

A Comparative Ecological Study of
The Water Babies, Sim Cheong, and Princess Bari

Ilgu Kim (Hannam University)

I.

Since long ago, the subject of the child has been among those excluded from the ordinary literary discourses in Korea's English and American literary studies. Especially, in Korean society, where Confucian tradition remains strong, the social position of the child is yet slight, despite the decreasing number of children and growing concerns regarding children's education and their character formation. However, it is notable that reflective and re-evaluative thoughts on the implications of children vis-à-vis adults are often found in the press, media and academia. Along with this, the increasing feeling of danger regarding the environment also belongs to the many recent changes attracting our attention. Mountains, water and air, previously regarded as free, limitless gifts to humans, have become important elements that must be preserved from technological innovation and destructive civilization.

This study treats the two topics, the child and nature, at the same time, and considers their thematic connection and cultural implications through the comparative viewpoints of folklore and fairy tales between the East and the West. As the pure mirror that reflects human society, nature and the child reveal both the idealized ecosystem and the various conflicts in human society. Among the many natural elements, water could be said to be the most natural simply because both the surface of the earth and the constituents of our body consist of 70% water. Therefore, the interaction between

water and the human, especially the child as the prototype, has been one of the most popular motifs in fairy tales, folklore and mythology. Focusing on water and the child, this paper deals with three texts: *A Story of Sim Cheong* as a Korean traditional folktale, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* as an example of classic Western children's literature, and *Princess Bari* as an example of mixed folklore between the East and the West. This study aims at recovering the innocence of children and affinity with nature in our post-industrial society, and argues that the sacrifice of children through water is commonly used in the three texts as the source of inspiration and implies the importance of ecocentric values in our efforts to recover wholeness.

II.

Princess Bari, Sim Cheong and the water babies all have one characteristic in common: being children sacrificed through water. These three children all were put into the water due to secular issues, namely just being born as a seventh daughter (Princess Bari), substitution for a monetary offering (Sim Cheong), and a false charge of theft (Tom). However, the water works as the midspace, and their deaths eventually turn into the rebirth of the ecological hero and heroines. Thereafter they provide healing to the blind or sick father and the evil employer.

The resuscitated Princess Bari obtains lifesaving water and revives her dead father in the funeral ceremony. Sim Cheong's reincarnation as a lotus-princess in the pond also results in meeting her father and curing his blindness at a party for only the sightless persons in the nation. The young chimney-sweep Tom, transformed into a newt, successfully makes his employer repent of his harsh treatment of him, also revealing the author Charles Kingsley's view of evolution.

In both the traditional Korean folk tale of Sim Cheong and the Western-influenced Korean shaman tale *Princess Bari*, the daughters are chosen as the scapegoat to solve the family conflict, and "filial piety" is, similarly to what Donald Holzman says of Chinese Confucian stories, "exalted throughout as the root of all virtue" (192). In Eastern tales, including *Kongju Patju* and *Jangwha Hongryun*, it is notable that the personification of feminine principles is often used as a device to bring harmony and peace into the conflicted world. On the other hand, in Kingsley's Victorian children's novel the relationship between the manager and poor boy employee is brought into relief along with the Christian ethics of conscience, righteousness, mercy and salvation. Here the social contract and work ethics exist prior to the family, whose bond was gradually weakened by the growing industrialization.

All of the children in the three stories are outsiders to society despite having their own helpers: Bari Gongduk grandmother and grandfather, Minister Jang's wife, and Sir John at Harthover. Rather, the villains such as Mujangseung, Mother Bbangduk and Grimes, are more powerful than the good-natured helpers in deciding the children's destiny. The watery worlds into which the children are thrown all fall under the category that Maria Nikolajeva calls "the secondary chronotope," the magical space where time twists and fantasy and reality are interconnected through a magical item, helper or messengers (187).

