

The Patterns and Meanings of Human Relations in Korean Stepmother Stories

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I. Introduction

Human beings are bound to the network of vertical human relations from birth. It is because we are born into the network of vertical human relations formed, narrowly, by our parents and, more broadly, by grandparents and our parents' siblings. Family is a socially important research topic in that the first human relations experienced by people are related to vertical hierarchy or order, and people learn this hierarchy or order through family and must continuously acclimate themselves to it. Furthermore, none of the peoples of the world consider human relations established through family to be confined to a specific family. It is because such relations usually attain a social consensus. Nevertheless, how strong the power is that such a consensus exercises socially depends on each people's historical situation or customs, so the pattern of the relations is not uniform. Furthermore, because we cannot say that such socially accepted vertical human relations mean the same thing and pursue the same ethical values, we may not be able to expect superficial perception and unconditional sympathy.

From the account of family above, we may derive three important points. First, family is the starting point of the birth of vertical human

relations. Second, such vertical human relations are not limited to a specific family but are, though informal, a kind of social phenomenon that has attained a social consensus. Third, the ethical value of vertical human relations formed through family may vary according to each people's historical situation or customs, and the enforceability of such relations based on social consensus may be different.

This study proposes to discuss the three issues through stepmother stories handed down in Korea and Japan. The reason for focusing on stepmother stories among various types of family stories will be explained in the main discussion. Although this study defines the scope of research in this way, it assumes that inquiry into family may reveal the basic types of all human relations, including the vertical human relations mentioned in the introduction, as well as ethical values inherent in the relations. Accordingly, this study is fundamentally different from previous studies that choose stepmother stories and limit their discussion to the single type of stories.

II. Family: A space for the birth of vertical human relations

Common sense is enough to discern whether family is where the birth of vertical human relations starts. It is because almost all humans start their lives in the sphere called family. Furthermore, a new family is created through the vertical human relation and marriage between a man and a woman, but this process inevitably involves the two persons' respective established families (usually headed by the parents). This is evidenced sufficiently by a number of folktales in which the parents choose the son-in-law or the daughter-in-law. In this sense, we can say that a new family or a husband-wife family is engendered in the vertical hierarchy and order of established families headed by the parents.

However, vertical human relations connote by birth and mar-

riage on the premise of ‘parent-child relation’ are vastly different in reality. This is because, while birth occurs within a single established family, marriage involves multiple established families. Therefore, we can expect that the ethical values asserted by the vertical human relations may be different from each other. This point will be discussed later, and here we will discuss further why family is the starting point of vertical human relations.

First, let’s think about the fundamental nature of vertical human relations resulting from birth. For this, we need to examine the relation between parent and child. However, because this relation is an eternal vertical human relation from which we cannot escape; it is a subject beyond discussion. The question is how to capture the relation among siblings who have the same parents on the top of the vertical relation. In particular, twins demonstrate paradoxically the essential nature of such vertical human relations. This is because, although twins have almost no physical time difference such as that seen in ordinary siblings, they are still subject to the hierarchy of elder and younger siblings.

However, the ‘determined’ hierarchy contains a high risk of overturning. That is, it is usually perceived that the settled hierarchy or order of elder and younger brothers does not have strong durability. In many stories in which twins are the subjects of the narration, the twins are more often in a conflicting relation than in a cooperative and harmonious relation. For example, in “*Cheonjiwangbonpuri*” the creation myth of Jeju Island, the twins Large Star King and Small Star King reveal their hierarchical relation by the words ‘Large’ and ‘Small,’ but the Small Star King never admits that he exists in a vertical human relation with the Large Star King. This is clearly confirmed when the Small Star King continues to suggest a competition for the exclusive possession of the world. In a word, they admit the vertical human relation outwardly, but inwardly it is regarded as a loose human relation that is highly likely to collapse. This suggests paradoxically that family is a group not based on horizontal human relations but based

on vertical human relations.

Not only in traditional Korean society but also in contemporary society, a couple can hardly establish their marriage without their parents' involvement. Even if it is possible, most husband-wife families formed through marriage are somehow placed in the network of vertical human relations built by established families. In this sense, marriage does not go beyond the hierarchy and order of vertical human relations formed through birth. Representative examples are the human relations between father-in-law and son-in-law, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, etc.

