



Characteristics of Female Figures and Memories of Women in Korean Narrative Songs

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Korean narrative songs have, since the Middle Ages, formed and transmitted the memories and figures of women. These narrative songs have been created and handed down as labour songs mainly by lower-class women, reconstructing women's specific experiences and memories. Korean narrative songs in traditional society are mostly concerned with the life of a woman in a male-centred, patriarchal society. The female figures expressed in these songs show how Korean women recognize their social reality. The figuration of women in Korean narrative songs can be categorized into 4 branches according to whether or not adversity is resolved to meet personal or social expectations. The A type (Personal expectations +, social expectations +) and the B type (Personal expectations +, social expectations -) are very rare in narrative folk songs. In the C type (Personal expectations -, social expectations +), the female figure lives according to social expectations or commits suicide. Most Korean narrative songs belong in the D type (Personal expectations -, social expectations -). When her personal expectations conflict with social expectations, the female figure commits suicide or becomes a monk. These female figures continue to reappear in women's memories and are embodied in narrative songs. This shows the tragedy of women's lived experiences and their perception of reality in Korean traditional society. The narrative songs were suitable for women's work because they were lengthy and replaced expectation and frustration with the sequence of events. Women poured out their sorrows by singing narrative songs, allowing them to forget the suffering of hard work. Narrative folk songs still have many implications in Korean society because the status and reality of women still does not match that of the democratic, equal society we believe we have achieved. However, it cannot be denied that narrative songs contributed to the movement towards gender equality in Korean society.

KEYWORDS:

narrative song, women, gender, class, Korea

INTRODUCTION

Korean narrative songs have been created and handed down by word of mouth by the common women of past dynasties and the rural, working-class women of today. While mainstream Korean literary tradition has been dominated by men, the upper class, and the written word, the narrative folk song tradition has, conversely, been led by women, the lower class, and oral tradition.¹ Women remembered events that

1 Dongil Cho examined the generic characteristics and functions of Korean narrative songs that came from the fact that they were mainly sung as weaving labor songs of common women (Dongil, 1970). After Cho's Study, comparative studies of Korean narrative songs



were unusual or impressive in their everyday experiences, and they sang about these memories to share with other women. In songs, these memories have been passed down from generation to generation and have been extended to the usual and common experiences of women. Women sympathized with the situations of the protagonists in the narrative folk songs and became angered by the unjust repression imposed by the antagonists. Narrative folk songs enabled women to create emotional communities that communicated, comforted, and solidified one another's feelings.

However, most women in Korean society, especially those who sang narrative folk songs, were commoners, occupying the lowest position in society. In Korean traditional society, the average woman belonged to the lower class in a class system which was divided into the upper class (Yangban) and the lower class (Pyeongmin); they also held a subordinate position in the male-centred patriarchal system. Therefore, the average woman would have been doubly oppressed by her class and gender. Moreover, these women were suppressed by a very solid social structure that has continued almost unchanged until modern times.

This article will examine what Korean women wanted to share and remember through narrative folk songs, how the figures of women are expressed in them, and how women have expressed and transmitted their experiences and feelings through narrative folk songs in the patriarchal class system which dominated Korean society.

The materials investigated are selected from *The Comprehensive Collection of Korean Folklore* (85 volumes, 1980–1992) by the Academy of Korean Studies. They surveyed and collected over 21,000 works of oral literature and published them in 85 books during the 1980s. They include 15,107 folktales, 6,187 folk songs, 376 traditional chants, and 21 miscellaneous oral pieces.²

WHAT WOMEN WANTED TO REMEMBER: FEMALE FIGURES EXPRESSED IN NARRATIVE SONGS

These narrative folk songs consist of women's memories which are handed down by word of mouth. Through narrative folk songs, what kind of images did women want to remember? What are the figures of women imbued in women's memories? The main characters of Korean narrative folk songs are mostly women. Most of these characters were singers or listeners themselves of the narrative folk songs, or women

and Anglo-American Ballads have been investigated by Gyuman Han, Cheondeuk Pi, and Myeongho Sim (Gyuman, 1988; Cheondeuk & Myeongho, 1971). I have shed light on the genre, type classification, and the comparison between Korean narrative songs and Anglo-American Ballads (Youngsook, 2009; Youngsook, 2018).

