Deconstructing the Ideology of Nature and Childhood

in Korean Child Narratives

by

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I analyze the construction of childhood and nature in a number of Korean Theatre For Young Audience (TFY) works and family movies produced since 2000. Studying *The Tale of Haruk*, *Gamoonjang Baby*, *Oseam* and *The Way Home*, I explore the childhood memes that surface in the analysis and how they relate to dominant cultural understandings of Korean childhood. Both nature and childhood are metaphorical spaces reflecting the specificity of the cultural context in which they are situated. And in the works I explore, the two are paired in interesting and complex ways and for ideological reasons, the study of which produces a deeper understanding of the construction of Korean childhood. The “child” in Korean TFY has not been thoroughly explored in earlier scholarly work, nor do many preceding studies explore the performance texts of Korean TFY from an analytic stance. This is a serious gap in the literature, considering the significance of the discourse on childhood as a major conceptual framework bolstering TFY and the centrality of the performative aspect of the field. Thus, this study is meaningful as one of the first doctoral works to analyze the performance texts of Korean TFY and the first work to explore Korean TFY from a childhood studies framework. The findings of this interdisciplinary work will be of interest to the field of childhood studies and TFY, broadly defined. In studying the works, my main methodology has been detailed performance analysis. Through the analysis, interesting tropes of Korean childhood emerge, some of which have not been addressed explicitly before. My work reveals Korean childhood as a hybrid cultural assemblage reflecting the complexity of the Korean cultural context, where historical, current, native and foreign ideas about childhood mingle.
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PREFACE

I rarely speak about myself in my research. After my doctoral defense, however, my mentors encouraged me to write this part which explains how my position frames this study. Hopefully, this preface will help readers understand my perspective and its ramifications for my work. I am native Korean, and have spent a little more than two thirds of my life in Seoul. What does this mean? I have been immersed in Korean culture, am more used to it than I am to other cultures, and know much about it. Yet, I do not think that I can represent my culture, nor do I think that I am an expert, especially if someone expects me to introduce something like authentic Koreanness. But for certain, I am familiar with Korean culture, just as most Koreans are, and more than most non-Koreans are. At the same time, though I am native Korean I have spent a little less than one third of my life in the West. For example, I spent a significant part of my childhood in Germany. Understanding that cultures are different, while maintaining an observational distance from every cultural context, has been part of my perspective since I was very little. Also, my sense of being in between cultures evolved further through diverse intercultural experiences in my youth and adulthood. To give a few examples, as a young adult I was a year-long cultural delegate in Germany, where my major duty was to introduce Korean culture to the German public; I did graduate studies in U.S. universities; and I served as an interpreter for theatre professionals from diverse places. Thus, I am very conscious of the fact that humans from different places think and feel differently. I have experienced that people often misinterpret other cultures. Also, I have met many people who take their own culture as an absolute or natural given. And I know
that ordinary facts about Korea can attract the attention of foreigners and that it is easy to
exotify Koreanness as the unknown, with or without the intention to do so.

The above perspective frames this study in a certain way. This dissertation is
about Korean TYA and childhood. Thus, in my study, I partly depend on the knowledge I
pull from my experience as a native Korean, in addition to the information I find through
my research. Meanwhile, I am writing in English for a Western readership, not
exclusively for them but for them in the first place, because this is a doctoral dissertation
I am submitting to a North American university. Thus, I consider the Western reader’s
perspective as much as possible. That is, I keep in mind that the culture I have been
immersed in, or the things I am familiar with, may be new for Westerners. Thus, I
consciously defamiliarize myself from the familiar. Also, as I know how easy it is to
misrepresent Korean childhood to foreigners, I select and present information about it as
accurately as possible. One way to do so is to consider whether a Korean reader would
agree with the content I introduce. Yet, at certain points, I cannot avoid writing on a
commonsensical level (from a Korean perspective), i.e., about very basic facts of Korean
culture. That happens because the majority of Western readers do not have the
background knowledge about the topic that native Koreans do. Also, no matter how much
I try not to mystify Korean culture, Koreanness cannot but be the exotic other to the
Western eye to some extent. On top of that, by coincidence, many works in the archive,
which I have selected based only on the selection criteria, happen to be rooted in
traditional paradigms. For example, I write more about traditional thought traditions such
as Confucianism or Buddhism, but not about Christianity, which is one of the largest
religions in today’s Korea. That is not a problem in itself but can be misleading if the
reader misinterprets the outcome. Here I am underlining that this study points to
significant aspects of Korean childhood, but that it does not represent its entire scene. I
am doing so mainly for non-Korean readers because such facts are obvious for Koreans.

