



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)  
Issue: Vol. 1; No. 4; April 2020 pp. 18-23  
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)  
Website: www.jlahnet.com  
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com

## **The Korean Folktale as a Narrative: Traditional Values, Changing Times, and Its Sociohistorical Development**

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### **Abstract:**

Folktales are part of a literary genre that includes myths, legends, proverbs, and oral narratives. Between 1890 and 1910, Korean folktale was not considered to be a distinct genre. Rather, the tale was used as historical artifact for an understanding of the surrounding culture. The rationale of this research is to examine Korean folktale as a genre, reviewing the way in which it was transformed, and what is possible for future studies to promote its culturally fundamental role. Several folklore perspectives have been based on a theoretical framework (especially since 1960), yet Korean folktale-as-genre was hardly discussed; instead, researchers used it as a nationalistic agenda, which scholars assessed in depth to depict relevant aspects. While investigating the historical development of Korean folktale studies from the nineteenth century until the present, they can be best defined as a group of stories: a genre unique to Korean culture, as folktales are often variations of the same story, and primarily intended for the general public. As such, Korean tales can be classified as authentic or fictional, since they often include multidimensional characters that are conversationally believable to the reader, thus offering a lens into Korean culture.

**Keywords:** Fairy tales; folktales; Korean folklore; *mindam*; *sŏlhwa*; *yetnaliyagi*

### **1. Introduction**

Folktale can be found in Korean oral tradition. The underlying syntagmatic structure of Korean folktale is reminiscent of other fairytale traditions, while its linguistic features are produced by individual characters. The performance enables the storyteller and audience to connect family networks to contemporary society, accomplished by a conceptualization of the past, in a tale that cannot be recalled. With many folktale traditions, repetitive phrases are common, with the best-known including the opening phrase “yetnalyetnale,” or the equivalent of the English “once upon a time.” Korean folktale represents a structural and linguistic oicotype.

Korean scholars use three different terms for folktale, which are mutually inclusive: *Yetnaliyagi* (stories of the past), *mindam* (people’s stories or ‘stories of the folk’), and *sŏlhwa* (stories that people convey for the sake of tradition). *Yetnaliyagi* and *mindam* have one-dimensional characters set in an unspecified time and place, while the stories are told as fictional accounts. *Sŏlhwa*, according to some scholars, portray multidimensional characters allegedly based on fact [2, 3, 7, 9, 24]. The term *sŏlhwa* designates the Korean folktale by Son Chin-Tae and others [7-13, 20, 24, 25]. Yet, it remains unclear how it started to be referred to as *yetnaliyagi*, *mindam*, or *sŏlhwa* by these academics [20-22, 24, 25]. Traditionally, oral storytelling is passed down by word-of-mouth over thousands of years, with each genre reflecting the times, cultures, and social norms.

To achieve greater understanding, this paper scrutinizes three terms to designate folktale in Korea, and finds that each refers to a different genre of oral traditional narrative. *Yetnaliyagi* and *mindam* are stories that follow the definition of folktale in Western traditions [25].

The contours of these two genres fall into Grimms' *Märchen*: they are fictional, along with a primary performer who elaborates the story, they use formulaic language (with a one-dimensional opening and closing structure), they are prose narratives, and are multi-episodic tales in which magic is customary [29]. *Sŏlhwa*, in contrast, are stories that supposedly happened in the past [7-13]. Accordingly, *sŏlhwa* is part of the legend genre rather than the folktale genre, describing alleged facts in terms of a specific time and place. The term *sŏlhwa* is also related to Stith Thompson's definition of the German term *Sage* or the French term *conte populaire*: "it purports to be an account of an extraordinary happening, believed to have actually occurred" [26]. Taking *Yetnaliyagi* and *mindam* as subsets of folktale, this paper examines how Korean folk tradition is rooted in the performative mode, or as aspects of Korean culture. This approach explores how *yetnaliyagi* can be a subset of *mindam*, with the former referring to tales of magic (fairy tale in Aarne's classification), while the latter refers to folktales without specific occasion [1]. This argument does not correspond to how terms were used, with the characteristic *yetnaliyagi* equivalent to Aarne's classification of fairytales, tale types 300 through 749 [1]. The author's inquiry into Korean cultural traditions may assist readers in their approach to the oral history of Asian culture: a review of folklore studies provides a theoretical basis of Korean folktales.

