

# The Originality of the Visualization of the Korean *Dokkaebi*

Through Comparison with the Japanese *Oni* in the 1990's

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**Abstract:** This paper is a comparative study of the visual representation the *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi*, mythical monsters from Japan and Korea, respectively. While the *Dokkaebi* has been studied extensively, the origins of its visual representation have been excluded from scholarly purview until recently. The question has been raised because, although the *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi* are certainly different in many respects, the image of the *Dokkaebi* today is described as being identical to that of the *Oni*. The specific time period under question in this paper, the 1990's, is an epoch when Korean society experienced many significant changes. In this paper, I review the opinions on the *Dokkaebi*'s visual image of each of the following groups: scholars of Korean literature, scholars of folklore, scholars of art history, authors and artist. This paper also considers the influences of those debates on the creation of new *Dokkaebi* images. In this way, this paper considers the meaning of this debate and its background in order to provide a new perspective on the direction to which the *Dokkaebi*'s visual image might head.

**Key words:** *Dokkaebi*, *Oni*, *Representation*, *Visualization*, *Post-Colonial Period*

## 1. Introduction

The *Dokkaebi* is a beloved symbolic icon of Korean culture, showing up in animation, comics, soap operas, and movies, and also used in shop or product names, and even as a metaphor used in everyday language. However, since 1995, with the words of Chong-dae Kim, who said: "the well-known actual visualization of the *Dokkaebi* is very similar to Japanese *Oni*. This is evidence that the colonial period is still influencing Korea and has to be corrected urgently," the theme of Japanese colonial influence on the *Dokkaebi* has been debated through Korean media on occasion and continues to this day.<sup>1</sup>

Well, what does the Japanese *Oni* look like? It is told that the *Oni* has two horns and is wearing a tiger's skin.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are variations, but these horns and tiger's skin symbolize the *Oni* and are used for many designs of *Oni*-based characters. These horns and tiger's skin also apply to the image of the Korean *Dokkaebi*.

Much research on the subject of each character refers to Japan and Korea's shared heritage of folklore and legends involving monsters. There are researchers like Chong-dae Kim<sup>3</sup> and Yong-ui Kim,<sup>4</sup> all of them agreeing that the current visualization of the *Dokkaebi*'s image has its origins in the illustrations of this Korean school textbook. Thus, in their reading, this unification of the visual image across the two countries is influenced by colonial ideology. Many researchers, authors, and artists speak out regarding their positions on this subject, and the debate about the originality of the *Dokkaebi*'s representation is still controversial.

While much previous research on the formation of the image of the *Dokkaebi* has focused on the colonial period (1910-1945), very little has been written about how it was represented in the post-colonial period. My

recent study looks at the question of why the visual representation of *Oni* and *Dokkaebi* remained so similar into the post-colonial period (1960s-1980s), even as the South Korean government officially banned the import of Japanese culture until the early 1990's. Furthermore, I explore why the *Dokkaebi* became a potent symbol of Korean national identity, especially in the 1980's.<sup>5</sup> The intention of this paper is not to discuss the originality of the *Dokkaebi*'s visual image, but rather to focus on the social background in order to understand why such a controversy regarding the possibility of Japanese colonial influence on its image occurred during the 1990's.

## **2. The debate concerning the authentic representation of Korea**

### **2.1. The increase in representations of the *Dokkaebi***

After liberation from Japan, the most remarkable turning point for the culture of visual representation in Korea was the Olympic games in Seoul in 1988. After this event, Korea's attention to visual images improved and the environment of visual design truly began at that time, as the demand for characters, logos, and symbols rose rapidly. Many companies and public offices seemed to compete as to who could change their logos more quickly or develop mascots or commercially recognized characters. The modernization of businesses and the growth of large billboards led to a natural but sudden increase of visual images in Korean daily life.

Korean society changed rapidly after the 1990's. With changes in computer hardware, dissemination of personal computers and the Internet, and changes in aspects of software, many pirated copies were made from imported Japanese pop cultural media. At the same time, indigenous efforts based on those influences played an important role in Korean popular culture. However, this whole-scale imitation of Japanese culture made conservatives feel that there existed a crisis of cultural imperialism. Korea has seen major changes, not just within the realm of politics but also in the economic sphere, such as the economic crisis of 1997. With the opening of the country to Japanese mass culture beginning in 1998, the Korean government started to support cultural policy that actively cultivated indigenous production and pushed for original content within this industry. The *Dokkaebi*, at first obtaining attention as a motif, later became problematic because of the debate on the originality of its visualization. The dissemination increased of the *Dokkaebi* image was prompted by powerful nationalist sentiment in Korea.

