reasons as to why Korean children will continue to learn about their national identity through dokkaebi folk tales and why there is a current academic debate on the representation of dokkaebi. The evidence is the current academic debate on the issue. The language of the Japanese *oni* has already been adopted in Korea, and so the scholastic debate on how to better educate Korean students on dokkaebi will only continue until there is a consensus on how to better frame one of the most culturally influential symbols in Korean civil society. All things considered, this paper is not to portray any group or individual in a negative light, but an educational attempt to qualify the Korean and English literature on dokkaebi to better understand its cultural importance within historical context.

However, it is interesting to note that while the Japanese propagated the language of the *oni* in colonial efforts to unify Korea and Japan, there is already a Japanese word that is closer to the meaning of dokkaebi – *yokai*, which is a class of supernatural characters. In terms of rhetoric, the effects of Japanese involvement in Korea have created a language of power that is reflected even today amongst Koreans. The communal recreation of dokkaebi folk tales in the past century have included efforts in publishing more printed works, producing children’s cartoons and even Korean dramas, digitally designing new visualizations, and maintaining an academic conversation (*even if it is not English*); these are all new traditions that modern Koreans have done to legitimize and reclaim the dokkaebi folk belief as a central part of the Korean identity.

Dokkaebi stories are time-honored, “reflecting the changes in folk tradition over history, while demonstrating the mythological perspectives, world views and values of the Korean people through human encounters with otherworldly beings that leads them to confront human identity” (National Folk Museum of Korea 356).

By structuring my paper like political science research, I wanted to emphasize the exigency of representation. This paper is more argumentative in style, but the majority of academic literature focused on issues of representation and interpretation for the Korean identity. In this sense, this paper aims to provide context for those who may not know just how much Korea has been deeply affected by Japan. In the end, everything is (and has been) political. This paper is also an attempt in reframing history so that the colonizer actually validates the colonized, which could be the first step in managing a lot of political conflicts today. By enforcing an education system with a language of power, the Korean language was stripped from its people and we almost saw how the dokkaebi figure was taken away from the Korean identity. The increasingly-changing significance of dokkaebi shows that newer generations can further develop old meanings of group traditions as to accurately be represented in a globalized context. All in all, the dokkaebi figure is viewed in a couple of different lenses as to bring in complementary perspectives that can further develop the understanding of Korea as a Confucian-based state. Confucianism is deeply ingrained in several countries, and the differences between Western and Asian values matters especially in terms of human rights. Confucianism’s lessened focus on the individual and emphasis of the group is what ultimately primed the intellectual conversation to examine dokkaebi as a characteristic of the Korean folk.

Ending Note:

In a country today where citizens are worried about 'getting bombed by Korea', some Americans may fail to consider why history matters for today's most controversial issues. This paper aims to encourage readers to incorporate conflict managerial skills in mediating just about anything. The author of this paper has both Korean and Japanese family members; Koreans who not only were amongst the poor during Japanese rule, but also Koreans who were wealthier because they were pro-Japanese. Ultimately, this paper is an academic pursuit in self-knowledge and representation to better understand geo and socio-political situations today.

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