- ² Following up on what was started in that project, the Revision and Expansion Project has been ongoing over a period of 10 years (2008–2018). They are going to integrate the materials collected by using advanced digital information technology to build a comprehensive digital oral literature information system. <https://gubi.aks.ac.kr/web/Default.asp> [accessed 22th January 2019] According to my research, about 1,010 narrative song versions of 6,187 folk songs were extracted in the first project.



the singers and listeners witnessed or heard about around them. These narrative folk songs consist of shifts and repetitions of 'expectation' and 'frustration' (Youngsook, 1996, pp. 49–53, pp. 85–86). 'Expectation' appears when the demands of the main character are fulfilled, and 'frustration' appears when these demands are not fulfilled. By marking expectation with a (+) and frustration with a (-), the figuration of the women in narrative folk songs can be expounded according to whether the protagonist resolves her suffering with expectation (+) or frustration (-).

Moreover, expectations can be further divided into the personal expectations that women hold individually and the social expectations that society imposes on women. Therefore, a situation in which adversity is resolved to meet expectation is marked as (+). Adversely, a situation in which adversity is not resolved is marked as (-). The figuration of the women in narrative folk songs can be categorized into 4 branches as follows:³

A. Personal expectations (+) Social expectations (+) [Female figure who aligns personal expectations with social expectations]: Personal expectation and social expectation are in agreement. The main character is obedient and very faithful to social norms. This female figure occurs in almost no narrative folk songs, and, when it does, appears mainly in the Gasa written in Hangul (Korean phonetic alphabet) by upper class women.

B. Personal expectations (+) Social expectations (-) [Female figure fulfilling personal expectations against social expectations]: Personal expectations are realized but not social expectations. The main character is faithful to her own desires and resists social norms. This female figure is very rare in narrative folk songs but does appear in a few versions such as 'Jori Jangsa' (The Strainer Vendor), 'Hussana Taryeong' (The Fancy Man), and 'Yangdong Gama' (The Broken Pot).

C. Personal Expectations (-) Social Expectations (+) [Female figure whose personal expectations are frustrated by social expectations]: Personal expectations are not realized but social expectations are met. The main character resists social norms due to her own desires but is frustrated. In opposition to her own expectations, the female figure lives according to social expectations or commits suicide. There are a few narrative songs with these features, including 'Sillang Bugo' (The Death of the Bridegroom), 'Seodap Norae' (The Bachelor Dying of a Sickness), and 'Ssang Garagji' (The Twin Rings: The Girl Suiciding because of Suspicion of Infidelity).

D. Personal Expectations (-) Social Expectations (-) [Female figure frustrated with both personal and social expectations]: Personal expectations are not realized, and social expectations are also not fulfilled. The main character is frustrated without being able to resist social norms. When her personal expectations conflict with social

³ I have categorized the representative types of Korean narrative folk songs. It is based on the major figuration of them, but a few versions may show different tendencies. Therefore, it is necessary to expand and examine all types of Korean narrative songs in the future,



expectations, the female figure commits suicide or becomes a monk. Most narrative folk songs belong here, such as ‘Jinju-Nanggun’ (The Husband Getting a Concubine), ‘Yisawonne Mattalaegi’ (Mr. Lee’s Eldest Daughter), ‘Gangsil Doryeong’ (The Bride Giving Birth), and ‘Sijibsari Norae’ (The Daughter-In-Law Becoming a Monk).

	Personal Expectations (+)		
	B. ‘Jori Jangsa (the Strainer Vendor)’, ‘Hussana Taryeong (The Fancy Man)’, ‘Yangdong Gama (The Broken Pot)’	A. Gasa of upper-class women	
Social Expectations (-)	D. ‘Jinju Nanggun (The Husband Getting a Concubine)’, ‘Sijibsari Norae (The Daughter-In-Law Becoming a Monk)’, ‘Gangsil Doryeong (The Bride Giving Birth)’	C. ‘Sillang Bugo (The Death of the Bridegroom)’, ‘Seodap Norae (The Bachelor Dying of a Sickness)’, ‘Ssang-garagji (The Twin Rings)’	Social Expectations (+)
	Personal Expectations (-)		

Based on these results, it is evident that most of the female figures memorialized through narrative folk songs do not meet personal expectations or social expectations. Narrative folk songs show the figures of tragic women who are frustrated because they are unable to achieve not only their personal expectations, but also social expectations. Therefore, in these songs, the female figures who do not meet social expectations, who are frustrated by their reality even as they try to harmonize with society, are highlighted. It is also a real picture of common women in traditional Korean society before modern times.

