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Lures and Horrors of AlTerity: Adapting Korean Tales of Fox Spirits

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Core incidents and motifs in retellings and adaptations of Korean folktales about supernatural foxes, known as Gumiho, have coalesced into a common, readily recognised fox-woman script. Since the end of the 1980s, the fox-woman script has become a focus for cultural conflict. The traditional stories are acknowledged to be part of Korea’s intangible cultural heritage, and as such have been retold conservatively to preserve that heritage (especially in picture books) or have undergone major reinterpretation in attempts to reshape that heritage and imbue it with contemporary significance. According to the fox-woman script, the Gumiho is humankind’s monstrous other, but a variety of works in film or television drama have challenged the assumptions about alterity and monstrosity. This challenge first emerged when moral awareness was attributed to the Gumiho character, especially in conjunction with the narrative strategy of aligning perspective with her, of transforming her from object to subject, and demonstrating that humanity is evidenced by behaviour and not by race or social privilege. Subsequently, general audience television drama and children’s film have explored homologies between a reworked fox-woman script and ethnic otherness, and have transformed the script into a narrative about cultural otherness that advocates an open and other-embracing society.

Key words: Korean folktales, fox-women, adaptation, intangible heritage, ethnic other, monstrous other.

‘You’re different . . . But being different is worse than being ignorant. You can learn to make up for being ignorant, but difference will always remain.’
Dong-Joo, guardian of supernatural boundaries in My Girlfriend is a Gumiho (2010)

‘What on earth have Yeon and I done to you humans? You humans are the ones who hurt us.’
‘Do you still not get it? Do you really have no idea why you should be persecuted and tormented? . . . You are different. You and your child are different from humans. That is the reason.’

Gumiho: Tale of the Fox’s Child (2010)

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‘Yoon Shi-Yeon of the fox race, I love you. Even though I know you’re a Gumiho, I still can’t stop loving you.’ *Forbidden Love* (2004)

For over a thousand years, folktales about fox spirits have been recorded in China, Korea and Japan and constitute a tradition in which some imaginary beings are identified as an alien element within society and thence signify both the attraction and the repulsion that can be generated by a society’s conception of its others, and especially the dangers threatening social fabric. When fox lore originally developed in China, foxes which took human form were mostly predators or tricksters in their relations with humans, but in some cases could be virtuous wives and mothers. Rania Huntington points out that fox lore encapsulated ‘the general human capacity for, and interest in, imagining the alien . . . the shape-changing fox helped to establish the boundaries around the human and the ordinary’ (4). As fox lore spread eastwards, its boundary marking function persisted, even though folktales and legends developed quite different nuances in different countries. In Korean folktales, foxes are predominantly female and almost always evil—female foxes take on human form to seduce or devour unwary men (see Fenkl). Because the Korean term for fox, yeowoo, is also used of a scheming woman, the bad reputation of foxes persists up to the present. At the same time, modern retellings of fox stories often draw on such associations in order to overturn them and thereby question the place of the alien in culture.

