

REFUTATION OF SUBVERSIVENESS IN THE LEGEND OF ARANG

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the subversiveness of the Legend of Arang. The story featuring Arang as a victimized lad is one of representative *wonhonselhwa*, that is grievance-redressing folktale. Led by her deceitful nanny, the beautiful lad is killed and thrown away by Jugi, a low officer who tried to rape her. This attempt to transgress the class barrier reflects the desire of common people to challenge the hierarchical structure. As a revengeful ghost, she tries to resolve her grievance by letting her death be known to the public. Her ghostly appearance to magistrates newly appointed in Miryang results in their deaths due to shock. One magistrate called Yi Sangsa helps her by convening all the officers. By transforming herself into a butterfly and sitting on the shoulder of Jugi, Arang uncovers who the murderer is. With his punishment, she does not appear again. The ending implies the refutation of subversiveness as well as the realization of *gwonseonjing-ak*. Her chastity is honored in the canonization process led by literati and further in the form of cultural heritage, Aranggak. In the 1960s, Park Jung-Hee regime emphasized her chastity in order to reinforce conservative values. Dominant ideologies intertwined with the sexual custom contributed to its canonization.

Keywords: Arang, Aranggak, *wonhonselhwa*, subversiveness, ideologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Korea, folktales featuring ghosts have been abundant for a very long time. Most of the Korean ghosts are females. As the pre-modern Korean society, especially the Joseon dynasty, was predominantly patriarchal, women were unduly oppressed and victimized. The male-dominated system that has sacrificed women can explain why majority of Korean ghosts are women. In Korean tales, female ghosts usually appear with unresolved grief, called *han* (恨), as they were unduly sacrificed by villains. The villains in many cases are the reflections of the dominant system, explicitly or not.

Folktales with such revengeful ghosts are classified as *wonhonselhwa* (冤魂脣話). *Wonhon* means ghost (魂) with grief (冤), while *seolhwa* means folk tale.

Also called *won-gwi* (冤鬼) or *wonryeong* (怨靈), the grieved ghost is unable to enter the Otherworld called *jeoseung* (儲承), and thus wanders around the present world without its grievance being resolved (Kwak 44). Thus, this type of story is translated into ‘grievance redressing tale’ or so. In Korean shamanism, “it is believed that the lives of the living are often harmed by *Wonhon*, whose deaths unnaturally occurred through violence and accidents and who thus never received proper funeral rites for entering the other world” (Choi 43).

Wonhonseolhwa is subdivided into several types. One of the main types is *sinwon* (伸冤) type, also called *haewon* (解冤) type. As *sin* means ‘voice,’ *sinwon* means revealing the grief of ghosts who were unduly victimized, often to death.



Figure 1. Advertisement of *Arang and the Magistrate*

Similar to this, *hae* (解) means ‘resolve,’ thus meaning resolving grief, that is realizing justice as a result. In this type, a spiteful ghost succeeds in revenging and attaining social approval by getting rid of notoriety often wrought by villains (Kwak 3).

One of the most representative *sinwon* types is ‘The Legend of Arang (阿娘),’ usually called *Arangseolhwa* or *Arangeonseol*. *Jeonseol* (前說) refers to transmitted legends or myths, mainly orally. Arang is the name of a young lady unduly victimized in a rape during the Joseon dynasty. Its popularity attests to its

representativeness. The story was adapted into films and TV dramas, though much modified from the original one. The movie *Arangnangja Jeon* [The Story of Lady Arang] was filmed in 1974, and another movie *Arang* was produced in 2006. *Arang Satto Jeon* [Arang and the Magistrate] was aired on MBC from August to October 2012. The drama was successful with a view rate of about 12%. And some literary works are also based on the tale. One of the well-known works is *Arang-eun Wae* [Why Arang?] by Kim Youngha, which was translated into Japanese. The tale, though considerably modified partly, still draws attention, for the contemporary people feel sympathy for the unduly death of Arang the protagonist. It is because the suffering of Arang is still repeated among women (Kim 2008: 79). Male violence against females is still exerted mercilessly. She is a representative type of female sacrifice.

As there is a cluster of similar stories featuring Arang, Son Jintae, an early main researcher categorized these stories as *Aranghyeongjeonseol* (阿娘型傳説), which literally means Arang type. According to Son, this type of narrative is often found in Chinese folktales. The Chinese female character is called Haerang (解娘), similar to Arang. The name ‘Haerang’ means ‘resolving lad,’ thus she is also a sort of *wonhon*. Also in ‘Arang,’ ‘rang’ means lad, while ‘A’ means slope or site near water. Thus, there seems to be a close relation between the two similar names. Probably Haerang had an influence upon Arang (Son). It can be also conjectured that she is called Arang because she was buried in a bamboo forest beside a river. It seems that ‘Arang’ has been used to imply the burial site near water, with the Chinese tradition of ending a female name with rang.