Ultimately, I have undertaken this study because of a question that I myself care
about. And of course, I do not write only for Western readers but for all who care about
the same question I do. Moreover, I want to point out that multiple conditions affect the
frame of this study in a complex way, rather than just the different cultural positions in
dialogue, which is the focus of this preface. Hopefully, this work means something to
those who are interested in the research topic, regardless of their cultural position. Yet, I
realize that writing in English with Western readers in mind is an efficient strategy in
terms of the overall productivity of the research. This study is about the ‘construction’ of
Korean childhood. Alienating myself from the Korean culture in which I have been
immersed and much of which I have taken as a given, is a complicated task. In the first
place, the perspectives of cultural studies and/or performance theory are significantly
helpful when distancing myself from Koreanness and revealing its constructed nature. On
top of that, by continuously trying to empathize with Western readers, I can study Korean
childhood as if I did not know about it or relativize it in the extreme, a stance that
sharpens my understanding of its constructed nature. I learn about Korean childhood in
an unexpected way: I can distinguish elements I would not have thought deserving of
attention or the existence of which I would not even have been aware. I am curious
whether my perspective and the frame of this study generated by such a position will
mean something for readers as well.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

In this study, I analyze a number of works from the Korean Theatre for Young Audience (TFY) and popular Korean family movies produced since the year 2000, to study the cultural meanings attached to “nature” and the “child.” I explore the tropes of childhood that surface in the works, and how these performative ideologies relate to the dominant Korean understandings of childhood. Performances of child-oriented theatre and family films depend on cultural tropes and ideologies to build coherent meanings and understandings. I explore contemporary understandings of children and childhood at the epistemological level and I uncover metaphorical constructs to explore the cultural making and re-making of “children.” This research project deepens typically Western-focused socio-cultural understandings of childhood by focusing on both nature and the child in Korean child narratives, building on the unique cultural relationships between the two. In the selected works I study, specific types of nature and a number of major paradigms about childhood meet each other in complex ways that deepen the field of childhood studies and theatre for young audiences (TFY), broadly defined. Modern Korean child narratives also reflect the complexity of the construction of Korean childhood. In my analysis of TFY works and family movies, I thus make the construction of Korean childhood visible by revealing its socio-historic specificity. This study is significant because it is one of the first doctoral works analyzing the performance texts of
Korean TFY and also because it is the first work to explore Korean TFY from a childhood studies perspective.

**Key Understandings**

The following theories frame this study. Most of all, child narratives can and need to be understood by studying the construction of childhood within them. Because TFY and family movies mainly address child spectators, the works are meaningful only if they address the reality of the child audience. One cannot know a child’s reality without understanding the way that different ideologies about childhood are in play in its construction. Since every piece of TFY or family movie roots in an ideology about the child, each influences the way people think about children. Representations of children quickly become truths about children, which in turn affects children’s material existence. One cannot understand how a child narrative functions without understanding the construction of the child. The cultural construction of childhood is thus a major discourse forming child narratives. My position is influenced by Bedard’s idea that “the cultural construction of the concepts of children/childhood looms as perhaps the single most dominant discourse that maintains and consolidates TYA” (24). When interrogating TFY works and family movies in this study, I will therefore focus on the construction of childhood from a childhood studies perspective. Childhood Studies is a field where scholars regard childhood as “something to which we [people] ascribe meaning” (Sternheimer, vii), a cultural construct rather than a universal given. It is an area where scholars explore such meaning by analyzing “historical, cultural and literary
interpretations of childhood (“Childhood Studies”)” and where they celebrate both the
child as a being, and the child’s agency.

For the purposes of this study, I define childhood and child agency as follows:
“Childhood” includes the period until the age of fifteen. Since childhood is a social
construct, every cultural context demarcates its starting and ending points differently.
One of the term used most widely to indicate a child in today’s Korea is Eorini (어린이),
which defines childhood as the period between the age of four and twelve. The boundary
of childhood in Korea is at present similar to the Western boundary. However, the
Western or modern Korean notion of childhood is not useful in all works in the archive.
Among the works in my archive for this study, Gamoonjang Baby and Oseam are
adaptations of myths or tales from a period before Korea was Westernized. The setting of
The Tale of Haruk is “once upon a time,” or old Korea. In Korea before the 20th century,
people generally thought of childhood as ending at the age of fifteen. Many studies of
traditional Korean childhood define it this way. Fifteen was also the age when Korean
people took up military duty or compulsory labor prior to the 20th century (Shin and
Kwon, 12). The Korean coming-of-age ceremony Kwanrye (관례) took place at the age
of fifteen. In this study, childhood thus ends at the age of fifteen. I will explore the
background of this boundary further in the main part of the study. Meanwhile, I define
“child agency” as children’s ability to be “… deeply implicated in the social world as
active agents” (Wyness 354). Children can think, make decisions, state opinions, take
actions, be responsible for their choices and influence their surroundings. That is,
“Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their
own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live” (James and Prout 127).