THE FOX-WOMAN SCRIPT

Retellings and adaptations of two fox tales in particular have taken many forms over a long period of time, and in combination with a few general motifs are the common pretexts for most modern fox stories and hence in combination constitute what I will refer to as a fox-woman script. ‘The Jewel of the Fox’s Tongue’ (Zōng 18–20) tells of a fox outwitted by a schoolboy after she had killed his ninety-nine schoolfellows by sucking out their human energy. If she did this to all 100, she would ascend to the heavens. As she attempted to suck the boy’s energy by rolling a jewel back and forth between his mouth and her own, the boy swallowed the jewel, thereby both thwarting the fox and gaining great knowledge. The next day, with a party of villagers, he returned to hunt down the fox in its animal form and kill it. Five key motifs here commonly recur in contemporary retellings. First, despite its superhuman powers and extreme longevity, a fox recognises its otherness as inferiority, and desires to become either a heavenly fox or a human being. The means to achieve this, however, is bestial, and the fox is therefore doomed to failure. Second, the fox fails to achieve her desire because she falls short by one item. Third, the fox’s jewel both absorbs human energy and can be a source of wisdom or physical power. Fourth, the fox is a shape-shifter and can readily pass as a human being, although it will always retain one feature or trait that will reveal its true nature. Fifth, the fox, once identified as other, becomes the quarry of a hunter with specialist knowledge.
The second, even better-known, core tale is ‘The Fox-Girl and her Brother’ (Zong 171–4). Versions of this tale vary widely in detail as different folktale conventions are accessed, but the broad story is constant: a wealthy couple have a son (or three sons) but no daughter; after many prayers, a daughter is born, and she becomes the favourite child; when the girl reaches a certain age (five or fifteen), the farm’s livestock begins to die mysteriously; the eldest son (or a herdsman) is appointed to watch in the barn, and sees the daughter remove and eat an animal’s liver; on being told this, the father refuses to believe it, flies into a rage, and drives away the son/herdsman; the event is repeated twice more, until all the sons are banished; the youngest son eventually wanders to a monastery, where a monk explains what has been happening and gives the boy three magic bottles; he returns to the farm, and finds everything dilapidated and deserted, apart from his sister, who has by now killed everything, including his parents; she plans to eat him but he tricks her and escapes and, with the aid of the magic bottles, kills her. Key motifs here are the fox’s substitution for and impersonation of a family member; the excessive affection lavished upon the fox-girl which causes chaos and social collapse; eating of the livers (in Fenkl’s retelling this was in order to become a human being). A motif that appears in, for example, Fenkl’s retelling is that things associated with the fox are perceived in contradictory ways. Foxes live in burrows or caves, but to a human under the fox-spell, a hole in the ground looks like a lavishly appointed mansion, and a meal of rotting carrion looks and tastes like a feast for a king. The main setting in Park Hun-Soo’s 1994 adult film, Gumiho [The fox with nine tails], depends on this convention, whereby the tasteful and beautiful house of the exquisitely beautiful fox-woman Hara is a cistern. As Fenkl points out, the tale of the privileged daughter is ideologically fraught. In favouring his daughter over his son(s), that is, over his proper heirs, the father overturns the ‘proper order’ of a Confucian society, and opens the way for the destruction of the family. According to Fenkl, ‘In a culture in which the old Confucian saying, “Namjon Yeobi” (“Man high, woman low” [sic: Revere man, despise woman]) is still invoked today, the message of this tale is quite clear: to irrationally keep a daughter at the expense of one’s sons is to bring ruin upon the family’.

Such a representation of the fox-demon is reproduced in folktale collections and picture book retellings (Han 1991; Lee and Park 1997; Kim 2005), and reflects a cultural conflict of which this story can be considered an epitome. As South Korea becomes modernised, globalised and Westernised, elements of its intangible cultural heritage—its folktales, folk customs, traditional performing arts, and indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, for example—become increasingly endangered, and this threat is met by an artistic impulse to preserve that heritage in picture books, films, and television dramas. At the same time, however, ideological underpinnings of the cultural heritage may be called into question, so that contemporary retellings of the fox-woman stories are apt to imbue them with contemporary significance. This shift is first evident in retellings for adults: in particular, Park’s Gumiho (1994), the action film Shiri (1999), which is in many ways homologous with Gumiho, the TV drama series,
Gumiho Wehjun [A nine-tailed fox story retold; a.k.a. Forbidden Love] (2004), and Gumiho: Tale of the Fox’s Child (2010). Emerging a little later, there is a parallel development in adaptations targeting family audiences, as with the film Yobi (2007) and the TV series My Girlfriend is a Gumiho (2010). Both groups use modern narrative and film practices to align their audiences with the Gumiho’s perspective, but pursue different thematic outcomes. The first group evidences some consciousness that the Gumiho story is designed to uphold patriarchy by depicting female sexuality as monstrous and devouring, and hence their fox-women enact moral conflict in striving to subordinate their fox characteristics to their desire to be human. The inevitable death of the fox becomes an act of self-sacrifice, although because this sacrifice is on behalf of a male lover the move does little to interrogate gender hierarchy. The second group adapts the story in a very modern way by resignifying the otherness of the fox, that alien creature dwelling within culture, to figure society’s ethnic others, such as immigrant workers and immigrant wives, and thence to challenge social classification of people according to their otherness. This second group constitutes the most innovative uses of the script, but it nevertheless emerges within a spectrum of retellings of fox narratives.