From the discussion above, it seems obvious that vertical human relations are maintained consistently through the establishment of a husband-wife family through marriage, the birth of new family members, namely children, and the development of next-generation husband-wife families through the children's marriages. However, we should take note of the fact that the importance of such relations in maintaining family was understood not in the factual dimension but in the perceptive dimension, and such understanding was projected onto most of the stories. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the understanding of vertical human relations in the perceptive dimension can lead to the proposition that family must be based on vertical human relations. It is because a settled perception and proposition for an object creates an ethical value apart from the matter of right and wrong, and such an ethical value needs a scapegoat.

Stepmother stories are a type of family story that are particularly important in this regard. It is because stepmother stories involve birth and marriage, the two concepts discussed above in connection to family, and exhibit how important the vertical human relations created by birth and marriage are in a family group. Thus, we will examine this point briefly using a typical example of a stepmother story before continuing our discussion.

There was a girl in a town called Mokju. She was famous for her filial pi-

ety to her father and stepmother, but her father listened to her stepmother and mistreated his daughter severely. Nevertheless, the girl supported the parents even more sincerely. One day, however, she was thrown out of the house by her parents. Leaving her parents, she met an old woman in a stone cave in a mountain and told her what had happened. The old woman had pity on her and allowed the girl to stay with her. The girl served the old woman just like she had served her parents. The old lady received her as her daughter-in-law. The couple lived peacefully and accumulated great wealth. Hearing that her parents were in poverty, she invited them to her house and supported them with all her heart. However, the parents were not pleased with her. Deploring this, the filial daughter composed a song, *『Koryosa』*.

The stepmother story above is one of the oldest stepmother stories in Korea. Thus, it is expected to suggest the archetypal form of stepmother stories. For this, we need to answer questions such as what permeates the three stories and what correlation it has with 'vertical human relations' that we focus on in connection to 'family.' In this regard, we may point out characteristics as follows. First, stepmothers are depicted negatively. Second, stepmothers confront the children of the former wife. Third, the husband is described as an incompetent man. These characteristics are common factors of stepmother stories, and in particular, the second and third are the most essential features of stepmother stories. It is because confrontation between the stepmother and the former wife's child is the basic outline of stepmother stories, and this confrontation is possible due to the husband's incompetence. If the husband had played his role properly, the stepmother might not have been able to persecute and slander the former wife's child. In this sense, the husband's incompetence is the factor that enables the stepmother to commit evil deeds in stepmother stories.

However, stepmothers' evil deeds cannot be fully explained by the husband's incompetence alone. We need to consider people's emotions toward a stepmother. Examining closely the second factor,

‘confrontation between the stepmother and the former wife’s child,’ we can find that the emotion is made concrete by the stepmother’s severe mistreatment and driving out of the former wife’s child. Why does a stepmother do such things and what is the ultimate purpose of such deeds? Part 4 of Volume I, “Second Marriage” in *Abn Family’s Codes of Conduct* interprets this as “a naturally occurring phenomenon in a real life situation, not just because of the woman’s strong jealousy and the man’s falling in love with the second wife.” In addition, it is believed that the husband can treat a child from his second wife in the same way as he treats one from his former wife, but the second wife regards a child from the former wife as an obstacle to everything. For this reason, stepmothers cannot help mistreating the former wife’s child, and this produces the negative image of stepmothers. Accordingly, such a negative image of stepmothers is emphasized by their efforts to ‘remove the former wife’s child.’ This is because this may be a stepmother’s natural human instinct in real life. The story might be different if most stepmothers could overcome ordinary human nature, but how many stepmothers are able to do that in real life? In this sense, ‘a stepmother of negative image’ may be a necessary evil that has to appear in human society.

If we understand this discussion in terms of ‘vertical human relations,’ which are the fundamental human relation advocated in family stories, we can say that ‘a stepmother’ is a being who aggressively attempts to destroy existing vertical human relations and establish new vertical human relations. In such a trial, the former wife’s child is perceived to be the only obstacle that may frustrate the stepmother’s attempt. For this reason, if she can remove the former wife’s child, the stepmother becomes able to form her own family equipped with completely new vertical human relations. Of course, this assumes that the stepmother has her own children, so in a stepmother story, not only the stepmother’s own marriage but also the birth of her children plays a critical role. This is because both marriage and the birth of children are the fundamental motives that support vertical human re-

lations in a family.