## 2. Defining Korean Folk/Fairytale

Folktale (*Yetnaliyagi*, *Mindam*, *Sŏlhwa* in Korean) as a genre constitutes a major classification of oral narratives over time. Distinct from myth and legend, a folktale is defined as "a traditional fictional narrative told largely for entertainment," often manifest in variants of the same story [2, 15, 25]. As a part of oral tradition, Korean folktale is the basis of manipulated literary work. It offers a window into culture and social awareness, which Harun and Holms view as ongoing preoccupation with the culture, represented at a specific time [18, 19]. Portraying a past that no one recalls, storytelling is a part of popular themes, which show cultural features of Korea. Since 1920, following the trend of Western folktale scholars, i.e., Thompson, Aarne, and the Brothers Grimm, Korean scholars developed a folktale doctrine that could well define Korean folktale [1, 4-13, 23-6].

However, Korean folktale is rarely discussed as a genre in Eastern or Western academic discussions, due to "the paucity of Korean tale [and folktale scholarship] in translation" (p. 283) [25]. Few Korean scholars speak or write English, so it must create publications without funding from the government [16]. Compared to Chinese or Japanese folklore studies, Western scholars do not consider Korean folklore as a treasure trove, with its lack of popularity [25]. Korean folktale is based more on ethnographic methods and less on historical methods, so is not included as comparative research.

The relative scarcity of Korean folktale scholarship could be a function of Japanese colonization. Between 1910 and 1945, the Japanese eradication of Korean culture played a crucial role in escalating the tension between memory and modernity, which informs Korean folktales. Recognized scholars of this include Song, Sŏk-Ha, and Son, while Jin-Tae found that the Japanese severely distorted Korean culture during their occupation [10, 21]. Moreover, they distorted a movement that attempted to restore folklore and establish their work in academia. This encouraged other Korean scholars to engage in folklore research to create narratives, which reinforced scholars to "characterize folklore as an aspect of the manifestation of the culture of [Koreans]" and examine it as part of the burgeoning cultural nationalism, *munhwa minchokjuŏi*, based on Korean tradition prior to Japanese colonization [21, 22]. However, this did not significantly contribute to promoting folktale as a comparative realm.

In addition, Korean scholars situated oral tradition in the context of literature and history [7-13, 16, 20-22, 25]. As a result of this, Korean oral tradition prior to the twentieth century was not collected comprehensively, with the tale dominated by literary scholars [20]. Even after early collections appeared, there was no folktale anthology shared by non-elites prior to 1920. Scholars looked at oral tradition as part of a cultural nationalist endeavor, which demonstrated a strong antagonism to colonial Japan. Korean folklore became part of an ideological trend to galvanize the masses, as well as a philosophical battleground: the collection of Korean folktales became a political version of contemporary society. Given this orientation, substantive discussion of the definitive role of Korean folktale as a genre did not emerge, since the definitions of *yetnaliyagi*, *mindam*, and *sŏlhwa* had already been established in Korean folktale scholarship. *Yetnaliyagi* is an emic term referring to folktale in Korea and is commonly used by the public, derived from the opening "yetnal-yetnal-ae" ('a long, long time ago' or 'once upon a time'). *Mindam* technically means "stories of the people," but Korean folklorists often interpret the term as "storytelling told by commoners or the lower classes" (p. 358) [16].

This interpretation is equivalent to that of folklorist Ben-Amos: “Folktale [is derived from] oral narratives told by peasants, members of the lower classes, or traditional people whose literacy, if existing, [is] minimal” (p. 101) [2]. *Sŏlhwa* is an etic term that defines storytelling as a specific form, with a single narrative motif, that combines *yetnaliyagi* and *mindam* into a larger perspective. As Harun and Jamuludin propose, “cultural heritage plays an important role in countries globally because it bears an invisible thread that links the present to the past” (p. 127) [18]. Moreover, *sŏlhwa* are actually stories that include Korean traditional elements, corresponding to *yetnaliyagi* in classical Chinese. These terms create a pivotal role for defining Korean folktale, but none yields a breakdown of how folklorists view it as a genre.

### 3. Intellectual History of Korean Folktale Development and Theoretical Trends

Although various Korean folktale collections were published and distributed across the peninsula between 1890 and 1930, its discussion as a genre was not publicized until 1938 (p. 108) [11]. After gaining independence from Japan, a Korean scholar, Nam-Sŏn Choe, pioneered the categorization of myth, legend, and folktale in his article “Chosŏn ūi mindam-tonghwa (Folktales from the Chosŏn Dynasty),” in which he states:

*Sinhwa* (implying myth in Korean) is a genre that comes from an ancient time, and deals with stories of supernatural beings who form the Earth. It is considered to be the earliest form of oral narrative. As time goes by, when people feel suspicious or lose interest about stories of supernatural beings, they change the contours of *sinhwa* and create stories about heroes or protagonists who actually existed in a certain time. These stories are identified as *chŏnsŏl* (denoting legend in Korean). As well as *sinhwa* and *chŏnsŏl*, there is another oral narrative form. Unlike *sinhwa* and *chŏnsŏl*, the contours of this oral narrative happened to be untrue, fictional, and aroused fantasy among people. The narrative, in scholarly terms, is called *Märchen* or folktale. In Korean, a folktale can be interpreted as *iyagi* or *mindam*. Although the term *iyagi* connotes a story that covers traditional elements, I interpret *iyagi* as a Korean folktale (p. 74) [11].