AN AFFIRMATION OF TRADITION:
THE FOX-SISTER PICTURE BOOKS

Two picture books, each with the title Fox-Sister [Yeowoo-nooi], are notable as conservers of intangible cultural heritage: the first by Lee Sung-Sil and Park Wan-Sook (illustrator) in 1997, and the second by Kim Sung-Min in 2005. In retelling a story which has bearing on ‘knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe’ (UNESCO, ‘Text’), both reproduce the traditional story in the form retold by Fenkl (with minor variations). Both books are narrated from the perspective of the brother who has been driven out for trying to reveal that his sister is a fox demon, and hence other (the common title already points to this), whereas Yobi and the three TV series are presented from the perspective of the fox, indicating a shift in sympathy. The crucial scene in which the brother returns to his now dilapidated home, inhabited only by his ‘sister’, who has now devoured his parents as well as the livestock, illustrates that the Confucian moral warning against allowing female domination is still in force. Female domination is strongly depicted in Park’s illustration of the brother’s entrapment upon his return home (see Figure 1): the dilapidation of the farm is metonymic of the chaos of female rule, as the vector running from exuberant fox-sister to the despondent entrapped brother takes in the broken and unhinged outer door, the broken floorboards and torn rice paper of the sliding door, and the pervasive cobwebs. The sister is clearly monstrous, in that her face is isomorphic with an earlier image of her in her fox form. Kim Sung-Min’s illustration of the same scene is strikingly similar in its components. Instead of using Western perspective, Kim employs opposite page woodblock prints, a traditional art form that flourished in
Korea from the eleventh century,² so that the combination of artistic heritage with the dilapidation of traditional objects (the lattice-work door on the left, the plank storage room door on the right, and the shattered storage jars) again emphasises the female monstrosity marked on the body of the sister. After his escape, and the destruction of the fox by means of the monk’s three magic bottles (that is, an implicit affirmation of spiritual normality), Lee and Park’s retelling concludes with the brother watching the fierce conflagration in which the fox has perished. Kim, however, adds a coda, a single page depicting that the brother subsequently marries and lives happily with his wife in an orderly house; the chaos of fox domination has gone and the patriarchal order of the world has been restored.

A NEW DIRECTION: PARK HUN-SOO’S GUMIHO

The death of the fox-woman is an invariable component of the script that underpins the core folktales, since her desire to become human must be thwarted. Contemporary filmic retellings therefore are compelled to address the inherent ambivalence in the lure of otherness and the horror which prompts the expulsion or destruction of the other, and are apt to do so by incorporating the fox-woman’s perspective as a substantial component of narrative and visual point of view. Audiences are thus aligned empathetically with her, and are sympathetic towards her desire to become human. A key shift in representation occurs with Park Hun-Soo’s Gumiho [The nine-tailed fox] (1994) in which the principal characters include figures who are liminal to everyday human society and, although desiring to belong, remain excluded because there is no path by which their desires can be realised. The social fabric depicted as the background setting
for the narrative signifies a malaise in the modern Korean society that has emerged from a history of bloodshed and oppression. In her desire to become human, fox-woman Hara seeks to join a society characterised by material greed, gangsterism, sexual violence, and narrow political ideology. As is the way with fox-women, she has magically constructed a home which appears to be architect designed and is furnished with fine art reproductions and elegant furniture, while her ‘lover’ Hyuk lives in a sparsely-furnished, run-down room. In part, such a luxurious setting points forward to a propensity in subsequent narratives to thematise the question of why a fox should give up immortality to become human. Is it more than an anthropocentric assumption that a brief human life has more value than centuries lived out in isolation and discomfort? Further, although Hara has surrounded herself with elite human culture, her cellars and yard contain cadavers and hens which she devours raw in her fox manifestation. The different spheres of her house, and her behaviour in each of these spheres, and in the surrounding woodland, suggest that her imaged human society is also like her house—beneath its surface simmers chaos and violent anarchy. The sexual disorder attributed to fox-women in general has thus been displaced and become a symptom of social malaise rather than its cause.

The opening scenes of the film establish this contrast as, shifting quickly amongst the main characters, they both ground the plot and embed the folktale in a context of a contemporary social dystopia, and thus develop thematic significance from the outset. The opening scene takes place in Hell, which is depicted as a carnivalesque reflection of the human market-place. Behaviour exhibits tyranny and arbitrary exertion of power, linked with bureaucratic incompetence, which culminates in the dispatch of the wrong demon, a dithering time-server, on the quest to destroy the last fox-woman. The next scene cuts to Hara who is running through a night forest pursued by a would-be rapist. The scene concludes with resurgence of her fox nature and her killing of the attacker (her current ‘lover’), concluding with her anguish that her quest for human subjectivity has again ended in abjection (100 days of sexual abstinence by her lover would enable her to use the fox jewel to absorb the man’s spirit and so become human). The third scene returns to the demon (sent by bureaucratic bungling to Busan instead of Seoul), who engages in a comic exchange with a street hawker: having identified the demon as other, the hawker accuses him of being a North Korean spy. The idea that otherness involves humans and their behaviour, and that supernatural beings are but figures of this otherness, will be a trope in film and TV drama for the next two decades.