Figure 2. Many wooden signboards with inscriptions by famous scholars at Yeongnamru are representative of the authority of literati who could write Chinese characters.

Like many other folktales, it has a number of variations. Though varied in details, the main plot is similar in general. For this reason, more than a dozen variations are regarded as being included in the Arang type. About 15 similar tales are found in *Hanguk Gubimunhak Daegye* (韓國口碑文學大系) [Big Book of Korean Oral Literature], a collection of 82 books published from 1980 to 1992. Besides this, other versions are included in *Cheonggyadam* (靑邱野談) [Tales from the

Green Hills] and *Dongyahwijip* (東野彙輯) [Collection of Tales from the Eastern Plains].¹ These kinds of stories have been widely circulated since the 17th century.

The earliest written version of the Arang legend is found in *Giyongnamrusa* (記嶺南樓事) [History of Yeongnamru, 1810]² by Hong Jikpil, a Confucian scholar. Hong notes that he recorded what was told by an old man in Miryang. It was first orally transmitted among common people and then circulated among learned classes later, mainly in the Yeongnam region occupying the southeastern part of Korea. Arang is also mentioned in ‘Yeongnamru’ a Chinese poem written by Shin



Figure 3. Arang appearing in front of a magistrate in the TV dram.

Seokgyun in 1878, who was a governor of Miryang. Later Chang Seok-young also mentions Aranggak in his poem. Besides this, many versions have been recorded from the 19th century. In the modern age, tales written in *Ondolyahwa* (溫突夜話) [Stone Heating Night Stories, 1927], *Joseon Minjokseolhwai Yeon-gu* [Korean Myths, Legends and Folktales: A Cultural Historical Study, 1947] and *Joseon Jeonseoljip* [Anthology of Joseon Legends,

1944] are regarded as heavily influenced by orally transmitted tales. Although the tales stemmed from the oral tradition, they do not purely reflect the thoughts of common people. Those who could write down the tales, especially in Chinese letters, were mostly learned classes. Through the writing processes of the learned classes, it was supposedly affected by the viewpoints and value systems of the high class.

¹ Along with *Gyeseoyadam* (溪西野談) [Tales from Gyeseo], *Cheongguyadam* and *Dongyahwijip* are generally regarded as the three major collections of folk narratives from Joseon. While *Cheongguyadam* is supposed to have been published around the mid-nineteenth century, *Dongyahwijip* was edited by Lee Wonmyeong who collected folktales in 1869. As for *Cheongguyadam*, the ten-volume ten-chapter edition is housed at the University of California-Berkeley, which is the oldest remaining one (Jung). As for *Dongyahwijip*, “Different editions of the book are currently held in collection at various institutions around the country: four different editions at Seoul National University; two at Yonsei University; one at Sungkyunkwan University; one at Sookmyung Women’s University; and two at the National Library of Korea. There is also a copy of the book’s eight-chapter eight-volume edition at the Osaka Municipal Library in Japan” (Lee).

² Yeongnamru located in Miryang is registered as a national treasure. It was one of top three pleasure pavilions with a reputation during the Joseon dynasty. The pleasure pavilions were spaces where male aristocrats enjoyed drinking and entertaining services offered by female courtesans. Chung indicates that it was also a venue for rituals and literary competitions or exams for governmental positions called *gwageo* (過擧). Considering its purposes and usages, it is a space representative of the dominant system of the Joseon dynasty. Especially, Yeongnamru houses several signboards with inscriptions by then famous scholars. Representative of the male dominance, it was where the sexual desire of dominant males was exerted. As the backdrop of the story, it symbolizes the Joseon dynasty’s dominant system.

In analyzing the story in its present form, such modifying processes need to be taken into account. My analysis will be focused on how ideology operated in the canonization and establishment of it as a cultural heritage site.

2. REFUTATION OF SUBVERSIVE DESIRE

Before advancing the analysis, the story needs to be outlined. According to the local legend, Arang was the only daughter of the magistrate of Miryang, a southeastern region of Korea. One evening, the beautiful girl with an image of purity was lured by her nanny to go to Yeongnamru to enjoy the moonlight. However, she encountered Jugi, a local government servant, who tried to rape her. Resisting his violation, she was tragically killed. Since this incident, newly appointed magistrates have died on their first night in Miryang. However, a new magistrate called Yisangsa survived, though he encountered the bloody ghost of Arang on his first night. He learned that his predecessors had all died from the shock of confronting the ghost of Arang. Arang told the magistrate about her grievance due to the violent deed. On the following morning, he convened his entire staff in the courtyard of the provincial government office. Arang transformed herself into a butterfly³ and sat on the man who had killed her. By marking the murderer in the public, she resolved her grievance. Jugi was punished and she did not appear again.