In this situation, the *Oni* came into Korean culture as the *Dokkaebi* and found its place. As stated above, the similarity between the Korean *Dokkaebi* and the Japanese *Oni* was pointed out in 1995 and, as a matter of fact, the *Dokkaebi* was gaining attention as an icon and a character used to symbolize Korean culture and beloved by all of Korean regardless their political position or economic situation. On the same time, a range of visual image was produced as *Dokkaebi*.

### **2.2. Discourse on the representation of the *Dokkaebi* and the *Oni***

The question has been raised because, although the *Oni* and the *Dokkaebi* are certainly different in many respects, the image of the *Dokkaebi* today is described as being identical to that of the *Oni*. Kwang-eun Kim, the then director of the National Folk Museum of Korea, first mentioned the doubt about the *Dokkaebi*'s visualization origins with the opinion, "the representation of the *Dokkaebi* is ambivalent to that of the Japanese *Oni*."<sup>6</sup> (1995) The folklorist Kang-hyun Joo, however, argued that "the Korean *Dokkaebi* is never cruel or brutal and different from the Japanese *Oni*." Also he mentioned that while the Japanese *Oni* has one horn, the Korean *Dokkaebi* has two.<sup>7</sup> (1995) The discourse concerning the representation of *Dokkaebi* started with the issue of horns. Ja-yong

Cho, the art historian, also took as the basis of his argument the characteristics of the monster-mask design among the two characters, saying that “the Korean *Dokkaebi* has two horns but Japanese *Oni* has one”, as well<sup>8</sup>. (1997)

On the other hand, the folklorist Chong-dae Kim’s active opinion was that Korean *Dokkaebi* has no horn at all. He said that there is no literature about the visualization of the *Dokkaebi*, so it is impossible to suggest its image, and the only information we can get is from the folktales themselves. He also presented an influential new image of the *Dokkaebi* as a full-page illustration in his newspaper interview: the figure is very similar to a normal man, but very large and hairy. The figure appeals to the readers not to confuse the Korean *Dokkaebi* with the Japanese *Oni*<sup>9</sup>. [Fig.1] In Kim’s opinion, the false image of the *Dokkaebi* is actually the *Oni*, and was implanted to encourage the ideology of unification during colonization. He says in his interview that “to tell Korea’s correct and true culture is to hand down Korea’s true history to our descendants.” (1998) Yong-ui Kim also says in his dissertation that the tale of “the geezer with a lump on his cheek (Hokpuri Yongkam),” which is told in both countries, was implanted during colonization in schoolbooks designed by the Japanese for Koreans with illustrations, with the goal of promoting the colonial ideology of unification. (1999)

This problem of cultural and visual origins became the subject of great attention because of the illustrations in elementary school textbooks compiled by the Korean state in the 2007.<sup>10</sup> [fig.2] Articles like the one above were a big social issue at the time and, in the end, the Ministry of Education and Science had a debate about this problem.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.3. Interpretations of the origins of the *Dokkaebi*’s visual representation

There have been other efforts to locate the origins of the visual image of the *Dokkaebi* in folk literature, tales or legends. In-hak Choi writes that there are visible *Dokkaebi* s in these forms of literature, appearing via objects such as broomsticks, pokers, mortars and pestles, and wills-o’-the-wisp, and there are also invisible *Dokkaebis*, which are hallucinations, like the sound of breaking houses, hammering hailstones, rattling doors, barking dogs, whistles, riding horses, the sound of stones hitting a hard surface, etc.<sup>12</sup> Hak-seon Kim also says that the *Dokkaebi*’s visualization is not limited to one form; rather, it can show up in the form of a child, a woman, or an old man. It also can appear in the form of objects such as bowls, trays, hammers or keys, and it can appear in the form of an instrument such as a gong or a drum.<sup>13</sup> Yong-ui Kim argues, like Choi, that you can see the *Dokkaebi*’s appearance from objects in the tales or fables in the order of broomsticks, mortars and pestles, large bowls or strainers.<sup>14</sup> The visual information of the *Dokkaebi* in the tales and from the view of folklore is not visible at all or in the form of objects you would encounter in your daily life. [fig.3]