A significant modification of the fox-woman script emerges at this time in that the conception of humanity becomes linked to altruism, and this link in turn pivots on a central dilemma which functions as a recurrent motif in subsequent film versions: the fox-woman script dictates that no solution can ever be found that circumvents the equation that for a fox to become human a human must die. The conclusion of Gumiho is thus reached through an operation of altruistic
behaviour. Hara and Hyuk, acting out of genuine love, vie with each other to die in place of the other. The ending is tragic, because the audience is positioned to hope that there might be a way both for Hara to become human and for Hyuk to survive, and no less so because the story finally adheres to the convention of the fox-woman script that mandates the death of the fox: apparently offering sex, Hara slips her jewel into Hyuk’s mouth and forces him to swallow it. The result is her own death, but audiences will assume that something of her essence will continue to dwell within Hyuk. Such a possibility was to be expressed explicitly in the later *My Girlfriend is a Gumiho* (2010), where the couple again strive to thwart the script, but in this earlier film it takes the script into the domain of hauntology, which, as Colin Davis aptly expresses it, ‘replaces the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive. It is an Other: a wholly irrecuperable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving…. it says…. that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be’ (373). Although the fox seeks to become human because of some perceived lack, her entry into the human world discloses that it too is lacking.

HOMOLOGIES: THE FOX-WOMAN AND ETHNIC OTHERNESS

New ways of resignifying the fox-woman that emerged in Park’s *Gumiho* have led to more complex representations, especially as altruism and quality of life have become part of the script. A further component, that of ethnic otherness, was added by the sixteen episode TV drama series, *Gumiho Wehjun* [A nine-tailed fox story retold] (2004), directed by Kim Hyung-II, but the series again observed the ‘rule’ that the fox must die. Indeed, the composition and blocking of the final *mise-en-scène* is reminiscent of the close of Park’s *Gumiho*. *Gumiho Wehjun* not only designates the foxes as another race, but also quite startlingly culminates in the genocide of this race, so that the ultimate triumph belongs with the hunter who, designating the foxes as ‘animals’ and ‘monsters’, has devoted his life to this genocide. At this time, the series that first develops an analogy between foxes and ethnicity portends a very pessimistic outlook. The homology of the fox with the ethnic other subsequently becomes a dominant theme in the film *Yobi* (2007), directed by Lee Sung-Gang, and in the sixteen episode TV series *My Girlfriend is a Gumiho* (2010), directed by Boo Sung-Chul. This resignification of the script reached a very wide TV audience, as when *My Girlfriend is a Gumiho* was screened in late 2010 its last few episodes rated consistently in the top three most-watched programs. As such, it meshes well with a current turn in Korean society, in that a challenge to the conception of contemporary South Korean society has been emerging from a palpable erosion of its myth of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Globalisation of industry, a falling birth rate, and ever increasing international migration is gradually transforming South Korea into a multiracial and multi-ethnic society. By 2007,
two percent of the population were foreign nationals (Han Kyung-Koo 9). For many societies, the greatest preoccupation with otherness involves not the others who are external to society, but those others who dwell within and have the potential to be a threat to social stability because they are objects both of fascination and of horror. As Han Kyung-Koo observes, from 2006 official South Korean discourse turned away from ‘the official affirmation of a single nation-state’ and began advocating multiculturalism: ‘From now on, cultural diversity and the presence of immigrants are to be viewed as an important asset in Korea’s effort for continued development in an increasingly globalizing world’ (9).

A challenge to the notion of a single nation-state was thrown out by the children’s film Yobi (a contraction of Yeowoo-hi, ‘Fox Rain’), which introduces three types of others. First, there is the eponymous protagonist, Yobi, who is a fox-girl little more than a 100 years old, and hence her transformations from her fox shape are into the form of a pre-pubescent, ten-year-old girl. A brief exposition preceding the film’s titles sketches the fox-woman script: Gumihos could transform into other shapes, and could become human by stealing a soul. Hence they were feared, persecuted and hunted down, and eventually retreated deep into the remote mountains. Second, there is a group of aliens from another planet whose spaceship crashed in the realm of the Gumihos a century before the film’s opening. Known as the Yoyo, these are furry, often comical beings whose conception owes not a little to characters in 1980s popular culture films, notably E.T. (1982) and the Ewoks of the Star Wars film, Return of the Jedi (1983). Yobi has made her home with them, thus forming an enclave of others, but the filmic allusions also suggest an element of multiculturalism. Finally, there is a group of human juveniles attending a camp for children vaguely defined as maladjusted. Through the presence of these three groups, otherness is portrayed both as fluid in application and as socially constructed. The Yoyos fear human contact because they assume it will entail invasive medical examination and even dissection, an assumption about human responses to otherness already confirmed by E.T. The motif is also employed in Gumiho: Tale of the Fox’s Child and My Girlfriend is a Gumiho.