This is the summary of the plot generally shared by the main versions regarded as definitive. The story is seemingly typical in that a female ghost appears in order to relieve grievance. However, the story is not merely a stereotyped one. If the plot had been merely typical, it would not have been so widely spread gaining attention from a wide range of readers, especially learned high-classes. In general, learned classes had a tendency to dismiss folktales, which were mainly circulated among common people, and especially favored by marginal classes.

With the notion of its exceptional appeal to the learned classes, there are some points worth paying attention to. First, the legend of Arang is known as not merely fictional but based on a historical fact. There might be raised doubt to its factuality. It is,



Figure 4. A picture on the inside wall of Arangsa depicts the scene where the murderer is revealed by the metamorphosed Arang.

³ Kim Tae-gyun indicates that in many cultures, “the butterfly was believed to be a reincarnated soul of a dead person. Especially, in Korea, people believed that a butterfly itself is the soul of a dead person” (3). In this light, “[a]ssociations between butterflies and women, like this one, have also been common in Korea, and sometimes even stronger correlations are drawn” (Cho 2018: 156).

however, at least supposed to be related to a certain person at a certain place. Sharing the backdrop of Miryang, similar stories were recorded around the region. It can be accepted that the stories reflect the factual situation or at least the social structure in the given context.

It is significant that the high-class woman was deceived, threatened to be raped, and killed by the low-class people. This deceptive violent act reflects the antipathy of the lower classes toward the dominant class. It was actually impossible for a low-class man to marry a high-class woman in the Joseon dynasty. There was a rule called *bansangje* (班常制) which strictly discriminated against common people from the high class. *Ban* represents *yangban* (兩班), which is the aristocratic learned class with the right to become officers. By contrast, *sang* represents common people who actually had little chance to become administrative officers. In this system, a common man was not allowed to marry a high-class woman. The attempted rape was an attempt to violate the rule and transgresses this barrier. It further reflects the subversive desire against the hierarchical system that discriminated between the divided classes.

This subversiveness, however, does not simply determine how the story operated ideologically. There is ambivalence in terms of subversiveness. Although the story itself undeniably reflects the subversiveness of low classes, it ambivalently advocates the dominant values by eulogizing her commitment to chastity. Furthermore, she could not reveal her death without the magistrate's help, which shows her reliance upon male power. To comprehend how it paradoxically worked against the subversive desires, it is helpful to examine how the story has been accepted and canonized. The process in which the story was canonized, especially since the 19th century, reflects how the story was influenced by the dynamics of ideologies. The way it was accepted, appropriated, and modified by varied classes reflects the ideological intervention.

The narrative was transmitted in the verse form of *gwachesi* (科體詩) [civil service examination poetry] among the literati of the Yeongnam region in the late 19th century. As the story was circulated among Confucian scholars, it has been employed as an ideological tool to reinforce the dominant value system. During the late Joseon dynasty, it served to oppress the latent subversiveness by emphasizing the criminal deeds of the murderer. In this context, Grayson indicates "two principal themes of this type of folklore, the emphasis on the preservation of a maiden's chastity, and the punishment of an unscrupulous person who violated the tabus surrounding her chastity." In this light, he further argues: "This tale has two principal functions, the validation of cultural values such as proper sexual and marital relations, and the maintenance of conformity to such values by illustrating the horrible punishment meted out to those persons who are found to have violated those values" (Grayson 307). The chastity of Arang characterized by the combination of beauty and purity is contrasted with the evil of the nanny and raper. By accentuating the evil of lower classes with subversive desire, the story serves to reinforce the status quo (Kang). The story can be regarded as a backlash against the challenge against the dominant structure of the late Joseon society. The concern

with her chastity reflects the operation of the dominant ideology. The late Joseon society was unstable with its hierarchical system being undermined. Towards the modern age, the rise of trade threatened the former strict hierarchy based on the old farming society. In such a state, the story reflects the threatened *yangban* classes' anxiety and subsequent futile efforts to retain their status once strictly demarcated from mid-low classes. Criticizing the rape and murder runs parallel to criticizing the challenge to the preexisting hierarchical structure. Sexual ideology is intertwined with the dominant ideology.