There are few narrative folk songs that realize both personal expectations and social expectations, which suggests how hard the lives of common women were in traditional society before the modern age. Women were relegated to living unhappy lives that did not fit their personal expectations, and society was still not satisfied with them. Common women tried to express their own traits and their real lived experiences through narrative folk songs. This is in contrast to the folktales enjoyed by men, in which the main character is successful personally and socially; the protagonists achieve both personal and social expectations through imagination and fiction. Women singing narrative folk songs used to say, ‘Songs are true; stories are a lie’. It shows that they considered the stories of narrative folk songs to be ‘true,’ or reflective of reality.

The genre of narrative song in which both personal and social expectations are realized is Gasa, written by upper-class women. Gasa is the poetry written in Hangul



(the Korean alphabet) during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910 A.D.), which was mainly enjoyed by men and women of the upper class. Most of the female protagonists in *Gasa* are portrayed as exemplary women who have mastered the norms of marital life and have overcome all suffering according to these norms. Though the suffering of marital life shows up in *Gasa*, the writers keep their dignity and nobility as upper-class women by resolving the conflict wisely. This is in complete contrast with the narrative folk songs of common women.

Very rarely, there are songs in which social expectations are not met, but personal expectations are. These songs appear when the main character, regardless of social expectations, behaves according to her own personal expectations and desires. The comic narrative folk songs are included in this type. In the cases of 'Jori Jangsa' (The Strainer Vendor) and 'Fussana Taryeong' (The Fancy Man), the main characters are exposed to their own sexual demands, contrary to social expectations. In the case of the 'Yangdong Gama (The Broken Pot)', when the daughter-in-law breaks a pot by mistake and is asked to pay for the pot by all the members of her husband's family, she resists them and asks them to pay for her own ruined body.

Somewhat differently, there are a few cases that meet social expectations even if personal expectations are not achieved. For example, when the bridegroom dies suddenly before marriage, as appears in 'Sillang Bugo' (The Death of the Bridegroom), the betrothed Korean woman must go to the bridegroom's house to live with her parents-in-law for the rest of her life. Another case is 'Ssang Garagji' (The Twin Rings), which depicts a woman who has been suspected of unfaithfulness by her brother; she commits suicide in accordance with the Confucian ideology of fidelity and the expectations of society. This shows how the notion of fidelity became a great oppression for women in traditional Korean society before modern times. Although women who committed suicide were praised for their sincerity by society, women could become aware of the unfairness of women's sacrifices through these narrative songs.

The majority of Korean folk narrative songs are types of 'Sijipsari Norae' (The Daughter-In-Law Becoming a Monk) that deal with the suffering caused by a husband's family (Youngsook, 1996). Most Korean common women had personal expectations of being loved by their parents-in-law and husband, but, contrary to this expectation, parents-in-law often made unreasonable demands and abused their daughter-in-law. The figures of women suffering from this unjust treatment are represented by the 'I' in narrative folk songs, as well as the singer and her audience. In these songs, the protagonist usually becomes a monk or commits suicide. This suggests that the singers thought their reality could not be changed. However, some versions show a sense of resistance to the reality of women through a paradoxical solution, such as the union of husband and wife after death.

In this way, narrative folk songs have remembered and shared the images of women who are depressed and frustrated by the unjust demands and expectations of society. By repeatedly singing about these women, sometimes alone or sometimes together, the singers and the audience empathize with the main characters in the narrative folk songs and become angry with the unjust reality imposed on women. This empathy and anger could have been the basis for women to become aware of the

unjust status of women and, in the modern era, to stand as dignified subjects against the unfairness of society.



HOW WOMEN MEMORIZED THE STORIES: ENJOYMENT AND TRANSMISSION OF NARRATIVE SONGS

The narrative songs were mostly sung while working at a spinning wheel or weaving on a loom. Weaving requires a long song with stories that can alleviate boredom. The repetitive movement of weaving and the regular rhythm from the loom naturally added a rhythm to the story. The reason that narrative folk songs have become rhymed story-songs is related to these monotonous and repetitive tasks. It is presumed that these weaving songs were formed long ago, sung even during the ancient Three Kingdoms period (57 B.C.–668 A.D.). The weaving song ‘Hoesogog (會蘇曲)’ (32 A.D.) is known as a sad tune that was sung by the woman who lost the weaving competition in Gyeongju, the capital of the Silla dynasty.