Otherness is immediately thematised as Yobi begins: the human children are having an adventure in the forest at night when they come upon a row of scarecrows used by the Yoyo as a disguise to chase intruders from the area. The row of scarecrows is an allusion to the Jangseung – images of mountain spirits (Sanshin) – which once appeared on the paths approaching traditional villages. As an embodiment of indigenous Korean spirituality, their fierce appearance had a protective purpose. The motif has a comparable thematic function in a near contemporary film about breaking down otherness, Park Kwang-Hyun’s Welcome to Dongmakgol (2005), in which the Jangseung are guardians of a village which exists, as it were, out of time: the way of life of the villagers is archaic and changeless, so that Dongmakgol is an utterly other place in a world driven by ideological divisions. Yobi evidences a comparable innocence in her lack of
knowledge about the outside world, and her attempt to explore it will culminate in her death.

Two incidents prompt Yobi to enter the children’s camp. First, while in her fox shape, she snatches an object dropped by Hwang Geum-Yi, one of the children – a circlet adorned with feathers, which Geum-Yi later identifies as a Native American talisman. Curiosity aroused, Yobi subsequently creeps into the camp in her fox form, where she spies on a snooty girl, Ju-Hee, posing before a mirror. When (in human form) Yobi herself later tries the pose, the Yoyos decide that she must be going through puberty. While Yobi’s ‘puberty’ becomes a running joke, the allusion to normal female development ironically reflects on the instability of Yobi’s embodiment (although she most often inhabits an intermediate form as a girl with five tails) and her propensity to show animal behaviour when in her human or intermediate form (see Figure 3).

Direct contact between versions of otherness is instigated by a second incident: when the Yoyos test flight their rebuilt spaceship, the ship crashes again when ‘Naughty Yo’ messes up. The Captain berates him, so he runs away and ends up in the children’s camp where he is adopted by Jong-Yi, a silent little girl diagnosed as autistic, to replace a toy bear the camp leader has confiscated to force her to be more outgoing. After a failed rescue attempt, Yobi decides the only way to get Naughty Yo back before he is handed over to a zoo or to scientists to be dissected is to join the camp in her human child form. To achieve this, she transforms into a beautiful woman and, posing as a single mother, persuades the camp director to take her ‘daughter’ for a few days. The scene between them is largely played in farce mode: first, being too young for this transformation, Yobi cannot walk in high heels, stumbles and falls; second, the director is immediately attracted to her (an allusion to the seductiveness of the fox-woman); third, Yobi keeps dashing in and out changing between the adult and child forms as the director wishes to speak to one or other of the ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’; finally, Yobi cannot control her body as an adult female, and her tails keep popping out, perhaps in an allusion to a common convention that a Gumiho’s transformation is always tenuous and unstable. The
comedic discourse foregrounds Yobi’s otherness in whatever form she takes, and for adult viewers the effect is compounded by a general physical resemblance between the clumsy adult Yobi and the sophisticated Hara in Gumiho (see Figure 4).

Yobi thrives in the camp, making friends with Geum-Yi, relishing the unappetising meals, and enjoying the athletic exercises, but she is always in danger of exposure, as while she is sleeping her tails are apt to come out or she reverts completely to her fox form, and she lacks basic knowledge about human culture and human bodies. Her ignorance about sexuality is another running joke, especially when taken in the context of the fox-woman script. Otherness can thereby be foregrounded by comic moments, as in the following exchange between Yobi and Ju-Hee. Ju-Hee, who thought she had glimpsed Yobi’s tails while she was sleeping, is jealous of Yobi’s friendship with Geum-Yi and attempts to warn her off:

Ju-Hee: ‘I’m not interested in you. I don’t care if you’re a good athlete. You are not charming. In a word, you are nothing. You are too skinny and not pretty at all.’
Yobi: ‘You’re right. I’m skinny and I’m not pretty either.’
Ju-Hee: ‘So, don’t try to seduce Geum-Yi.’
Yobi: ‘What are you talking about?’
Ju-Hee: ‘I mean don’t wag tails at Geum-Yi.’
Yobi: ‘Tails? Did you really see my tails?’
Ju-Hee: ‘Don’t play dumb! You’re very foxy!’
Yobi: ‘Foxy? You know everything. Don’t you?’
Ju-Hee: ‘Stop flirting with Geum-Yi, that’s what I’m telling you!’

[Ju-Hee now slaps Yobi.]

The conversation runs entirely at cross-purposes because of Yobi’s ignorance both of sex and of the way the fox-woman script has shaped the language of seduction, and hence she interprets common metaphors – ‘wag tails at’ and ‘foxy’
The conversation is in fact a case of cross-cultural misunderstanding, a strategy which will also be taken up in My Girlfriend is a Gumiho, in which the Gumiho has been cut off from human contact for 500 years before entering the world again. This strategy foregrounds the resignification of the fox-woman script as a narrative about cultural otherness.