Eun-hae Kang insists that “*Doodoori*,”<sup>15</sup> a god of the forest, is *Dokkaebi*’s origin.<sup>16</sup> A similar research conclusion is reached by Eun-yong Park, who interprets the *Dokkaebi*’s name as coming from *Doodoori* and related to the mortar used in building homes.<sup>17</sup> [fig.4]

Suk-jay Yim writes that “some people think that the roof tile design of the monster-mask and other masks express the visualization of the *Dokkaebi*, but this visualization is derived from the monster-masks from Japan in China. So you cannot say that those masks show the visual origins of the *Dokkaebi*.<sup>18</sup>” [fig.5] In addition, Woo-bang Kang from the Art History Research Institute of Korea holds the opinion that *Dokkaebi Kiwa*, the name of the roof tile of monster-masks, comes from Japan, and the Korean roof tile design uses dragons as a motif and not the *Dokkaebi* (a ghost or a monster), so it should not be used as a reference for the visualization of the *Dokkaebi*.<sup>19</sup> (2004) [fig.6]

On the other hand, Sung-hee Huh proposes that the monster-masks also have Korean characteristics if you consider the fact that the monster-mask roof tiles have similarities shared throughout East Asia, but differ depending on countries or epochs.<sup>20</sup> Kyoung-kook Choi presents the possibility of an interactive influence between Korea and Japan, focusing on the point that the visualization of the Japanese *Oni* is based on monster-mask designs as well as Buddhist deities.<sup>21</sup> [fig.7]

### **3. Visual representation of the *Dokkaebi***

#### **3.1. Ambiguity surrounding the origins of the *Dokkaebi*'s visual representation**

However, Korea lacked the production capabilities needed to fulfill the needs of the public, which was asking for a greater and deeper amount of visual culture, being as it was influenced by economic growth and exposure to foreign visual culture. Korea was depending on foreign visual culture, and the piracy and copying continued. The ideal material to copy was the visual culture of Japan, because its taste was very similar to Korea, and thus it was easy to use. This situation led to an effect adverse in its reception by the Korean public: Japanese visual culture became difficult to define as separate from Korean culture.

During the days when the lifting of isolation against Japanese culture was being discussed, the books translating *Oni* as *Dokkaebi* and the illustrations which also showed the *Dokkaebi* as same as the form of an *Oni* were already entrenched in Korean popular culture. The fact that the surge of nationalism spurred by the dictatorial government was turning into a nationalism held by the public and culminating in many demonstrations against Japan, America, and the dictatorial regime itself, all organized by the masses, furthered the debate. Because the argument about the originality of the *Dokkaebi* was connected with the colonial period, this argument was more emphasized within this period.

Throughout the 1990's, many Japanese comics or videos were published via pirated means, and the imitation of Japanese culture in Korea and the implications of this practice became a major social issue. The use of the home video player was increasing, ensuring that a good deal of pirated Japanese animation videos were circulating, and the Japanese characters of Sanrio were used for stationary and toy designs in Korea, even as the concept of character on these imitations was quite poor. The *Oni* character *Ramu* from the comic book "Urusei Yatsura" [fig.8] and *Goropikadon* of Sanrio, a Japanese character company [fig.9], for example, were used for many stationary designs.

The settling in within Korean visual culture of a typical *Oni* character as the *Dokkaebi*'s image is an incontrovertible fact, and the works which show the *Dokkaebi* based on the form of the Japanese *Oni* were in fact the most popular ones. Especially in shows such as musicals for children, we still find today a *Dokkaebi* that looks like a typical Japanese *Oni*. However, there are other popular examples of the *Dokkaebi* that do not follow the visual guide of the *Oni*. "Dokebi bride (*Dokkaebi Shinbu*)", a comic for girls, draws its motif from the arts of Buddhism. [fig.10] The *Dokkaebi* s from the Internet game "Ghost online (Guihon)" [fig.11] and from the animation "The Land of Tales ABC (ABC Donghwa Nara)" [fig.12] seem to be stateless like the Genie from "Aladdin's Lamp," rather than following the visual example of the *Oni*. In the animation "Kkobi kkobi," made in 1995, a *Dokkaebi* is shown as a traditional Korean hero.<sup>22</sup> [fig.13]