I also understand that the TFY plays and family movies foster ideologies about children, make these ideas appear natural, and lead people to accept them without reluctance. Because the works impose certain ideas about children on their audiences, they have an ideological influence, and are thus important. Through my analysis, therefore, I reveal the ideologies hidden behind the representations I study. I want to discover how they have come to appear natural, by studying where they come from and how they relate to social norms. Here I depend on Althusser’s idea that a system of representation is “endowed with an existence and a historical role at the heart of a given society” (Barry 163), as well as on Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony, which is “an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem natural or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all” (164). For the purposes of this study, TFY or “TYA (Theatre for Young Audiences)” is “the common appellation of professional children’s theatre, specifically, theatre performed by adult actors for child audiences” (Bedard 22), and for the purposes of this study, “family movies” are movies that both children and adults can enjoy and where a child protagonist is often in action. The term “family movie” is not an academic one, but rather popular and commercial in nature, and because the concept has a short history, its definition is still evolving. The general Korean public is familiar with the term, however, and shares a rough consensus contained in the above meanings.

I understand Korean childhood as a product of the cultural context of Korea and not an absolute entity. Thus, when studying Korean childhood, I consciously focus on the
socio-historic specificity of the Korean context and the unique cultural interactions within. If childhood is not a universal given existing in all places, every childhood, including those in Korea, needs to be understood in the light of cultural contexts. My position is influenced by the ideas of childhood studies scholars who, as mentioned, argue that “within a socially constructed, idealist world there are no absolutes” (Jenks, “Constructing Childhood” 89), and I agree that “… the institution of childhood vary cross-culturally …” (James and Prout 3). I also understand that my work challenges the notion of universal childhood by revealing that Korean childhood, as every other childhood, is “related to a particular cultural setting” (Jenks, “Childhood” 7).

Lastly, for the purposes of this study, “nature” means “the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations” (“nature”). According to Raymond Williams, “nature” is perhaps the most complex word in the English language (219). Ginn and Demeritt summarize William’s three different meanings of nature as the following:

1) Intrinsic nature, the essential characteristics of a thing
2) External nature, the external, unmediated material world (e.g. the natural environment)
3) Universal nature, the all-encompassing force controlling things in the world. (301)

According to Soper, the term is most often used for things that are not human and not cultural, but also to ask questions about “… the more or less artificial quality of our own behaviour and cultural formations …” (2). Thus, the term is used diversely in a complex way. Among the meanings, this study focuses on the meaning of Williams’
second category: the natural environment. This is because “nature” as the natural environment often is coupled with the child in Korean child narratives for ideological reasons, reinforcing specific tropes about the child.

A Brief History of Korea

I will briefly explain Korea’s history to provide non-Korean readers with information about the context of the study. Korea’s 5,000-year history began with the foundation of its first kingdom Gochosun (고조선) in 2333 B.C. The period of the Three Kingdoms (삼국시대), i.e., Koguryeo (고구려), Baekje (백제) and Silla (신라), lasted from the 4th to the 7th century and was followed by the period of Unified Silla (통일신라) (676-935) and Koryeo (고려) (918 - 1392). Koryeo’s state ideology was Buddhism, which was imported during the period of the Three Kingdoms and became popular in Unified Silla. Korea’s last dynasty was Chosun (1392-1910) and its state ideology was Confucianism, which has heavily influenced Korean culture. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea and the Japanese colonial era then lasted until 1945. Soon after Korea’s liberation from Japan, the country was divided as a result of the Cold War. The United States occupied the land south of the 38th parallel and the USSR the north. Thus, the two governments of North and South Korea were created. North Korea invaded the South in 1950 and the Korean War continued until 1953. However, the turbulence of Korean modern history did not end with the war. In the next few decades, the Korean people had to endure a series of dictatorships. That hindered the development of Korean democracy, which was not stabilized until the 1990s. At the same time, during the second half of the
20th century, “South Korea has overcome the weight of its tragic history to become arguably the greatest national success story of recent times. It is a story of rapid economic, political, cultural and artistic achievements” (Tudor 21). Thus, Korean culture is a hybrid assemblage reflecting its long history and comprising diverse cultural elements: shamanism, imported thought traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Western ideas, among others.