Luckily for the drowned children, the magical helpers are all godly figures who can transform them into supernatural protagonists. Buddha and Amita for Princess Bari, the Dragon King and Lord of Heaven for Sim Cheong, and Irish fairy and Mother Carey for the Water Baby are all the instruments of poetic justice. However, in Korean

folktales the evildoers are not punished as severely as those in the Western tales. Rather, the bad mother Bbangduk runs away with a richer husband after deserting the blind father of Sim Cheong, and Mujangseung, Bari's bad husband, also is rewarded with seven sons by Princess Bari instead of being punished for enslaving Bari for nine years.

Overall, the self-effacing virtues of the feminine, such as perseverance, compassion and altruism, as we see in Dangun's foundation mythology and the story of Kongjui and Patjui, are described in painful detail, which characterizes the Korean literature as that of *han* (恨) or deep sorrow. In time, subjection of lower class women in Korean literature leads the heroines to recognize the greater truth because their abject position in society brings them closer to the nature and virtue. We might call this "ecological justice." For instance, Princess Bari labors over the wash, lays a bridge and builds a tower for others to obtain the life-saving water for her moribund father. Similarly, Sim Cheong begs for alms and prays over the well water at its purest to open her father's blind eyes. These abject daughters do not regret their hard work and pains at all. Instead, their harmonious and virtuous life in accordance with nature is finally much appreciated by the magical helpers.

In her analysis of Asian children's literature Donna Norton points out that "Buddhism emphasized honoring of nature--mountains, valleys, and rivers play a great part in enlightenment" (206). This ecocentric concept lies in sharp contrast to the Western notion of the so-called "moralized landscape" where nature is narrated and resonated according to the humans' volatile emotions. The dragon as the symbol of the dynamic

natural principle reveals clearly the cultural differences regarding controllable or mystical nature between the West and East.

The dragon is often, as Donna Norton suggests, associated with water, and more directly with "the energy of the water cycle: rain, river, sea, vapor, and rain", in Asian paintings and folklore (206). In the Western world, however, the dragon, with a root in the Greek word *drakon*, or "snake", often connotes an evil spirit (Finkle). The symbol of the dragon was also often extended to the wielding of the power of nature itself beyond human capacity. Similar to the notion of the dragon, the perception of nature as "red in tooth and claw" is deeply embedded in the psyche of Westerners, so that nature was thought of as something to be subdued by human reason and science. In terms of modern ecological views, Easterners' treatment of nature is closer to the views of the 'dark Greens.' According to Jonathan Bate, 'dark Greens' are deep ecologists who radically regard technology as the problem, such that we must return to nature, viewing nature as existing not only for our own sake (37). On the other hand, Westerners' view is mostly similar to that of the 'light Greens', the environmentalists who value nature because it contributes to our well-being and can be controlled properly by our responsible consumption and production (37).

In Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, Tom survives drowning thanks to Mother Carey and transforms into a newt, which is compared to a dragon in the second chapter. Kingsley says, "People call them[fossils] Pterodactyls; but that is only because they are ashamed to call them flying dragons, after denying so long that flying dragons could exist" (53). In a similar way, Kingsley mentions, "The wiser they are the less inclined they will be to say positively that there are no water-babies." (54)

His assertion that "There are land-babies – then why not water-babies?" reflects his belief in evolution theory. Human beings' active stewardship between the Creator and Creation is more concretely described in Tom's dialogue with Mother Carey in the end. In comparison, the Dragon King in the case of Sim Cheong simply rules over all the process of nature and human society. The reason why the Dragon often represents the Confucian wise and benevolent ruler is based upon the Asians' non-anthropocentric conception of the intrinsic values of ecological systems and the interconnectedness of all the components in the universe.