Yobi is a very rich text and incorporates other core aspects of the fox-woman script, but here I will only discuss the motif of the hunter who patrols the existential boundary between the human world and the supernatural domain, and who has become a pervasive part of the fox-woman script. The otherness of the fox-woman is emphasised by this figure, who is invariably male and, even when human, is apt to exhibit traits, especially of obsession and social alienation, that take him across the divide between human and monster. In Yobi the hunter’s monstrosity is underlined by the three savage hunting dogs that accompany him. He devotes his life to pursuing Gumihos because one of them killed an ancestor eight generations back, and scornfully dismisses the suggestion offered by one of the children that foxes eat human livers, asserting instead that they are much more dangerous—they take human souls in order to become human themselves. The hunter’s function in the script is primarily symbolic, in that he does not directly cause the death of the Gumiho, and may even be killed by her, as in Gumiho: The Fox’s Daughter. In Yobi, however, his dogs do indirectly cause the death of Geum-Yi when he intervenes to save Yobi from them, and this is then the catalyst for the film to play through the ‘rule’ that either he or Yobi must die. In an underwater realm called Canava, where the souls of the dead take the form of doves, Geum-Yi’s soul is briefly snatched by a shadow demon, but released when the demon is destroyed. Yobi then out-maneuvers the Buddha-type guardians and altruistically trades her own soul for Geum-Yi’s, and the film in turn out-maneuvers the fox-woman script and portrays how, after an indeterminate number of years, her soul is released to be reincarnated as a human schoolgirl. Yobi thus plays out the script, but in contrast to, say, Kim’s picture book Fox-Sister, whose coda affirms that everything has returned to its rightful place, the film’s coda avers that Yobi’s rightful place is with human peers. With a light touch that avoids labouring the point, the final mise-en-scène depicts a multicultural society in which Yobi walks between her friends in a springtime world.

THE FOX-WOMAN SCRIPT OVERTURNED: MY GIRLFRIEND IS A GUMIHO

The other recent text that undoes the fox-woman script is My Girlfriend is a Gumiho. In this case, the employment of modern narrative forms and an extensive self-reflexivity promote a metafictive distancing which both accommodates audience desire to empathise and draws attention to the constructedness of the fox-woman script. The opening establishing sequence of Episode1 visually and verbally quotes the film My Sassy Girl (2001), and the series subsequently reprises some
narrative techniques used in that film: embedded film sequences, such as *A Chinese Ghost Story*, in which the main parts are now taken by the principal characters of *My Girlfriend is a Gumiho*; the conceit that the story of the two lovers has been or is being made into a film; and a conclusion which is sequenced as two endings, one sad (Gu Mi-Ho dies) and one happy (during a solar eclipse the heavens ‘go crazy’ and Gu Mi-Ho enters the world again). The second ending seems to be a joke at the expense of the conventional ending, a point emphasised by an allusion to the ending of *Gumiho Woejun*, in which the fox race is eliminated during a lunar eclipse. At the same time it is an inconclusive, open ending, since Gu Mi-Ho is not reincarnated as a human but is still a fox. An effect of this strategy is that audiences must derive two different teleologies from these endings: first, a return to the rightful order whereby the ‘monster’ is expelled and the community’s social and sexual hierarchies are reaffirmed; second, an overturning of that outcome and the introduction of a new order whereby the other does not need to be integrated or transformed, but is accepted unchanged. Dae-Woong had averred that he didn’t care whether Mi-Ho was ghost, human or Gumiho, as long as she was back, but the innovativeness of the actual outcome is underscored by his surprise that she is a Gumiho. As with *Yobi*, the point is lightly made, here both because it is comedic and because it is the culmination of a game—the *hoi hoi* dance—played by the couple throughout the series: facing each other, they move their right hands in circles and suddenly touch index fingers (see Figure 5). Their final pose invokes the iconic image from the film *E.T.*, in which E.T. and Elliott touch fingers (and of course this in turn cites the *Creation of Adam* image in the Sistine Chapel). Human and divine, human and alien, Self and Other are linked by means of the image.