Nature and the Child

Nature as a Metaphorical Space

Nature is a metaphorical space, an idea to which people attach different cultural meanings. According to Cronon, “Nature is somehow socially constructed and contingent rather than being intrinsic, external and universal” (qtd. in Ginn and Demeritt 304). And Soper writes that “Nature also carries an immensely complex and contradictory symbolic load; it is the subject of very contrary ideologies; and it has been represented in an enormous variety of different ways” (2). Examples of ideologies about nature abound, and reflect the historical and cultural contexts that produce them: for example, there is an understanding that the East and the West perceive nature differently. Soper writes, for example, that “… all Western discourses on nature … carry within them … a metaphysical tradition that has covertly identified the ‘human’ side of the humanity–nature distinction with ‘civilized’/‘developed’ humanity” (10). And the West has related ‘nature’ to “‘the primitive’, the ‘bestial’, ‘the corporeal’ and the ‘feminine’” (10). Conversely, Yimoon Park argues that Western philosophy or religion is human-centric...
whereas Eastern views such as Lao-tzu's philosophy, Buddhism and Shamanism are based on monism (486). Different from Western dualistic epistemology, Eastern monistic views do not differentiate nature from human beings (486). Park argues that representations of nature in the two cultures reflect such an epistemological difference: In Romanticism, for example, Western people praised nature, but this was a temporary phenomenon (485), whereas nature-centered perspectives have continually prevailed throughout Eastern philosophical traditions (488).

Other examples of ideological perspectives on nature that are influential at the present are ecology and theory/cultural criticism (Soper 3). In ecology, people regret the destruction of nature and try to protect it from human contamination. In cultural criticism, on the contrary, people regard nature as an ideological product and deconstruct its cultural representations. “… postmodernist cultural theory and criticism … has invited us to view the order of nature as entirely linguistically constructed” (6). As the above examples illustrate, nature is not a universal given, but an idea to which people have attached diverse cultural meanings. “Nature is a mirror of and for culture. Ideas of nature reveal as much or more about human society as they do about nonhuman processes and features” (Spirn 251-252).

**Childhood as a Metaphorical Space**

Childhood, as mentioned, is a metaphorical space, and the most representative example of childhood as an ideological construct is the idea of the innocent, vulnerable and passive Western child as the ideal norm: the normative child goes to school, does not work, plays happily and is protected from the harshness of adulthood (Bissell 56).
Among the dominant ideologies of Western childhood, the most influential historical tropes are the romantic/natural/innocent child, the evil/puritan child and the child as tabula rasa. For the romantic child, thinkers such as William Blake and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who supported the idea, “engaged in a primitivist celebration of children’s spontaneous feeling and intense experience. The child was emblematic of freedom from social convention and utilitarian calculation” (Jenkins 18). In their view, adulthood was “corruption” and formal education was harmful to the development of the child (18). And adults “…might more profitably idolize or worship the intrinsic values they [children] bring to bear on the world…” (James, Jenks and Prout 13). There is also the puritan idea of the child, which is a framework that contemporary Christians still use, the thought that children are “potentially wicked and evil” (Kehily 5). “Childhood … [is] a battleground … to save the souls of the children” (Gittins, 31) and children are “in need of correction” (James, Jenks and Prout 12). In Locke’s view, that a child is a tabula rasa, or blank slate, children are like white paper without characters or ideas. Children could become “rational human beings” (Kehily 5) through training. “Within this discourse, the child is always in the process of becoming an adult-in-the-making…” (5). As such, the historical notions of childhood which comprise the dominant Western framework overlap with and sometimes contradict each other, thus revealing the complex ideological nature of childhood as a construct.

Meanwhile, other examples of ideologies about childhood are the dominant frameworks for understanding childhood in fields such as psychology and sociology. Developmental psychology is “the branch of psychology concerned with the changes in cognitive, motivational, psychophysiological, and social functioning that occur
throughout the human life span” (“developmental psychology”). Psychologists who are interested in Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, which is based on the idea of “natural growth” (James and Prout 10), argue that childhood is a natural condition and that its stages are of a biological nature. “Within this framework, childhood is seen as an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be charted through stages related to age, physical development and cognitive ability” (Kehily 7). The journey’s destination is the acquisition of rationality, “the universal mark of adulthood” (James and Prout 10).

And in the case of sociology, the sociologist considers society first, and the individual or the self is an “epiphenomenon” (Jenks, “Constructing Childhood” 85). Sociologists are more concerned about “what the society naturally demands of the child” than “what the child naturally is” (86). They “work back to the necessary inculcation of its [society’s] rules into the consciousness of its potential participants – these are always children” (86). Through socialization, children need to learn the qualities of normative adulthood. Adults and children are “two different instances of the species” (James and Prout 13), the former being complete and the latter incomplete. Thus, the frameworks used in developmental psychology and sociology are examples of ideological assumptions about childhood.