For Princess Bari, rooted in the King Erin episode in Celtic mythology (Kim Whanhee), the lifesaving waters Princess Bari finally obtains from Mujangseung strongly evoke the Judeo-Christian tradition of baptism, where life is reborn through the shedding of holy water. Also, the river which Bari crosses is connected with limbo, as death and life are separated by the river, reminding us of the river Styx in Greek mythology where boatman Charon functions as the keeper of the neatherworld like Mujangseung.

In *The Water Babies* water functions as a scientific laboratory, and Tom, within this environment, is depicted as "the muscular Christian man of science Kingsley admires" (Wood 208). It is often said that "Christianity's severing of pagan animistic ties to nature made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (Wood 210). However, Kingsley's use of the Gaian Goddess of Mother Carey, especially in the setting of the primordial soup, recovers the lost relationship between humanity and nature. The minister Kingsley's religious faith was said to have "nearly crumbled" when he published this work in 1863. However, it would be more accurate to say that "he was confident that eventually science would support religion"

(Harper 128), especially given that the water baby is, after all, the living soul surviving from Tom's dead body.

III.

The theme of sacrifice of the most innocent children through water among culturally diverse texts was the motive that led me to write this presentation paper, and I think that I now must return and focus more on the original purpose of this writing. Why on earth were children used as immolations for the troubles of their parents and society? In *Sacredness and Violence*, theologian Sungmin Ryu insists that "the sacrificial ritual worked as the buffer which prevented the bigger social violence by providing small sacrificial offerings" (26). This explains why the powerless, innocent children, women and slaves, were often used as immolations. They have one characteristic in common, that there were no avengers of their being killed. The more we are in crisis, the more we require sacrificial rituals. After witnessing the victim of the circumstances, we belatedly come to recognize what we have done wrong. If the scapegoat is the most innocent child, such as Sim Cheong, Princess Bari and Tom, our emotional shock is heightened further, as though our future has reached a dead end. The child is still inside of us, even when we are adults. The child, water and transformation are all interconnected into the web of life. If we transform the self into more varied forms of life, such as the lotus, newt and shaman, we will understand more about the universe where we are not destined to watch over but rather coexist with other creations. Whatever forms we change into, we still need water inside of us, and there will be always need for us to communicate with water, just as Emoto Masaru found his secondary chronotope through the water in *Waters Know the Answers*.

Works Cited

- Bates, Jonathan. *The Song of the Earth*. New York: Picador, 2000.
- Emoto Masaru. *Waters Know the Answers*. trans. Ukkwan Yang. Seoul:
Namushimneun Saram, 2006.
- Harper, Lila Marz. "Children's Literature, Science and Faith: *The Water Babies*."
Children's Literature: New Approach., ed. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein. London and
New York: Palgrave, 2004. 118-43.
- Holzman, Donald. "The Place of Filial Piety in Ancient China." *Journal of American
Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 189-99.
- Kim, Seunghee. *Princess Bari*. Illustrated by Choi, Jungin. Seoul: Biryongso, 2006.
- Kim, Whanhee. "The Shamanist Myth of 'Princess Bari' and Its Western
Counterparts: A Comparative Study of the Tales of the Water of Life."
Comparative Korean Studies, 10.1(2002): 1-33.
- Kingsley, Charles. *The Water Babies*. London: Puffin, 1994.
- Fenkl, Heinz Insu. "The Binary Serpent."
<http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/forbiser.html>
- Nikolajeva, Maria. *Children's Literature Comes of Age*. trans. Seojung Kim. Seoul:
Munhak Kwa Jisung, 2004.
- Norton, Donna. *Multicultural Children's Literature: Through the Eyes of Many
Children*. Columbus: Person, 2004.
- Ryu, Sungmin. *Sacredness and Violence*. Seoul: Salim, 2003.

The Story of Sim Cheong. ed. Korean Classical Literature Institute. Seoul: Baek Am Publishing Co., 2007.

Wood, Naomi. "(Em)Bracing Icy Mothers: Ideology, Identity, and Environment in Children's Fantasy." *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, eds. Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004: 198-214.