*My Girlfriend is a Gumiho* constantly thematises being human, and employs its comic mode to foreground ontology—a way of being in the world. The ontologically human is made a focus of attention through frequent dismantling of the human/non-human binary by contrasts between behaviours classifiable as ‘human’, not-human or inhuman. Thus the series maintains a continual contrast between Mi-Ho (eager to become human) and her rival for Dae-Woong’s love,
the malevolent Eun Hye-In (described by Dong-Joo, the demon boundary
 guardian, as ‘half human’, like himself, because of her self-regardingness and
 inability to feel empathy or behave altruistically). Mi-Ho is vivacious, playful,
 often childlike, and the latter trait, as often elsewhere, is an attribute of cultural
 inferiority. It is, for example, heavily used in Disney’s _The Little Mermaid_ which is
 invoked as a pretext in Episode 8. Mi-Ho’s vivacity is at times contrasted with her
 age, which is often alluded to, but not specified (she is close to 1,000 years old,
 since her fox jewel incorporates goblin fire from an ancient precursor who failed
 in her attempt to become human and was executed by the boundary guardian).

The Gumiho’s otherness is perceived in different ways by those she
 encounters: for her ‘boyfriend’ Dae-Woong, who knows what she is, she functions
 as a repository for human fears and fantasies; for most other characters she is
 strangely gauche (on a number of occasions people speculate that her cultural
 ignorance shows she must have grown up overseas). Dae-Woong is ambivalent:
 he mistreats her because she is not human, but also needs her both for the
 power of her jewel (which healed him of horrendous injuries when he fell
 from a cliff) and because of developing cathexis. He often abandons her in
 situations she doesn’t know how to deal with (for example, leaving her in a
 college lecture theatre), and often excludes her by defining places as spaces
 only humans can enter. Insofar as the element of cruelty in such behaviour is
 reminiscent of practices of racial segregation, each occasion reinforces audience
 recognition that Mi-Ho is homologous with representation of a cultural and
 ethnic alien.

The problem of culture is not so straightforward, however, and at this point
 we can reflect back on the reason for the conservative depiction of intangible
 heritage in the picture book retellings of the fox-woman script. Where Mi-Ho
 may find the modern world bewildering and difficult to comprehend, Dae-
 Woong is strikingly ignorant about his own culture’s past. In a comment apposite
 to these texts, Han Geon-Soo remarks that ‘the westernization in everyday life
 in Korean society has... induced nostalgia for traditional culture arising out of
 a moral obligation to cultural nationalism’ (33). Thus Dae-Woong’s ignorance
 about local folk traditions, especially fox-lore, enables the text to incorporate
 cultural information at strategic moments. This information is often imparted by
 Dae-Woong’s friend, Kim Byung-Soo, who is much more culturally informed,
 but at one point Dae-Woong does something portrayed in many modern texts
 for young audiences – he goes to the college library, gathers up a stack of books
 about tradition, and discovers as much as he can about Gumihos. Intangible
 cultural heritage is also directly invoked on the occasion when he takes Mi-Ho
 home to meet his grandfather and she offers entertainment: the old man is utterly
 charmed by her skills in traditional dance, flute playing, and painting. On the
 other hand, it is clear that these skills, which she learned while preparing for a
 wedding that never took place five hundred years earlier, have little place in the
 modern world. Mi-Ho’s back story is that she has been imprisoned in a painting
 and excluded from the human world for five centuries because on an earlier
 attempt to become human her unearthly beauty had thrown society into chaos.³
The painting is another metafictive device, which points to how the female/other is trapped by representation. In Episode 1 a monk tells her story thus:

That Gumiho came down to the world of humans and wanted to live as a human.
But her unearthly beauty became a problem . . .
The civil servants who needed to study stopped their writing.
And the farmers who needed to farm stopped their planting.
And the merchants who needed to sell stopped working.
They were all bewitched by the Gumiho and could do nothing at all.
The women couldn’t bear to see the men like that and went to the Three Gods Grandmother.
The Three Gods Grandmother was in a dilemma and she thought that if she found a husband for the Gumiho, the problem would be solved.
So she found a man to be the Gumiho’s husband.
But the women didn’t want to give up their brothers or sons to be husband to the Gumiho . . . [and spread rumours about her].
So the Three Gods Grandmother cut off the Gumiho’s nine tails, and trapped her in this painting, so she could never come out into this world again.

Hye-In’s dislike for Mi-Ho is expressed in comparable terms in Episode 10: Mi-Ho is a monster, inferior to humans, uncivilised, and of course her need to learn how humans behave – how to eat, how to use a shower and a toilet, what electrical appliances are for, how to go to a party, how to use money – underlines her vulnerability to dismissal as an inferior alien, irredeemably other. When she asks Hye-In why she dislikes her so much, she is told, in one of the series’ most explicit evocations of racial prejudice: ‘I don’t like that you mix with us, pretending to be human’. The long task that Dae-Woong has to accomplish is to grow to love Mi-Ho simply for who she is, regardless of what she is. At first her otherness frightens him and when in Episode 6 she wants to bond with him by playing out a traditional marriage ceremony he is horrified, and even more horrified when she says, ‘Let’s just mate then’. At this point his rejection of her overtures betrays an underlying horror of miscegenation.