**Child and Nature as an Ideological Pair**

Nature and childhood have been paired in many times and places for ideological reasons. One example is the recent popularity of the idea of “nature-deficit disorder,” or the “no child left inside” movement in the West. Both concepts are based on pairs of ideologies about nature and childhood. The term “nature-deficit disorder,” was “coined by Louv to broadly address the lack of human-nature experiences, and the resultant
human costs (Miller 4)” and describes the idea that children who do not spend enough
time outdoors have behavioral problems (5). The “no child left inside” movement is “an
initiative … committed to reconnecting children with nature by providing a wide range of
opportunities to experience nature directly while building the next generation of
environmentally conscious citizens” (Miller v-vi). The movement has significant cultural
power in Western societies as it includes numerous institutions, often prestigious ones,
fostering the production of a huge body of public discourse, research and writing.

The idea that nature is beneficial for children’s health and growth and that the two
should be brought closer to each other is rooted in a number of ideologies about nature
and childhood. According to Mergen, the “no child left inside” movement is based on
two key assumptions: “first, that nature, however defined, is a good place with inherent
powers to improve human behavior, and second, that children, usually defined as those
aged five to twelve, are a distinct group of humans, unlike adults, and in special need of
nature” (645). Thus, the initiative is based on a cultural idea about a specific type of
nature, mostly constructed as beneficial or beautiful, and on an ideology that children
deserve something good, are valuable and should be nurtured and protected. The
movement is the product of a social context where nature and humans are separated:
mostly urbanized societies. Children who are not separated from nature, in
underdeveloped countries or rural communities, for example, do not need to be brought
closer to it, and thus, the ideas of “nature-deficit disorder” and the “no child left inside”
movement are examples of the intersection between ideologies about nature and children.

Another example of a pairing of the concepts of nature and the child is the current
trend connecting ecology and children. According to P. Lee, the reason for “… the recent
stirring of interest in the child and nature” is “probably a subset of the larger society’s concern about environmental issues” (193). Miller, for example, argues that “… as children become adults, their interactions with nature as children have substantial impact on their attitudes toward the environment and environmental issues” (1). He introduces a substantial amount of scholarship which provides evidence for his claim. Such interest in children’s experience of nature and in their potential as future guardians of the earth involves several ideologies. As ecologists think that people need to “value, conserve, and recognize our dependence upon it [nature]” (Soper 7), they “tend to invoke nature as a domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity” (6). The idea that children are significant as future guardians of the environment implies the idea that children are “potential citizens” whom adults have to lead through a socialization process that benefits society. As people connect ecology and children, they thus take an ideological position about both nature and childhood.

What about nature and children in the Korean context? Nature has been important in Korean children’s culture and child narratives from an ideological perspective. A good example is the article about nature and children in the Korean children’s charter (어린이 헌장). One of the charter’s eleven articles says that children should be guided to love “nature” and the “arts.” The Ministry of Health and Welfare published the second version of the charter in 1988 (the original draft was issued in 1957) and stipulated the responsibilities of the nation, society and family to improve the welfare of children (J. Choi 112). Interestingly, I could not find much information about the theoretical or legal background of the charter. Apparently, the document is mostly symbolic in nature, rather than a text with material influence on reality or legal force; but because the contents very
often appear in newspaper articles on Korean Children’s Day (어린이날), for example, the Korean public has been frequently exposed to its ideas. Korean people are thus familiar with the idea that children should become close to nature, even if there is only a rough consensus about the exact meaning of “nature” or the “child” in such a context. The following analysis reveals more about the ideological background of such mentality.

Most of all, “nature” is a significant concept in the educational philosophy and literary work of Jeonghwan Bang (1899-1931). Bang was an author of children’s literature and a children’s rights activist who argued that “children are independent beings who must be honored, respected, and cared for” (“Bang Jung-Hwan’s Passion for Children”). He introduced the term Eorini (어린이), which as mentioned, is one of the Korean words for ‘child’ mostly used today, and which is backed by the idea that children have equal rights with old people and youth. Before the appearance of the term, people dismissively called them Aenyosok (애녀석) or Ahaenom (아해놈), both of which are scornful terms for children.

Bang’s philosophy about nature and children is a good example of the ideological coupling of the two symbol systems. Bang compared children’s songs and shapes to those of nature and Hanul (한울 ‘the divine in Korean Cheondoism,’ a Korean religion that continues the tradition of Donghak, which means “Eastern Learning”). He wrote in his Praise of Childhood that “it is the child who loves mountains and the sea, who truly admires everything in nature and who dances with the sun. For the child, everything is happiness and love. The child is a close friend to all things” (Jungwon Lee 45). The goal of the Cheondoism educational movement, in which Bang was actively involved, was to
preserve children’s innate love for nature and their tendency to easily make friends with plants and animals (Hyejung Jung 257). As such, Bang believed that children should become one with nature, learning its beauty; and his literary works, where a majority of subject matter comes from the natural environment, reflect this philosophy (Jungwon Lee 49). Bang’s philosophy incorporates several ideologies about nature and the child, including that nature is something beautiful, good and beneficial, and that the child is innocent, good, happy and loving.