#### **3.2. Argument concerning the visualization of the *Dokkaebi***

This kind of debate also drew in artists and authors who were actually behind the rendering of the visual image of the *Dokkaebi*. Authors had to select the stereotypical *Dokkaebi* image, influenced by the *Oni*, or a new image of *Dokkaebi*, and had to prepare a good reason for their decision. In the picture book “The hectic *Dokkaebi* (Jungshin Upnun *Dokkaebi*),” the *Dokkaebi* is drawn as a red-colored giant, shirtless and with fiery hair. He does not have any horns and, except for his skin-color, looks like a normal man, and so this representation coalesces with the theory of the non-horned *Dokkaebi*. [fig.14] In “The tales of *Dokkaebi* told by Grandpa,” the *Dokkaebi* shows up as Chi you (Chiwoo) from the Chinese “Records of the grand historian (Sagi)” and so this work shares the opinion that Chi you is the origin of the Korean *Dokkaebi*.<sup>23</sup> [fig.15] “The teacher who became *Dokkaebi*’s boss” shows us a stereotypical *Dokkaebi* with a horn, shirtless and with a club. The author of this book, Byung-ho Han, has said in an interview that he does not trying to draws the traditional form of the *Dokkaebi*, but at the same time is creating a *Dokkaebi* of his own.<sup>24</sup> [fig.16] Recently the *Dokkaebi* is also used as a character for the purpose of tourist marketing, to revitalize interest in regions that are the cradles for various traditional *Dokkaebi* tales. There is, for example, “The *Dokkaebi* village Koksung” in South Jeolla Province, and the statue of the village is very similar to the Japanese *Oni*. The creator, Song-bom Kim, says, “I could not give up the horn and the club. Anyway, I tried to express the Korean image in the face of the statue.”<sup>25</sup> [fig.17] The Koksung district is progressing with a 9 billion won project for developing “*Dokkaebi* Land,” including the place where this *Dokkaebi* statue will be placed.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1. The plurality of views concerning the “authentic” *Dokkaebi* visual representation

The diagram below visualizes the plurality interpretations surrounding the *Dokkaebi*’s visual representations and what is believed to be “authentic” images in art and culture.<sup>26</sup> This map presents many other opinions of each major group in the debate: scholars of Korean literature; folklore; art history, authors, and artists. It also shows the creation of the new *Dokkaebi* images in popular media including those influenced by these debates. Here we can find the reluctance against finding authenticity in folk art, and we can also see the problematic difference between the ideas in the invisible area [A, B in Dia.1] and the crafts easily found in the visible realm: this disjuncture shows the distance between the status of art [G, H in Dai.1] and folk art [C, D in Dia.1] in Korean society. In fact, the opinion of literary folklore academia, which regards this authenticity as important, is in contraposition to the art itself, which involves ethnic heritage as well as other, different aspects caused by the confrontation between art and craft. These literary folklore academics are leading the debate without any satisfying results to show. The tenet of the Japanese *Oni* is limiting the focus of this debate to the legacy of colonialism alone. Of course, this is one of the reasons that this debate has attracted so much popular attention in the first place. As a matter of fact, the point of their central argument – that the visualization of *Dokkaebi* is based on the Japanese *Oni*, which was borrowed during the colonization period, and is not created naturally from traditional Korean art – makes it hard to enter this debate or take a longer view of the issues at hand. [E, F in Dia.1]