3. ARANGGAK HONORING CHASTITY

It is needed to analyze how the canonized story had a substantial influence on Korean culture. It seems that the intention to emphasize chastity bore fruit in many aspects. What epitomizes the respect for Arang's chastity is Aranggak (阿娘閣), which is located right beside Yeongnamru. It is also known as Aranggak Shrine or Aranggak Pavilion, as it is a shrine commemorating her in the form of a small wooden pavilion. The place also has been called Arangsa (阿娘祠) occasionally. At present, 'Arangsa' is actually an inscription on the wooden signboard put on



Figure 5. The entrance gate of Aranggak with the signboard of *Jeongsunmun*, which means the gate of

the pavilion. The inscribed signboard in a traditional style was attached to the pavilion in 1963 when the venue was renovated. Aranggak was registered as Gyeongsangnam-do Cultural Heritage Material No. 26 in 1983. Thus, it is proper to officially use Aranggak rather than Arangsa. The early 1980s was a period when the military regime had power. For this reason, it can be acknowledged that the conservative stance was still continuing.

Aranggak was originally set up to mourn and commemorate Arang during the Joseon period. It can be conjectured that the origin of Aranggak, though in a form different from the present, dates back at least to the early 19th century. In *Geumgyepildam* (錦溪筆談) [*Writing Stories of Silky Stream*, 1865]⁴ Seo Yuyeong notes that he saw Arangsa, which means that it was in the form of *sadang*, that is ancestral shrine. As no other earlier record is found, it can be conjectured that the construction of the shrine does not date far back to a much earlier period than the 19th century. However, it is known that there had been *yeolnyeosa* (烈女祠) originally at the place of the present Aranggak. Arangsa succeeded or superseded *yeolnyeosa* in

⁴ It is also a collection of folktales. It is regarded as reflective of the collector's viewpoint rather than the original folktales.

its emphasis on chastity, as *yeolnyeosa* is a shrine for pious woman. Meaning ‘pious woman’ or ‘virtuous woman,’ *yeolnyeo* is a title conferred upon women who kept chastity, especially when widowed. A woman’s chastity and loyalty to her spouse were considered so important that the government awarded the title of *yeolnyeo* to devout women who remained loyal to their late husbands. Originally intended to set a good example, the title conventionally regarded as prestigious, in some cases, caused absurd situations. Widows would kill themselves in order to be acknowledged as virtuous women. “The suicide of *yeolnyeo* was no doubt the final and perfectly faultless expression of self-restraint and self-denial” (Kim 2005: 149). Its representativeness of the patriarchal oppression can be affirmed.

In the modern period, Aranggak gained momentum for some reasons. The causes seem to be not confined to the ideological purposes, but include efforts



Figure 6. Portrait of Arang by Kim Eunho.

to keep traditional values and boost the local economy. To retrace some monumental events, its significance was marked by Ha Dongju who wrote ‘Aranggak’ on a signboard in 1901. In 1910, *Arangyujibi* (阿娘遺址碑) was built by Lee Eungdeok and Park Sanghee, former officers of Miryang. ‘Yujibi’ means memorial stone for the site where someone remains. Considering their social positions as males, they probably had a conservative idea about female chastity. On the other hand, it can be conjectured that it was intended to keep the traditional values of Korea. The memorial stone’s site is where the dead body of Arang was found in the bamboo forest. The bamboo forest is a symbolic place. In Korea, like many other cultures, bamboo has many symbolic meanings, mostly positive. Bamboo is a representative symbol of Confucian virtues. As a symbol of tenacity, bamboo symbolizes the unbeatable loyalty of a retainer and the chastity of a virtuous woman. As Kim Bitna notes, in shamanism, the bamboo forest is regarded as a holy place that does not allow the approach of evil spirits in the secular world (1-2). These symbolic meanings match her characteristics. In 1930, *Jeongsunarangjibi* (貞純阿娘之碑)⁵ was set up with the renovation of Yeongnamru, and a pavilion was built for the memorial stone. Actually, the pavilion was titled

⁵ *Jeongsun* means chastity, and *jibi* means one’s tombstone or memorial stone. Thus, it means chaste Arang’s memorial stone. It is also a collection of folktales. It is regarded as reflective of the collector’s viewpoint rather than the original folktales.

Aranggak. The intentions of these efforts seem to be motivated by traditional conventions rather than ideological projects. The first half of the 20th century was the period when Japan occupied Korea. Japan, with a strong Buddhist tradition, had no reason to strengthen the traditional Confucian values of Korea. Chastity was never a value the Japanese thought as important as Koreans regarded.