The idea of the “nature-friendly child,” the idea that children have a love for nature and easily become friends with it because of their goodness and innocence, appears in a number of Korean child narratives. Of the children’s songs most frequently included in the national music curriculum, the majority contain either a positive world view of the innocent child and/or represent the “nature-friendly child” (Sookyung Kim 374). Because such trends in children’s songs started in the 1920s and 30s, Bang’s heyday (376), the “nature-friendly child” has been a major meme in the field of children’s songs throughout the past century. In the main chapters of this study, I show that similar phenomena exist in other genres of child narratives. As such, the ideological paring of nature and the child appears frequently in Korean child narratives.

The above are only a few examples of nature and children being paired for ideological reasons, but these relate to each other in diverse ways, a complexity I explore in the following parts of this study. Constructions of “nature” turn out to be as diverse as those of “childhood,” and thoughts about both have evolved to reflect changes in Korean history, culture and dominant ideologies. The interrogation of the intersection between
the two leads to meaningful discoveries about the specificity of the Korean context, which in turn deepen understanding of the particularity of Korean childhood.

**Design of the Study**

**The Archive**

In this study, I focus on works where a child protagonist is active, and where the target audience is children and their families. I therefore explore a number of TFY works and family movies. I selected the children’s theatre and film works based on the following criteria:

- Nature appears in the work and relates to the child in a meaningful way.
- The work was created after 2000. Since Korean TFY developed significantly in the 1990s, the year 2000 is the point when the growth of the field had been in progress for about a decade. Therefore, the selected works likely reflect the maturing stage of Korean TFY. Also, the period from the 1990s and continuing till after the turn of the 21st century is often viewed as a time when Korean culture in general as well as children’s art flourished dynamically and changed rapidly, a time when cultural media expanded and diversified to an extreme degree. Therefore, by exploring works created after 2000, I can study the recent scene of children’s art that is historically and culturally meaningful.
- The work is culturally significant in the Korean context. Examples of culturally important works are those that have won awards or that are popular with the general public. Thus, I selected TFY works that had won the top
prizes at the Seoul Children’s Theatre Awards (서울 어린이 연극상), the oldest and only well-established TFY awards in Korea. In the case of the family movies, I selected works that had been released in theatres, because few domestic family movies are shown in theatres. One of the two movies, *The Way Home*, was a huge box office hit and thus familiarized the public with the genre of family movies. The other movie, *Oseam*, based on a famous traditional tale, won awards at prestigious international film festivals. Its original text has been remade in different genres, some of which became extremely popular and are included in the elementary school reading curriculum.

In order to conduct a detailed analysis of the works, I have limited their number to two per genre. All the theatre pieces and films are in Korean, and I have watched them in Korean. I do not interrogate the dramatic literature used in the TFY, but rather the performance texts. I have seen all my archive’s TFY works as live performances, but for this study, I mostly analyzed tape-recorded versions of the performances provided by the theatre companies. The companies also offered me English scripts of the performances, which I use when quoting from the works. In the studies about the movies, I use the English subtitles which are part of the officially published DVDs.

**Works of TFY**

Korean TFY is not a major field in Korean children’s art, but it has grown substantially over the past few years. Korea is “among the nations that produce hundreds of new TFY pieces annually … has 80 some professional companies … and is the only
Asian nation that has hosted the ASSITEJ World Congress and Festival of the Arts (J. Park 1). TFY was introduced to Korea a century ago by missionaries, and remained a minor field until it was “transformed into a beneficial and relevant field” in the 1990s, through the increase in the number of audience members and productions as well as through an improvement in the quality of productions (1). Such change was possible through the effort of people who viewed the genres as an essential part of children’s art (1) and because of changes in people’s perceptions of children, children’s education, political environments, government policies and children’s culture, among other things (135). Meanwhile, the Seoul Eorini Theatre Awards were established in 1992 to improve the quality of TFY. As mentioned, they are the only well-established annual awards for children’s theatre in Korea. A handful of performances receive prizes each year in categories such as best performance, good performance, set design, acting, playwriting and popularity. The awards have existed for 22 years, and 22 performances have won the “best” award. Among the award-winning theatre works, I have studied The Tale of Haruk (하륵이야기) and Gamoonjang Baby (가문장아기).

Korean TFY is rarely represented in English speaking academia. Only Yun-Tae Kim and Joohee Park’s doctoral studies explore the history of the field. Within Korea, a group of studies that address TFY approach it as a literary field. Among the few people who write about TFY as a performative genre, not many explore the performance texts of TFY from an analytic stance, and no research focuses on the childhood discourse. This is a serious gap in the literature, considering how crucial the performative aspect and the discourse of childhood are in the research on TFY. This research exploring Korean TFY performance texts from an analytic stance and from a childhood studies perspective is
thus pioneering work. Meanwhile, I study the preceding works on each performance in the main chapters.