Choe’s argument suggests that *iyagi* (or *mindam*) differs from both *sinhwa* and *chŏnsŏl*. He suggests that characters, times, and places in folktale “are unidentifiable in social, historic, or geographic terms, thus suspending reality” (p. 74) [11]. The author validates primary functions in Korean culture proposed by Grayson [14], and is aligned with William Bascom’s four perspectives on folklore: a) Folktale is a pedagogic tool that reinforces certain morals, values, and wisdom, and b) folktale is a means of applying social pressure and control [4]. Choe’s theory of Korean folktale is vital for the development of Korean folklore scholarship, as he better examines how it can be defined as a genre [11-2]. His investigation of *sinhwa* encourages the idea of restoring Korean culture, which had been erased by Japanese colonization. It is compared to the structural-semantic analysis that Harun and Jamaludin applied in Malaysian folklore, yielding a holistic view of folktale classification [18].

Opposing Nam-Sŏn Choe’s theory, Korean folklorist Chin-Tae Son discusses the definition of Korean folktale with the term *sŏlhwa*. His book, *Chosŏn minchok sŏlhwa ūi yŏngu*, explains it as follows: “*Sŏlhwa* is a broader spectrum that embraces all kinds of [Korean] oral traditions” (p. 1) [24]. Scrutinizing how *sŏlhwa* represents the generic categorization of oral narrative, Son posits that Korean folktale is a storytelling style that bridges myth and legend. His argument attacks Choe’s premise—how Korean folktale is derived from these constructs—and introduces ethnographic methodology to more fully investigate them [11, 24].

Son’s foundation creates enormous ambiguity to other Korean folklorists, as the term *sŏlhwa* refers to the cross-over genre distinction [22]. As a function of his theory, *sinhwa* is part of *sŏlhwa*, *chŏnsŏl* is perceived as *sŏlhwa*, and *mindam* should be classified as *sŏlhwa*. Therefore, any form of oral narrative in Korean tradition is considered to be Korean folktale. Scholar Tong-Gwŏn Im points out that the connotation of *sŏlhwa* is problematic: “*sŏlhwa* is needed to be examined explicitly because its connotation brings huge confusion. Some folklorists interpret *sŏlhwa* as [Sage], others refer *sŏlhwa* as [Märchen]” (p. 266) [20]. To resolve this, he reflects on the view of the Brothers Grimm: “the fairy tale is more poetic, the legend is more historical” (p. 410) [2]. Im proposes that *sinhwa*, *chŏnsŏl*, and *mindam* must be classified along with the adaptation of Bascom’s generic configuration and Nam-Sŏn Choe’s framework [4, 11-3, 20]. Im’s assertion has become the cornerstone of folklorist Tŏk-Sun Chang’s analysis of Korean folktale [7, 8, 20].

While introducing Kaarle Krohn's historic-geographic approach, Chang substantiates Im's theory and calls for a comparative analysis of Korean and Western folktale, but does not discuss Korean folktale as a genre [8]. Analyzing certain motifs as integral aspects, based on ATU's *Tale Type Index* in 2004 [1], the author attempts to maintain Korean folktale as "an apt genre for the application of the historic-geographic method" (p. 446) [27]. Chang investigates the historical and theoretical treatment of *sŏlhwa* to be able to interpret it as Korean folktale. His effort promotes Bill Ellis' "Why Are Verbatim Texts of Legends Necessary" and classifies its motifs into twenty-six categorizations: he developed this to elaborate on how Korean folktale takes place. Nevertheless, his work simulates Antti Aarne's classification [1], but fails to describe Korean folktale with an organized and systematic examination of Korean and Western folklore theories [7].