Stepmother stories reveal that vertical human relations among family members are in violent conflict. Vertical human relations hidden behind ordinary family stories make it impossible to hide the human emotions felt by members of a remarried family, particularly the stepmother, when they collide with one another. Therefore, a stepmother can inflict ruthless violence on the former wife's child that is legitimately based on the hierarchy of vertical human relation. It is because the stepmother holds a certain position in the family hierarchy, namely the motherly position over the former wife's child. Furthermore, the husband's incompetence strengthens the stepmother's authority as a mother. Through this, the hidden violence of vertical human relations established among the family members provides a natural ground for focusing on 'the stepmother.' In this, we can find all the reasons why the stepmother is described as a violent figure in all stepmother stories. What is more, such an image of the stepmother is based on a kind of social consensus, though informal. This is because human emotion in real life, as is pointed out in *Abn Family's Codes of Conduct*, is not applied to a specific stepmother, and we can see the regular pattern of a stepmother mistreating the former wife's children. Particularly because 'the regular pattern' here permeates all stepmother stories, we need to examine the meanings of the pattern in detail. Such examination may be a way to identify the core of stepmother stories.

III. Stepmothers' evil deeds and typical patterns, and informal social consensus

From the oldest stepmother stories in Korea, China and Japan, we can find a typical pattern related to stepmothers' evil deeds. It is that they initiate the mistreatment of the former wife's children. What we are curious about are the detailed contents and patterns of

mistreatment. Another question is how the patterned contents of mistreatment are different according to the gender of the former wife's child. These points are missed by many of the previous studies on stepmother stories, and, as far as this author is concerned, answering these questions is the way to find the literary value and meaning of stepmother stories within the category of family stories.

In this regard, this study looks at a number of stories transmitted in Korea and Japan, and the one to be discussed first is "A Bride without Hands." It has been reported that this study has around 18 versions, and research on its connection to novels has made some progress mainly focusing on: type system¹; mythological characteristics²; psychological analysis³; relevancy to novels⁴; comparison with similar folktales in neighboring countries⁵; and literary therapeutic analysis.⁶ In this study, however, we attempt to explore meanings overlooked in previous studies by focusing on the stepmother's evil deeds in this

- 1 김혜정, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화의 유형체계: 유형, 하위유형, 상위유형의 관계를 중심으로」, 경기대학교 석사학위논문, 2002.
- 2 이인경, 「설화의 신화적 성격과 심리학적 접근」, 『구비문학연구』 제13집, 한국구비문학회, 2001.
- 3 신연우, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화와 여성 의식의 성장」, 『우리어문학연구』 18, 우리어문학회, 2002; 김현선, 「제주도 <손 없는 색시>의 각면 비교와 여성심리학적 해석」, 『탐라문화』 25, 제주대학교 탐라문화연구소, 2004; 이유경, 「민담 <손 없는 색시>를 통한 여성 심리의 이해」, 『심성연구』 21, 한국분석심리학회, 2006.
- 4 홍혜란, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화와 <연당전>계 소설의 인물 연구」, 국민대학교 석사학위논문, 2008; 이윤경, 「계모형 고소설 연구: 계모설화와의 관련성을 중심으로」, 성신여자대학교 박사학위논문, 2004.
- 5 주종연, 「한국의 전래민담과 독일 Grimm 동화와의 비교연구」, 『어문학논총』 11, 국민대학교 어문학연구소, 1992; 박연숙, 「한국과 일본의 계모설화 비교 연구」, 계명대학교 박사학위논문, 2010; 최자운, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화 유형의 비교설화학적 연구」, 『인문논총』 11, 경기대학교 인문과학연구소, 2003; 김현선, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화 유형의 비교설화학적 연구」, 『인문논총』 11, 경기대학교 인문과학연구소, 2003; 이명숙, 「<손 없는 색시> 설화유형의 비교설화학적 연구」, 『인문논총』 11, 경기대학교 인문과학연구소, 2003.
- 6 서은아, 「<손 없는 색시>의 문학치료적 가능성 탐색」, 『국학연구』 12, 한국국학진흥원, 2008.

story and their typical pattern in the category of stepmother stories. For this, we collected from these 18 versions a number of versions with relatively logical narrative development, extracted their outlines, and compared the versions based on the outlines.