The lyrics of ‘Hoesogog’ have been not transmitted. However, it is thought that it was a narrative folk song with characteristics similar to ‘Loom Song’, which was sung while weaving. The ‘Loom Song’ has a detailed description of the parts of the loom that move when a woman is weaving, and the words of the song show the expert knowledge and emotion that came from women’s weaving labour. The song also tells the story of a woman. Who, having finished making her husband’s garments, waits for him at the gate, but he has died. Her husband’s death takes away all her energy, which had previously let her overcome the long hours of work with the expectation of meeting him. Therefore, the phrase ‘Hoeso (會蘇)’ in the title probably indicates a desperate anticipation that they will be able to be together and live again in the afterlife.

The narrative folk songs are not necessarily sung only while weaving. In addition to weaving, common women took care of almost all the housework and outdoor chores, such as ploughing, sewing, rice planting, weeding, cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Most women’s work consisted of simple and repetitive movements that required long hours of labour, so it was necessary to sing narrative songs to facilitate this. The narrative songs were suitable for women’s work because they go on for a long time, replacing expectation and frustration with the sequence of events. Women poured out their sorrows by singing narrative songs, allowing them to forget the suffering of hard work.

Narrative folk songs have been sung mostly as solos, but sometimes they have also been sung in a call and response, or antiphonal style. While singing at the loom, women sang alone, but when they gathered in a room to turn a spinning wheel or to make thread, they used to sing the refrains of other women’s songs, singing the words alternately. The work that women did together turning spinning wheels or making thread is called ‘dulge sam’ (cooperative spinning), while the place is known as ‘mulle bang’ (spinning wheel room). During the breaks in spinning thread, they put a gourd over a large barrel filled with water and sang while drumming a tune on the gourd; alternatively, they sang these songs while playing a bow used for making cotton thread. During these rest times, the song that was often sung was ‘Dungdange Tarryeong’.



The refrain, ‘Dungdangedeong dungdangedeong danggi dungdange dungdangedeong’, adds to the main words of the song.



FIGURE 1: Mulbangu (Water Drum)⁴



FIGURE 2: Hwalbangu (Bow Drum)⁵

These are pictures of the tools used in singing ‘Dungdange Taryeong’. Picture 1 is the Mulbangu (Water Drum); where a gourd is put over a large barrel filled with water and the women sing while drumming a tune on the gourd. Picture 2 is the Hwalbangu (Bow Drum); the women sing these songs while playing a bow used for making cotton thread.

⁴ Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture/ <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/dic/21/picture/73208/1> [accessed 13th February 2019].

⁵ Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture/ <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/kr/dic/21/picture/73207/1> [accessed 13th February 2019].



In addition, women also sang narrative songs as the main lyrics of ‘Kanggangsulla’ or ‘Kwejinachingchingnane’, dancing songs sung at leisure time after finishing the farm work or during a festival period. It is noteworthy that narrative songs sung in leisure have straightforward, aggressive expressions and bold female figures compared to the songs sung while working, even though they are the same type of song. This may be due to the fact that realizing personal expectations, or comic content, rather than failing personal expectations, or tragic content, is better suited to the situation. By laughing together at a daring woman challenging the oppressive reality of the day, singing loudly, and dancing and jumping hand in hand, women would have been able to experience catharsis.

A group of women singing narrative folk songs was not only a labour community cooperating to do hard work, but also an emotional community sharing feelings of sorrow and anger and comforting each other. This was possible because the narrative folk songs were sung in a closed community of common women of the same age who shared work, experience, and emotion. Narrative folk songs are not usually sung when males or females of other ages are involved.

However, when women sang the narrative folk songs while doing outdoor work such as ploughing or planting rice, upper or middle-class men might have had a chance to hear them sing the songs. During the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392 A.D.), narrative folk songs were collected; some of them were adopted into the court music tradition, and some songs were also translated into written poems by upper class men. Some songs, such as ‘Woljeonghwa’ (Moon Flower) and ‘Yeseonggang’ (River Yeseong), which are introduced in *The Music History of Goryeo*, can also be found in the narrative song tradition of ‘Jinju Nanggung’ (The Husband Getting a Concubine) and ‘The Chess Bet’. ‘Jinju Nanggung’ consists of a woman committing suicide when her husband brings home a concubine, and ‘The Chess Bet’ consists of a husband staking his wife in a bet and handing her over to a rich merchant.