Two Korean folklorists, Hŭi-Ung Cho and In-Hak Choe, suggest an ethnographic method, but this approach does not elicit genre debate about Korean folktale. Assuming *sŏlhwa* as Märchen, Cho suggests that it can be defined as a genre specific to Korean tradition [7, 9, 15]. However, the author simultaneously challenges the need to define Korean folktale as a genre, distinct from myth and legend [9]. Unaware of Aarne's primary categorization of the tale type, Cho asserts that it is categorized by animal tales, mythological tales, ordinary tales, anecdotes, and unclassified tales [9]. Akin to Cho's argument, Choe states: "even nowadays, *yetnalyagi* not only covers folktale, but it also implies myth and legend" (p. 298) [12]. Compiling a motif-index of Korean folktale, the author argues that *yetnalyagi* or *sŏlhwa* should be discussed as Sage, or stories from the past [12]. Cho and Choe analyze folktale from an ethnographic perspective, i.e., how Korean folktale must be explored in the context of culture; however, these theories do not expand on Im's theory [7, 12, 20].

Tong-Il Cho, Professor of Korean Language and Literature at Sŏul National University, interprets Korean folktale while also examining Bascom's myth, legend, and folktale distinction. In *kubimunhak ūi segye*, he asserts:

*Sinhwa* is a group of stories that elaborates the unity between self and the world. *Chŏnsŏl* describes the conflict between self and the world after the Human realizes that self and the world cannot be equal. Stories that belong to *chŏnsŏl* set the premise that the world is superior to self. In *mindam*, self (which can be a storyteller) controls the world while proceeding with the narrative (p. 177) [10].

This approach not only supports Nam-Sŏn Choe's theory, but highlights an idiosyncratic practice of defining Korean folktale as a genre. The author's theory is considered to be a remarkable accomplishment, in terms of adapting Western discourse for an interpretation of Korean folktale. Despite this effort, Cho's theory is limited, because some folktales are characterized by *chŏnsŏl* and vice-versa (p. 27) [22]. Due to this limitation, other Korean folklorists criticize Cho's theory, which the essential failure of Hŭi-Ung Cho and In-Hak Choe's arguments [25].

#### 4. Conclusions and Future Discussion

Korean folktale proposes a connection to the past and allows the narrator and audience to explore aspects of human behavior in society. As such, it should be investigated within a broader spectrum of folklore studies. There has been no explicit genre debate about Korean folktale, although some implicit discussions had been introduced. This phenomenon may involve the multidimensional characteristics of *yetnalyagi* and *sŏlhwa*: they are interpreted as fictional narrative without any traditional elements of Korean culture. In public, people commonly deal with myth, legend, and folktale as *yetnalyagi*. In Korean folklore scholarship, *sŏlhwa* becomes a genre that is "an umbrella concept, allowing for many disparate, but often related, concepts to be conveniently divided and subdivided" (p. 509) [17]. These terms serve a dual function, equivalent to Trudier Harris' classification of genre: *Yetnalyagi* and *sŏlhwa* offer "a classification and conceptual framework for articulating the characteristics of the individual unit [folktale distinct from myth and legend]" (p. 513) [17]. The terms refer to stories from the past [24-5]. Given their complexity, Korean folktale theories have evolved as only being loosely defined and persist as folktale mystery.

Their theoretical themes are derived from historic-geographic or ethnographic methods, so the trends endure. Krohn uses similar methods, which are criticized for "overlooking the possibility of vertical diffusion" (p. 447) [27].

No Korean scholars had witnessed the exploration of folktale (within an intact Korean context) as being problematic. Some theories omit defining a Korean folktale genre, which survive as a perplexity. Other theories the same limitations as Western discourse.

In conclusion, the same generic function exists in Korean folktale [3, 18, 19]. *Yetnalyagi*, *mindam*, and *sŏlhwa* represent a genre that is repetitively performed, orally or in written form. All bring great pleasure to audiences, or produce an “exaggerated terror by an emphasis of the sentimental and romantic, an abundance of charming animals and inanimate objects” (p. 220) [6]. As in oral circulation, Korean folktale elaborates concepts about human nature in the form of “a long, long time ago.” The journey of the Korean narrative circulates in oral form, as it is an integral aspect of the culture. Future discussions should resolve the limitations of previous studies, while continuing to examine Korean folktale in a comparative analysis of Western folktale. Korean folktale must be viewed its own domain, but must also be assessed in other group cultures. Folktale as a paradigm encapsulates cultural norms, social values, and traditions in order to understand society of the past, present, and future [5]. Grimms’ fairy tales, according to Jack Zipes, are continuously revisited by Western European and American scholars, so the tradition continues [29]. The author concludes that by highlighting the entrenched Korean cultural tradition, it can clearly offer notable alternatives, involving sociohistorical approaches that conceptualize and find merit in oral tradition.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** The author thanks Dr. Carol Seitzer-Zurcher for reviewing and editing this manuscript with great care.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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