A man who was bereaved of his wife and had a daughter remarried. The stepmother persuades her husband to drive out the former wife's child for the prosperity of the house based on a fortuneteller's words. The father cuts off both of his daughter's hands with a fodder chopper and drives her out. The two amputated hands fly up to heaven. The girl without hands climbs up a pear tree beside a house in order to appease her hunger, and there she is noticed by the boy in the house who is reading. The boy hides the girl in the wall closet of his room and cares for her. However, a maid servant recognizes that the amount of food eaten by the boy has been changed and she peeps into the boy's room. She finds that the boy hides a girl in the wall closet and reports it to the lady of the house. Hearing about the girl's situation from her son, the lady lets the girl marry her son. While her bridegroom is away for the civil service examination, the bride without hands gives birth to a son. She writes her husband a letter, saying that she has given birth to a beautiful son, but the hostess of the inn where the postman stays steals the letter and changes its contents, saying that the baby does not have either eyes or a nose. In his reply, the bridegroom asks her wife to raise the baby well, but the innkeeper again steals the letter from the postman and fabricates it, telling the parents to drive out the bride without hands. Receiving the forged letter, the mother-in-law drives out the bride with her baby. As she is trying to drink water at a wall, a thunderstorm pours down rain and the bride, with her baby on her back, falls into the well. Then, her hands are restored. The mother and baby are adopted by Old Lady Magu in Mt. Cheontae and they live together. When the boy becomes five years old, the bride encounters her husband, who is on his way home after passing the civil service examination. She tells her husband that her hands were restored, as her dead mother had kept them in the well. The husband brings his wife and son home in a palanquin. When the bride returns, she finds that her parents have already been ruined. The

innkeeper was her stepmother. After that, the husband and wife lived a long happy life.⁷

As outlined above, a key point of “A Bride without Hands” is that the former wife’s daughter is thrown out with her hands amputated but the hands are later restored. This is common among all the different versions. What is more, the amputation of the former wife’s daughter’s hands is closely associated with the stepmother’s evil deeds because the stepmother provides the motivation for the amputation. Accordingly, we need to examine this point closely in order to understand stepmothers’ evil deeds and the typical pattern of the evil deeds.

After he remarried, the stepmother came in and worked the daughter hard. However hard the stepmother was, the fifteen or sixteen-year-old girl endured it and did everything the stepmother ordered. If her stepmother told her to weave, she wove, and if her stepmother told her to weed, she weeded. The stepmother said to herself, “What a talented girl she is! She does everything so well. I cannot let her be.” So she said to her husband, “That girl! She must be driven out for our family’s peace and prosperity.”⁸

If a fifteen or sixteen-year-old girl does housework well, she must be praised. However, the stepmother envies the stepdaughter and urges her husband to cut off the daughter’s hands and drive out her, saying that this is what a fortuneteller told her. As a result, the daughter, with her hands amputated, is driven out by her father. What we should examine carefully here is the correlation between ‘a woman’s domestic labor’ and ‘her hands.’ In most families, housework is exclusively the women’s share. Thus hands are essential for women’s housework. A woman without hands is not able to do housework any

7 최정여 · 천혜숙, 『한국구비문화대계』 7-13, 한국정신문화연구원, 1984, pp. 332-347.

8 Ibid., pp. 332-333.

longer.⁹ Furthermore, a family does not need such a woman.

However, considering that the former wife's daughter is mistreated through heavy housework in a number of different versions of "*A Bride without Hands*" and "*Kongjwi Patjwi*," we can hypothesize 'woman ≈ domestic labor' as a higher category that subsumes 'a woman's domestic labor ≈ a woman's hands.' The assumption of the higher category is believed to give a very important implication for understanding social consensus projected on stepmother stories. It is because one of typical patterns in the stepmother's mistreatment of the former wife's daughter in stepmother stories is associated with 'woman's ability to perform labor.' In one version of "*A Bride without Hands*,"¹⁰ when a minister with a son and a daughter remarries, he hides the daughter, believing that the stepmother may mistreat her. Let's think about the fact that he thought only of his daughter, and not his son, as a target of mistreatment. Then what would a woman like a stepmother use to mistreat the former wife's daughter? It may be transferring her housework to the former wife's daughter or acting out of jealousy over the daughter's perfect completion of housework. An extreme and concrete representation of the stepmother's jealousy is 'amputating the hands of the former wife's daughter.'

Another typical pattern that we can find from the stepmother's evil deeds in "*A Bride without Hands*" is 'pregnancy.' As shown to some degree in the version mentioned above, the stepmother does not let the former wife's daughter live a new happy life. At first, she

9 This is confirmed clearly by "The End of a Stepmother Who Mistreated Her Stepdaughter," a different version of "*A Bride without Hands*." The outline of the different version is as follows. "The stepmother forces the stepdaughter to do all kinds of housework. The stepdaughter completes everything perfectly. Then, the stepmother orders the stepdaughter to find dropwort, which cannot be found in midwinter. The stepdaughter gets dropwort with a bachelor's help. The stepmother kills the bachelor and gives the same order to the stepdaughter. The girl revives the dead bachelor and gets dropwort again. Then, the stepmother cuts off the stepdaughter's hands and throws her out." 임재해, 『한국구비문학대계』 7-10, 한국정신문화연구원, 1984, pp. 890-894.