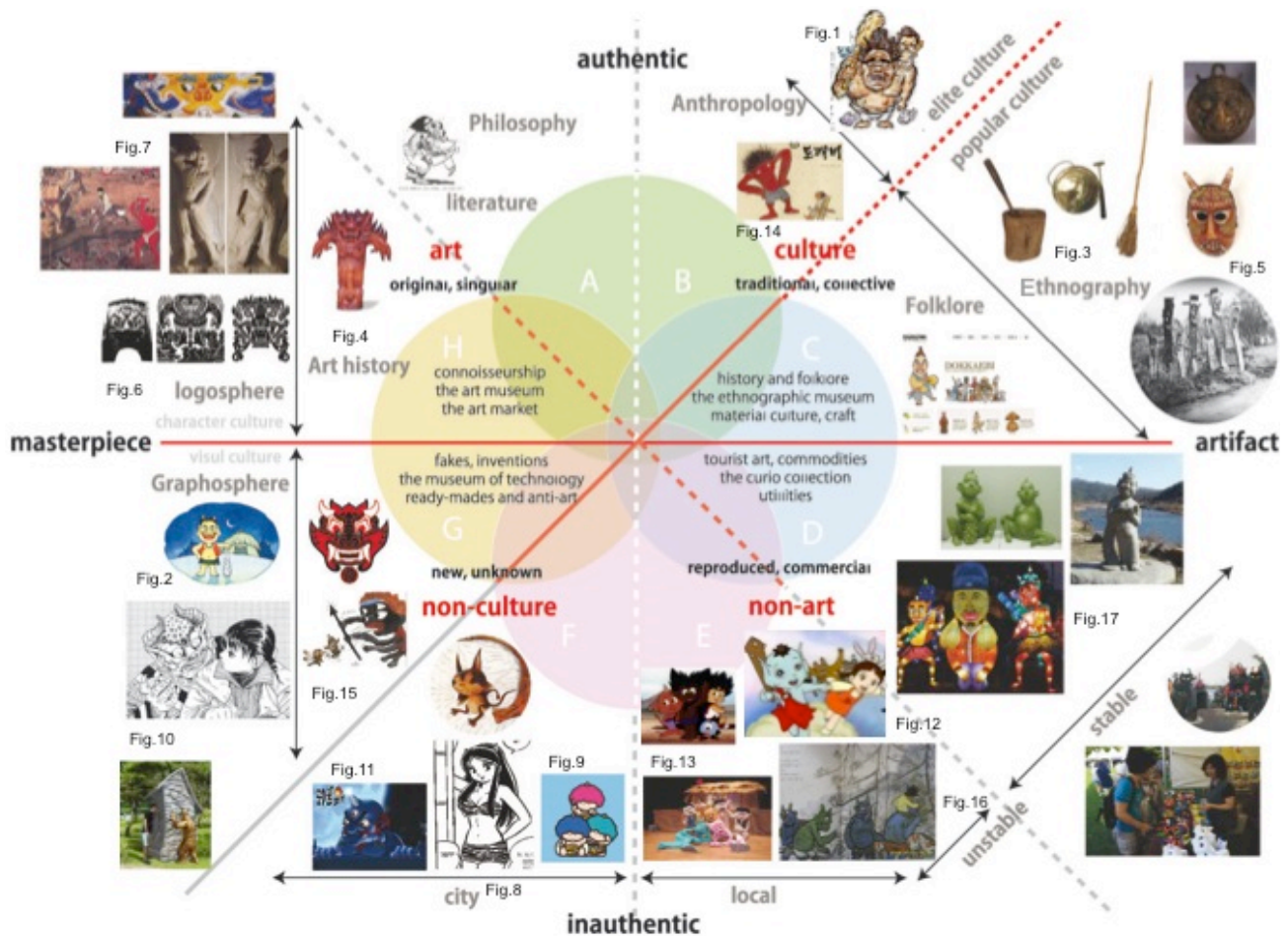


Diagram.1 The Visualization of *Dokkaebi*

## 4.2. Conclusions

Korea has seen major changes, not just within the realm of politics but also in the economic sphere, such as the economic crisis of 1997. With the opening of the country to Japanese mass culture beginning in 1998, the Korean government started to support cultural policy that actively cultivated indigenous production and pushed for original content within this industry. The *Dokkaebi*, at first obtaining attention as a motif, later became problematic because of the debate on the originality of its visualization.

The popular visual representation of the *Dokkaebi* has already been used for over 50 years after the colonial period ended, and is still criticized to be Japanese. However, a visual image is selected and accepted: not by ideology, but naturally. It is a tall order to try to “settle” a debate on the representation of a mythological character. This kind of debate is an ideological conflict, caused by specifics within Korean society, which still depends upon the authority of literature but at the same time tries to be a society in which visual images are the leading cultural output. It is a society whose consciousness surrounding the culture of visual representation has not yet reached the level to which it strives to attain. It is not productive to limit the visualization of the *Dokkaebi* with an ideational point of view.

Ambiguity of origins led to various images of it being created. That is what makes the character interesting. Search for authenticity lack purpose more interesting or fruitful to appreciate the enter spectrum of images that has been created. So it is important not to exclude the possibilities for a variety of potentials within visual culture.

This is true also in relation to traditional art and traditional crafts. I hope to one day see a new visualization for the *Dokkaebi* that embraces the possibilities of folk craft and art now being uncovered by diverse and careful researchers in a still-developing field.

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