**Family Movies**

Movies intended primarily for child audiences have never been well-established or popular in Korea. The few studies which address the genre all use different names for the category. Such a lack of consensus about the genre’s name reveals both a short history and a scarcity of material. All writers on the topic agree that the genre is not well developed: “Film is mainly a genre for adults in Korea, because children mainly watch television” (Junga Lee 8). “[The genres of] child movies except for Disney productions are in fact a dead zone in the Korean film scene” (Sohee Kim 130). “The Korean movie scene does not take children seriously” (Simoo Kim 74). While movies for children are underdeveloped genres with emergent characteristics, the term “family movie” appeared at the start of the 21st century. While the identity of the term is still developing, the general public and production companies have used it casually, based on a rough consensus on its meaning: “family movies” are movies that both children and adults can enjoy, and where often a child protagonist is active. Of the family movies, I explore *Oseam* (오세암) and *The Way Home* (집으로). I survey the earlier studies on each movie titles in the main chapters.

**Research Questions**

When exploring the above works, I asked the following questions:

*Main Question:*
• How are “children” and the “child” constructed in the Korean TFY works and family movies where nature plays a meaningful role in the meaning-making process?

Sub-questions:

• How are “children” and the “child” constructed in the work?
• How is “nature” constructed in the play or movie?
• What are the ideological relationships between childhood and nature?
• Do the child protagonists practice agency, and if so, how?
• What can these constructed narratives tell me about Korean social and educational norms?

Methodologies

The main methodology for this dissertation is detailed performance analysis. I also followed the process below, introduced in the order in which my research proceeded. Before starting the analysis, I studied literary texts about Korean childhood in areas such as education, child literature and history, to explore Korean tropes of childhood. I synthesized the ideas in chronological order and examined which tropes exist across different periods. To expand my understanding of childhood beyond the rigid categories set up by scholarly work, I collected visual images of children from popular culture and created an image collage. I did all of the above to gather sufficient background information about Korean childhood, helping me to recognize tropes present in the works. In undertaking extensive research on Korean childhood, I realized that not all these tropes related to my collection of works, notwithstanding their cultural significance. Despite this
I decided to explore how I could use the background knowledge about Korean childhood in the analysis, and moved to performance analysis.

I undertook substantial amounts of research into the cultural meaning of nature during the planning/research stage of this dissertation. Before analyzing my archive, I collected images of nature and created a collage in the same way I had for childhood. This crystallized my understanding of the topic, opened new possibilities, and helped make a tentative start from which to begin my analysis. I then watched the works to become familiar with their depiction of nature. In this way, I had a framework on which to deepen my understanding of the subject through the literature survey at a later stage of the research.

For close analysis of the performances, I watched and analyzed each work approximately five times. When watching them, I explored the theme, the director’s intention, the characters, their relationships to each other, costumes, movements, attitudes and voices, among other things. I also studied images, props, lighting, use of music/rhythm, settings, significant stage moments and spectator responses (if any). Not all of the above elements were present in all the works, nor did I pay attention to all elements every time. I selected multiple elements among the above, depending on the case and on my stage of analysis. When first watching, I kept my focus on nature and the child, but did not exclude other emotional or intellectual responses even if they were irrelevant to the topic. I made notes while watching the pieces and brainstormed with self-reflective memos immediately after watching. When watching the second time, I paid more attention to the main topics of nature and the child. I then wrote a first-draft analysis of each work.
After gaining a general idea of how the works represented nature and the child, and also of the range of nature expressed, I deepened my understanding of nature. I studied scholarly works in diverse areas including: cultural studies, environmental philosophy, geography, landscape architecture, religious studies, literature, education, child studies, and other areas. I classified the studies into three categories: 1) those that answer the question of what nature is; 2) studies of Eastern and Western conceptions of nature; and 3) theories of nature and childhood in Korea and the West. I then synthesized the above research into a collage of ideas about “nature” and “nature and the child.”

Once I had deepened my understanding of nature, I watched all the works again, focusing only on the representations of nature in them. To complicate and deepen my understanding, I related the different tropes of nature to each other and created a map of nature as it appeared in the four works. With my more solid understanding of the different tropes in my archive, I watched the works a fourth time. Here, I explored how the nature tropes connected specifically to tropes of the child. I then wrote new drafts of each analysis. At this point, I felt I had the bones of the ideas about nature and the child as represented in the four pieces. Finally, I watched each archive again, searching for specific moments that deserved close attention, thick description and deep analysis. This time I refined and deepened my analyses.