A way of exploring this horror is offered through the series’ reading of The Little Mermaid. In Episode 7, Dong-Joo takes Mi-Ho into Seoul’s Youngpoong Bookshop and decides to buy her a book. It will need to be a children’s book, because of her limited literacy, and, out of an ulterior motive, he decides on a picture book translation of the Hans Christian Andersen story. Dong-Joo is adamant that even if Mi-Ho achieves her dream of becoming human she will never be accepted. His own formula, which he has followed for a thousand years living amongst humans, is to remain aloof, never form relationships, and never stay in the same job or place for very long. In Episode 4 he cites the example of E.T. as paradigmatic: ‘He became friends with a human, but he had to go home’. The Little Mermaid is another representation of what, as imagological studies remind us, is a process of representing aliens by means of stereotypes. Dong-Joo wants Mi-Ho to grasp that alterity cannot be overcome, and any attempt to do so will end tragically. Although Dae-Woong tears out the ending of Mi-Ho’s
book and recommends the Disney film instead, he is himself a long way from accepting otherness and is ambivalent about Mi-Ho’s explicit identification with the Mermaid’s desire to lose her tail and become human: pointing to a page in the book, Mi-Ho asks, ‘She has a tail too, . . . Would he like her if he knew she was becoming human?’ Dae-Woong simply replies, ‘No’.

The story of the Little Mermaid prompts Mi-Ho to ask if there are other stories about love between humans and non-humans, and if any of them turn out well. The answer offered by My Girlfriend is a Gumiho is, well, this story. There don’t seem to be any others, and love that transcends otherness is only possible ‘when the heavens go crazy’. The series, however, offers the assurance that altruism may be strong enough to send the heavens crazy, that Mi-Ho and Dae-Woong can be together, and their example can even help Dong-Joo and Hye-In become a little more human. My Girlfriend is a Gumiho is both the most recent reworking of the fox-woman script and finally the most radical in the trajectory from affirmation of patriarchal order and ethnic homogeneity to affirmation of the ontological integrity of otherness.

Following the democratisation of South Korea at the end of the 1980s, the fox-woman script has been a focus for cultural conflict. It has been retold conservatively as an element of intangible cultural heritage and it has undergone major reinterpretation in attempts to reshape that heritage and imbue it with contemporary significance. Thus the script’s representation of female sexuality as monstrous has been challenged by the attribution of moral awareness to the Gumiho character, especially in conjunction with the narrative strategy of aligning perspective with her, of transforming her from object to subject, and demonstrating that humanity is evidenced by behaviour and not by race or social privilege. Most recently, homologies between a reworked fox-woman script and immigrant workers and wives have demonstrated the script’s potential to be transformed into a narrative about cultural otherness that advocates an open and other-embracing society. We will now have to wait and see whether the very wide market reach of My Girlfriend is a Gumiho can have a permanent impact on the fox-woman script.

NOTES

1. A folktale which graphically makes this point is #22 in Zong, which tells of a man who urinated upon a white bone lying beside the road. The bone took on life and pursued him, but he escaped by a trick. Returning that way some years later, he encountered ‘a pretty young woman selling wine’ in a new shop there. He told this woman about his past experience, and, ‘As he spoke the girl turned into a nine-tailed fox. “I was that white bone,” she cried. “I have been waiting for you to come back.” With those words she sprang on him and ate him up’. The woman’s demonic insatiability was clearly provoked by the exposure of his private parts.

2. Most famous is the Goryo Dynasty Tripitaka, a collection of over 80,000 woodblock printing plates now kept at Janggyeong Panjeon Hall in Haeinsa Temple in Gyeongsangnam-do province. Carved between 1236 and 1251, the collection is the oldest and most complete version of the Buddhist canon, and was the source for Tripitakas later
produced in Japan, China, and Taiwan. The plates were listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 2007.

3. The mayhem caused by excessive ‘vixen’ beauty was also a theme in Chinese fox stories. Huntington, writing of the ‘kingdom toppling sensuality’ of such foxes (202), notes that, ‘From the point of view of other women, these are women who have an untoward and unhealthy power over men’ (203). My Girlfriend is a Gumiho depicts women as the source of the rumour that foxes eat human liver in order to become human: the equivalent of racial slander is used to expel the other and preserve the community’s social and sexual status quo.

4. The most explicit homologies between Mi-Ho and an illegal immigrant occur when she decides to find a job and ends up working long hours for very little pay because she has no ID (Episode 8) and when Dong-Joo, having decided to take her as a companion for himself, has a comprehensive set of false identity papers forged for her.

WORKS CITED


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