During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910 A.D.), the narrative songs were translated into Sino-Korean poetry or recreated as the long Sijo and Gasa styles of poetry. For example, ‘Ssang Garagji’ (The Twin Rings) and ‘Chinjeong Norae’ (Wish to Go Home) were recreated as the Sino-Korean poem ‘Five Versions of Planting Rice Song’. Similarly, ‘Jori Jangsa’ (The Strainer Vendor) is presumed to influence the Gasa ‘Imcheon Byeolgog’, which deals with the relationship between an old widow and a vendor; the long Sijo ‘Mother-In-Law, Don’t Blame the Daughter-In-Law’ was preceded by ‘On the Wedding Night, the Bride Broke a Pot’. The transformations of the narrative folk songs as they were translated or re-created in upper class, male literary genres show that a change in the perception of men about the reality of women was taking place.

It was after the 1920s that Korean folk songs began to be recorded or surveyed by researchers. In 1949, Go Jeong-Ok compiled several narrative folk songs in *The Chosun Folk Song Study* (Jeong, 1949). In the 1930s and 1940s, even though many folk songs were adapted, revised, and released as records, the narrative folk songs were far from such popular revival. It is likely that the long lyrics and monotonous rhythms of narrative folk songs were not suitable for commercialization. Amid the wave of modernization and industrialization, the narrative folk songs were handed down only in the memories of rural women.



However, when the democratization movement took place in the 1970s and 1980s, some narrative folk songs became resistance songs against the oppression of women in the male-dominated society of Korea. 'Jinju Nanggun' (The Husband Getting a Concubine) and 'Tabakne' (The Girl Going to her Mom's Grave) are good examples. As awareness of female oppression and unequal social structures increased, these songs were revived as the music of the student-centred People's Movement, and they were even released on record and became popular songs.

The narrative folk songs still have many implications for Korean society because the status and reality of women still does not match that of the democratic, equal society we believe we have achieved. However, it cannot be denied that narrative songs contributed to the movement towards gender equality in Korean society (Youngsook, 2017, p. 129).

CONCLUSION

This article examined how Korean narrative songs have formed and transmitted the memories and figures of women since the Middle Ages. These narrative songs have been created and handed down mainly by women, reconstructing women's specific experiences and memories. Korean narrative songs in traditional society are mostly concerned with the life of a woman in a male-centred, patriarchal society. The female figures expressed in these songs show how Korean women recognized their social reality.

The figuration of women in Korean narrative songs can be categorized into 4 branches according to whether or not adversity is resolved to meet expectations: The A type (personal expectation and social expectation are aligned) and the B type (personal expectations are realized but not social expectations) are very rare in narrative folk songs. In the C type (personal expectations are not realized, but social expectations are met), the female figure lives according to social expectations or commits suicide, as in 'Sinlang Bugo' (The Death of the Bridegroom), 'Seodap Norae' (The Bachelor Dying of a Sickness), and 'Ssang Garagji' (The Twin Rings). Most Korean narrative songs belong in the D type (personal and social expectations are not realized). When her personal expectations conflict with social expectations, the female figure commits suicide or becomes a monk, as in 'Jinju-Nanggun' (The Husband Getting a Concubine) and 'Sijibsari Norae' (The Daughter-In-Law Becoming a Monk).

These female figures continually reappear in women's memories and are embodied in narrative songs. This shows women's tragic reality and their perception of reality in Korean traditional society. These songs were released on record and revived as songs of resistance by the popular singers and progressive students who demanded democratization during the era of dictatorship in South Korea.

Although narrative folk songs could serve as a healing mechanism for common women to overcome an unjust reality, they could not be used as a tool to overthrow the social structures that suppressed them. Even so, narrative folk songs at least gave women the opportunity to criticize and reflect on the injustice they experienced,

which started to make cracks in the seemingly solid foundation of their patriarchal society. It would be possible to say that the tradition of transmitting memories through narrative folk songs has allowed Korean women to strive to stand as dignified subjects for a gender equal society.



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