10 최정여, 『한국구비문학대계』 7-13, 한국정신문화연구원, 1985, pp. 684-697.

drove out the stepdaughter in the name of the prosperity of the family, but later she revealed her wickedness by changing the contents of letters so that the former wife's daughter would be thrown out of her husband's house. That is, she fabricates the story that the stepdaughter gave birth to a monster-like baby and causes her to be driven out by her mother-in-law.

A number of different versions of “*A Bride without Hands*” use ‘pregnancy’ in their introductory part as a means of creating a pattern for the stepmother’s evil deeds. This proves that ‘pregnancy’ can be used as a typical event for describing a stepmother’s evil deeds against the former wife’s daughter. When a stepmother secretly did the former wife’s daughter harm, she must have known that ‘extra-marital pregnancy’ is the most powerful cause for social disgrace for a woman, and this was not only the perception of women such as the stepmother but also that of men. Accordingly, stepmothers might utilize women’s sexuality and specifically social perceptions of a virgin’s sexuality.

Yet another version of “*A Bride without Hands*” that shows this is “The Virgin without Hands Driven out by Her Stepmother”.¹¹ In the version, the stepmother finds the former wife’s daughter, who had been hidden by the minister, causes her to have a stomachache by feeding her wild buckwheat paste, and then she puts a skinned mouse in the stepdaughter’s underwear while she is sleeping in order to fabricate a miscarriage. The minister, who accepts the fabrication as fact, cuts off his daughter’s hands and orders his son to kill her by dumping her into the river. What is curious about this is the fact that the minister cut off his daughter’s hands and then ordered his son to kill her by dumping her into the river. If he had intended to kill her from the beginning, it would not have been necessary to amputate her hands. Of course, this may be understood as a result of mixture

11 Ibid., The same contents are found in “*A Girl Who Married a Charcoal Maker*”. 정상박 · 유종목, 『한국구비문학대계』 8-11, 한국정신문화연구원, 1984, pp. 714-720.

with other stories, but may also be a consequence of the dual significance of ‘a woman’s hands.’

In the early discussion, we examined how closely ‘a woman’s hands’ is correlated with ‘a woman’s domestic labor.’ Then, do ‘a woman’s hands’ indicate only ‘a woman’s domestic labor?’ Are they not related with ‘pregnancy’ at all? In a Koryo folk song “*Ssanghwa-jeom*”, which contains indecent descriptions, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is described symbolically by each seizing the other’s wrist. In the myth “*Mr. Dorang and Bride Cheongjeong*” as well, Bride Cheongjeong goes through several tests in order to meet Mr. Dorang, who died even before the first night, and her failure of the tests results from her attempt to grasp Mr. Dorang’s hand first. Grasping Mr. Dorang’s hand represents Bride Cheongjeong’s hidden sexual desire but, at the same time, it was considered immoral for a woman to grasp a man’s body part with her hand. Considering these facts, accordingly, ‘the amputation of the daughter’s hands’ in “*A Bride without Hands*” implies a punishment for her immoral sexual deed.

From the discussion above, we can derive the typical patterns of a stepmother’s evil deeds against the former wife’s daughter as follows: the transfer of domestic labor to the former wife’s daughter; jealousy over the stepdaughter’s perfect completion of housework; and dishonoring the stepdaughter by fabricating extramarital pregnancy. In a word, ‘domestic labor’ and ‘pregnancy’ are typical patterns used to describe a stepmother’s evil deeds. What is more, “*A Bride without Hands*” describes the stepmother’s evil deeds more vividly by presenting the act of ‘hand amputation’ in connection to these typical patterns. That is, ‘hand amputation’ is described as a symbolic act that not only removes the former wife’s daughter but also destroys her abilities as a woman to work and conceive.

In order to see how authentic such a characteristic is, however, we need to examine what evil deeds stepmothers commit against the former wife’s son. “*Medicine Liver*,” a folktale with around 20 different versions reported throughout the country, describes the stepmother’s

evil deeds against the former wife's son. Using this story, let us examine the typical patterns of stepmothers' evil deeds against the former wife's son in comparison with their evil deeds against the former wife's daughter.