It was during the early 1960s when Arang began to be honored significantly. In the early period of Park Jung-Hee regime (1960~1979), the military government needed an ideological apparatus to justify and reinforce its dominance. The regime



Figure 7. Arangyujibi within the bamboo forest.

used the tale to strengthen the moral ideas that the governments valued. The vicious acts of the conspiracy are to blame, but what matters is the way the tale reinforces the dominant ideologies. The tendency to honor chastity as a way of reinforcing conservative values and dominant ideology continued in the modern period. The renovation in 1963 was the result of the governmental project. The First Lady Yuk Young-soo expressed regret for the fact that the place had not been duly

respected. Thus, she asked Yidang Kim Eunho⁶ to paint the portrait of Arang. She visited the fixed Arangsadang and donated the portrait on the 9th of October 1963.

Some aspects of Aranggak need to be scrutinized. On a board built in the shrine, it is stated that the original name of Arang was Yun Dong-ok (尹東玉). However, it is not certain whether a lad with the name actually existed. It was not until the early modern period that Arang's name was notified (Chung 267). It can be noted that actually Arang was once described as a courtesan or a woman without a known name in some tales orally circulated among mid-low classes. However, her status was gradually changed into the daughter of the governor. Towards the modern period, she attained her present name and status. In this light, her name might be a creation intended to emphasize the characteristics of the victim. Her name seems to be a specimen of the beautiful maiden of nobility. Her family name Yun seems to have been deliberately chosen, for Yun is the family of many queens of the Joseon dynasty. 'Dong' means east and 'ok' jade. Jade was the main precious material for jewelry used by women in the Joseon dynasty. In Korea, beautiful women often have been compared to jade, especially in the past.

⁶ Kim Eunho (1892-1979) is the most representative portrait painter in the 20th century Korea. With a reputation for many portraits of beauties, he also painted the portraits of Gojong, the last King of the Joseon dynasty. Although his ability was acknowledged, he was blamed for his tendency to serve for dominant forces. He worked both for the Japanese empirical force and the oppressive Korean government after the emancipation. His portrait of Arang also can be seen in this light.

It seems that the tale was modified for the purpose of emphasizing chastity. The difference can be found in other aspects of the shrine. There is a modern signboard narrating the story for visitors. The authorized version of the story on it is not merely different from but even contrasted with other versions circulated among common people. It states that she killed herself. But in many other versions, she is depicted to have been murdered. Her suicide was intended to honor more pronouncedly her efforts to keep chastity. Thus, the shrine serves to glorify the dominant ideology of the Joseon dynasty. This is a remarkable aspect of the ideological intervention.

4. CONCLUSION

By retracing the ways the legend came to be canonized and produce cultural heritage, we could find that the dominant ideologies were significantly influential in shaping its contour. At this moment, a question might be raised as to what role the story and its byproducts, including the cultural heritage, play in modern society. Although the Park Jung-Hee regime belongs to the modern age, the present is quite different from the 60s and 70s when the pre-modern tradition remained much preserved. Thus, we need to examine how its emphasis on chastity is evaluated.

To discuss this, cultural programs associated with Arang need to be examined. Representatively, Miryang Arangje, a festival centered around Arang has been held annually since 1963 and is still being held. One of its main events is 'Arang *Gyusu Seonbal Daehoe*,' which is actually a competition for Miss Arang. The participants are evaluated based on their capacity to practice traditional deeds, which was regarded as apt for woman in the past. Apparently, the conventional values with which Arang was endowed might seem to be still respected. However, such programs and activities commemorating her are merely a part of the local festival. The present viewpoint upon chastity is quite contrasted with the conventional one. Actually, there is a controversy over the Miss Arang competition. Recently, a sort of female association in the region demanded the Arang competition be abolished. For it is against the feminist values of modern society. Actually, the competition is not so popular as a local midwife recalls. Kim Sookhee who has been a local resident for decades says that in her young days, Miss Arang was a dream for girls. She notes that her daughter participated in the competition, but the former glory had gone away. Mainly old people watched the competition (Shin). This demonstrates that gender awareness in Korea has changed for the past decades.

On the other hand, the latent subversiveness embedded in the plot seems to have received and still receives little attention from the public. Only a limited number of scholars have paid attention to it. Common people might simply think of the legend as one of the common old ghost stories, as old Korean stories are mainly in the frame of *gwonseonjing-ak* (勸善懲惡).⁷ However, to fully

⁷ Lee Hyunsuk accounts for the concept regarding the rewards of deeds: "if one does good, he deserves blessing, and if he does bad, he deserves punishment although it does not look like true in practice" (173).

comprehend the implications of the tale, the recognition of ideological operation is needed.⁸

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