Upon his wife's death, a man remarries. The stepmother plots with a shaman and says that she has to eat the stepchildren's livers. The father orders a hunter to kill the children and bring their livers. However, the hunter sends dog liver instead of the stepchildren's livers. The stepmother pretends to eat the dog liver and says that she has recovered from the illness. The stepchildren settle at an old man's house. They pass the civil service examination and succeed. Returning home, the stepchildren put the stepmother in a palanquin made of brier and place the palanquin at an intersection with a public notice telling passersby to pull the saw. However, they cannot bring themselves to kill the father. After this, the stepchildren live long and happy lives.¹²

As outlined above, "*Medicine Liver*" shows a somewhat different pattern from stepmothers' evil deeds against the former wife's daughter discussed earlier. In this story, the stepmother does not mistreat the former wife's sons through heavy work, nor does she fabricate the sons' immoral affairs with women. What is more, the story tells of no abilities of the stepsons that are equivalent to the stepdaughter's perfect performance of domestic chores. Accordingly, the stepmother does not show jealousy over the stepsons' abilities. The only thing that she is jealous of is the husband's care for the sons so that they can study at a temple. That is, she is envious of the husband's attention to the former wife's sons. Furthermore, the stepmother grieves over her childlessness and the expected ill-treatment by the former wife's sons in the future. Thus, in order to control her husband's estate, she hatches a plot to remove the stepsons. According to the plot,

12 "A Wicked Stepmother and The Son's Revenge", 임재해, 『한국구비문학대계』 7-10, 한국청
신문화연구원, 1982, pp. 1025-1034.

she pretends to fall sick and urges the husband to get the stepsons' livers.

Interestingly, while a stepmother is described as one who can exercise her authority over the former wife's daughter, here she instead treads lightly around her stepsons. This may reflect the position and social perception of daughters and sons in a family rather than the relation between a stepmother and the former wife's children. The storyline suggests the common idea that a stepmother is allowed to do anything with the former wife's daughter but not with the former wife's son.

In order to clarify further the typical pattern of stepmothers' evil deeds against the former wife's son, let us look at another story. This story, titled "*Umoknangsang*" has some seven versions found so far, and its plot is as follows: A man, who is a government officer, loses his wife and is left with a son, and he marries again. One day the man is exiled to a remote place, and the stepmother shows her stepson a forged letter saying that the father fell ill in the place of exile and the only remedy is the eye of a living person. The son gouges out one of his eyes and gives it to her, and the stepmother puts it in a needle box. After a while, the stepmother presents another fabricated letter that mentions the father's sickness. The stepson takes out his remaining eye. Then the stepmother drives out the son. The blind son makes a pipe out of bamboo and begs around. The father is released, and on his way back home he is attracted by the sorrowful sound of the pipe and meets his son, but the blind son does not recognize his father and is led home by the father's hand. Following the doctor's prescription, the father collects a bucket of tears, soaks the dried eyeballs from the needle box in the tears, and puts them back in the son's eye sockets. The son's sight is restored and the stepmother is punished.

In "*Umoknangsang*", the stepmother makes the former wife's son gouge out his eyes on the pretext of the exiled husband's illness. "Worrying about her own son's future due to the former wife's son,

in case the husband never comes home,”¹³ she envies the stepson. So she fabricates a false letter and blinds the stepson, and this scheme is carried out very cleverly. She makes the stepson gouge out his eyes himself by appealing to his filial affection. Here again, a question is raised as in the stepmother stories above. If the stepmother worried about her own son’s future, why did she make the stepson gouge out his eyes instead of killing him, which might be a more perfect solution? We may thus identify two typical patterns of stepmothers’ evil deeds against the former wife’s son. One is killing by taking out the liver and the other is gouging out the eyes to deprive the stepson of the ability to function socially. Blinding is considered equivalent to amputating the hands of the former wife’s daughter in order to destroy her existence as a woman. This is evidenced clearly by the blind stepson’s begging.

Through the discussion above, we can see that the typical pattern of stepmothers’ evil deeds is different depending on whether the former wife’s child is a son or a daughter. That is, unconditional sacrifice is forced on the former wife’s daughter through domestic labor, extramarital pregnancy, etc. and on the former wife’s son through his sacrifice to cure his parent’s disease. In addition, such typical patterns mean the deprivation of the deprivation of the former wife’s daughter’s position at home and the deprivation of the former wife’s son’s position in society. In order to restructure the vertical human relation of the family, the stepmother has to deprive the former wife’s children of their positions based on the established family relation. In this sense, stepmother stories reveal violence that is either hidden in families built on vertical human relations or tabooed in normal families.

13 “*Filial Son Yoon’s Pupil*”, 유증선, 『영남의 전설』, 형설출판사, 1971, p. 416.

IV. Understanding ethical values through comparison of stepmother stories

If evil deeds in stepmother stories have relatively typical patterns, there must be some ethical values involved. This is because an established value restrains human behaviors, and it may be adopted as an undeniable value in literary works. In order to prove this, we will make a brief comparison with a similar folktale in Japan.

“A Bride without Hands” transmitted in Japan has around 114 versions found so far. Among them, we chose one whose narrative development is logical for our discussion.

A rich man in Osaka leaves home for Edo for business, and while he is gone, the stepmother tries to kill the pretty stepdaughter but fails to do so. She orders one of her retainers to kill the stepdaughter, but, not wanting to kill her, the retainer just cuts off the girl's two hands and abandons her on a mountain. In order to quench her thirst, the girl with the amputated hands comes down to a village and picks a pear from a pear tree in a yard. Reading the doorplate of the house, the girl murmurs that she was engaged to the son of the family. A servant of the house hears this and reports it, and the girl without hands becomes a daughter-in-law of the family. After her husband leaves home for a business trip, the girl without hands gives birth to a son. The servant who has been sent to report this news to her husband stops by the girl's maiden home. The stepmother intoxicates the servant with alcohol and changes the letter. In the same way, she changes the contents of the return letter from the husband of the girl without hands. Reading the letter, the parents-in-law cannot help but drive out the girl without hands and her son. At a Buddhist shrine by the roadside, the girl prays for the restoration of her hands. On the way, she meets an itinerant monk and learns from him that her hands will be restored when she is surprised. When she tries to drink water flowing under a rock, the baby on her back nearly falls off. She is startled and tries to hold onto the baby, and her hands are restored. The girl meets the itinerant monk again and settles at a temple he tells her about.

When her son becomes four years old, the husband returns home and goes out to find his wife and son. After two or three years, the husband visits the temple that the itinerant monk tells him about. The boy shouts “Daddy!” and runs to his father. The three return home and live a happy life. The stepmother loses her sight due to her evil deed. One with an evil heart is punished.¹⁴

Like the other versions presented earlier, “*A Bride without Hands*” transmitted in Japan shows the common pattern of the stepmother trying to kill the former wife’s daughter. In comparison, the stepmother in the Korean version of “*A Bride without Hands*” mistreats the former wife’s daughter through all kinds of hard work or disgraces her by fabricating an extramarital pregnancy. Moreover, the stepmother in the Japanese story orders her retainer to kill the former wife’s daughter—that is, the daughter of the retainer’s lord—but the retainer has pity on her and sets her free after only amputating her hands. Cutting off the stepdaughter’s hands functions as a symbol indicating that the retainer is faithful to his duty. In the Korean story, on the contrary, there are largely two reasons for amputating the stepdaughter’s hands. One is that she is extremely good at housework, and the other is her extramarital pregnancy, which is immoral for a virgin. As discussed above, both of these reasons are closely associated with hands. Therefore, the stepdaughter’s loss of her hands in the Korean story is considered highly relevant to the stepmother’s intentions. That is, the stepmother wanted the stepdaughter’s hands to be cut off. Without hands, the stepdaughter cannot be good at housework any longer and will be perceived to be an immoral woman by society. Either way, the stepdaughter can hardly lead a normal life as a woman.

Which is more immoral: killing the stepdaughter completely or impairing and defiling what is most important to a woman, domes-

14 “*A Virgin without Hands*”, *Overviews of Japanese Traditional Stories*, Vol. 2, Dongmyeong-sa, 1998, pp. 276-279.

tic labor and pregnancy? There may not be a definite answer to this question. If one is more immoral, is the other less immoral? What is immoral is simply immoral, and it is difficult to give a relative value to it. This is because, both in the Korean and Japanese stories, killing or driving out the former wife's daughter is a consequence of the stepmother's envy and jealousy of the stepdaughter. In this sense, the core of the question is whether the consequence of envy and jealousy is limited to individuals or goes beyond individuals.

Concentrating on this question, we may draw conclusions as follows. In the Japanese folktale, the stepmother is engrossed only in killing the former wife's daughter. She does not plot with any of her family, and her deed is purely from her envy and jealousy. In this sense, her act is thoroughly personal. By contrast, the stepmother in the Korean version colludes with the stepdaughter's father, namely, her new husband. As a result, the stepmother's evil deed is replaced naturally with punishment enforced by the authority of the husband as the family head, namely, by the hierarchy and order of vertical human relations. Ultimately, the stepdaughter loses her position as a daughter in the family and as a woman in society. From this viewpoint, the stepmother's envy and jealousy, and her evil deeds as the visible representations of this envy and jealousy, have a strong social aspect. Punishment is the most convenient means for maintaining a group, and it is found in the family, which is the smallest social group. What is more, the stepmother's evil deeds in the Korean story are shared with her husband and this means that such evil deeds were carried out under the patriarchal system. From this viewpoint, we can say that the stepmother's evil deeds are underpinned more by masculine ethical values in the Korean story than in the Japanese version; that is, such deeds are based on ethical values that exist under the patriarchal system.

Next, there are 15 versions of "*Medicine Liver*" reported in Japan. The outline of the story is not much different from the Korean equivalent: a man loses his wife to death and marries again. Plotting with a

shaman, the stepmother pretends to be sick and says that she has to eat the stepson's liver. The father explains the stepmother's situation to his son (or orders his servant, a hunter, etc. to take out the son's liver, or the father discusses with a deity in the temple and is instructed to give a dog liver). The servant brings a dog liver and lets the boy run away. When the stepson is wandering, the dead mother or her incarnation (or an old man, a Buddhist priest, a deity in the temple) appears and gives him a pipe and a magic fan. The son is hired as a horse driver by a rich man. The stepson dresses himself gorgeously using the magic fan and plays the pipe in a festival. Seeing this, the rich man's daughter falls so in love with him that she falls ill. Advised by a fortuneteller, the rich man has his servants appear before her as she lies in bed, and when the horse driver appears at last she receives his cup and is healed. Then the stepson transforms himself into a noble man and marries the rich man's daughter. The stepmother starves to death, or the father loses his sight and the stepmother comes to beg. The rice cake on the 3rd of March and the use of Ibuki mugwort as a remedy originate from this story. Unlike this outline, however, a few versions do not mention the stepson's marriage. The father saves the son using a duck liver, or the hunter saves the son using a monkey liver, or the father brings a dog liver as instructed by a deity. Later, when the stepson returns in gorgeous attire, the stepmother falls sick and dies, or the father tells the truth to the stepmother and she regrets her actions and raises the son sincerely, or a deity raises the son into a great man.

There is little difference in the general outlines of the Korean and Japanese folktales of the same line. With these stories, however, we may draw a conclusion similar to that for "*A Bride without Hands*" stories analyzed above. In the Korean story, the stepmother's collusion with the husband is maintained to the end and her plot is discovered at the last moment. In the Japanese story, however, the collusion between the stepmother and the husband is broken easily and turns into a confrontation, or the husband persuades the stepmother to receive

the stepson. Moreover, in the conclusion, the stepson's punishment of the stepmother is not as impressive as in the Korean version. This is probably because social consensus on or perceptions of punishment for the stepmother's evil deeds were not clearly formed. From these facts, we can see again that the stepmother's evil deeds are carried out not by the stepmother alone but under the patriarchal hierarchy and order represented by the husband. The fact that stepmother stories were more popular than stepfather ones may be understood as a visible phenomenon of patriarchal hierarchy and order, but its ethical value has to be dependent on the practical implementation of the hierarchy and order.

It is noteworthy that, because stepmother stories are commonly recited by women, they must have reflected women's consciousness, but in Korea, women's consciousness, which had already been masculinized, thoroughly permeated the stepmothers' evil deeds. This is because the question of who would punish the stepmothers' evil deeds and set standard ethical values for the punishment is a social issue based on the family as the smallest social group, as well as an issue of society as a whole.

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ABSTRACT

The Patterns and Meanings of Human Relations in Korean Stepmother Stories

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We may point out three important points about family. First, family is the starting point of the birth of vertical human relations. Second, such vertical human relations are not limited to a specific family but are, though informal, a kind of social phenomenon that has attained a social consensus. Third, the ethical value of vertical human relations formed through family may vary according to each people's historical situation or customs, and the enforceability of such relations based on social consensus may be different. This study proposes to discuss the three issues through stepmother stories handed down in Korea and Japan.

I discuss that the typical pattern of stepmothers' evil deeds is different depending on whether the former wife's child is a son or a daughter. That is, unconditional sacrifice is forced on the former wife's daughter through domestic labor, extramarital pregnancy, etc. and on the former wife's son through his sacrifice to cure his parent's disease. In addition, such typical patterns mean the deprivation of the deprivation of the former wife's daughter's position at home and the deprivation of the former wife's son's position in society. In order to restructure the vertical human relation of the family, the stepmother has to deprive the former wife's children of their positions based on the established family relation. In this sense, stepmother stories reveal violence that is either hidden in families built on vertical human relations or tabooed in normal families.

KEYWORDS stepmother story, family, human relation, vertical human relation, sacrifice, Korean oral narrative