After the analysis of the individual works had developed substantially, I started exploring how the archives related to each other. I distilled key ideas about “the child,” about “nature” and about “nature and the child” in all the works. I put the key terms on note cards and categorized them in diverse ways to map how the ideas related. I then created a conceptual map of key terms which became the skeleton of my conclusion.
Using my conceptual map, I reviewed each individual analysis to see if additional ideas arose that added to or changed the meaning of the map. I then explored how the key ideas of “nature” and “the child” related to Korean tropes in general. I considered the relationship between the archives and the specific Korean socio-cultural context throughout the process, but concentrated on this task intensively at this stage of my writing.
CHAPTER 2
NATURE AND THE CHILD IN THE TALE OF HARUK

In this study, I explore the construction of childhood in *The Tale of Haruk* (하륵이야기). *The Tale of Haruk* is part of the repertoire of the theatre company *Tuida* (뛰다). Founded in 2001, it is one of the most acclaimed Korean TFY companies. *The Tale of Haruk* was born in 2001 and has remained in *Tuida’s* repertoire ever since. The performance solidified *Tuida’s* positive reputation, as shown in the 2002 Seoul Eorini Theatre Awards, where it won in the categories of best performance, playwriting, set design and acting (H. Im 166). The play has been invited to nine countries including Australia, Russia, India, China, Japan and Singapore, thus achieving international recognition and popularity. I myself watched it years ago, and again at the 2014 ASSITEJ summer festival in Seoul. The present analysis is based on the video recording, provided by *Tuida*, of the performance at the 2008 ASSITEJ World Congress in Adelaide, Australia. And in this study, I quote from the English script of *The Tale of Haruk*, provided to me by *Tuida*.

Even though *The Tale of Haruk* is a well-known play, there has been little research into the performance. Sooseon Im briefly introduces the strength of *The Tale of Haruk* in her MA thesis about the history and future of Korean children’s theatre. Kyungha Moon writes briefly about the images and movement in *The Tale of Haruk* in her MA thesis about the postmodernist aspects of Korean theatre. There are several theatre critiques about the play, such as those written by H. Im and Junghyo Kim. Few studies have focused on *The Tale of Haruk* and no study concentrates on the work alone at a deeper
level. Even though the piece is known as children’s theatre, no research addresses “the child” in it. Thus, this study fills a significant gap in the literature.

*The Tale of Haruk* is a performance about an old couple, living deep in the mountains, who long to have a child. They pray desperately, again and again, to the Spirit of the Tree. [Spirit of the Tree is a translation of the Korean word *Namooshin* or 나무신. *Namoo* means tree and *Shin* means God or Spirit. Korea has a tradition of tree worship.] Finally, the tree blesses the couple with a child whose name is Haruk. [There is no indication of Haruk’s gender in the performance, so I will not use gendered pronouns to indicate Haruk throughout this study.] The tree warns the couple that the child may eat nothing but dew, but Haruk really wants to eat rice, and pesters the parents for it. They give Haruk some rice, but upon eating the rice Haruk becomes gigantic and endlessly hungry, devouring everything around, even the sun and the moon. Haruk’s huge size prevents the parents from even communicating with their child. Despite eating continuously, Haruk remains hungry. The parents, realizing that they will never be able to live with Haruk again, decide to lessen their child’s hunger by feeding Haruk with their own bodies, as the last act of their lives. Haruk cries endlessly out of loneliness and hunger. Haruk’s tears become rivers and seas. Finally, Haruk turns into mountains and continents, and Haruk’s parents, the sun and the moon live on in Haruk’s stomach ever after. The play thus has three main characters. The old man and woman are played by actors wearing masks (except in a short scene at the end of the performance where they appear as hand puppets). Haruk appears as a puppet throughout the play, the size of which changes as Haruk’s fate changes. Haruk is manipulated by puppeteers who are also musicians/storytellers who play music and narrate the story of the performance.
The Child Before and After Haruk’s Experience of Rice

How is the child constructed in *The Tale of Haruk*? What can we know about the construction of childhood by exploring the relationship between nature and the child in the play? In exploring this question it is useful to divide the play into two parts, before and after Haruk eats rice. This is because the most important event in the play is the moment where Haruk eats rice instead of dew, and because there is a sharp contrast between the situation of the child before and after this event.

The Child before Haruk’s Experience of Rice

How is childhood constructed before Haruk tastes rice? As explained above, when bringing Haruk into the world, the Spirit of the Tree solemnly warns the old couple to feed the child only dew. I want to focus on the subject matter “dew” when exploring the construction of childhood before Haruk eats rice, because dew functions as a key element of the play and because one can understand the construction of childhood by interpreting the meaning of dew. The play doesn’t provide information about the exact meaning of ‘dew,’ and there are multiple ways to interpret it. For example, there is the popular Korean joke that pure or innocent people (especially women) “eat only dew (이슬만 먹고 산다).” Also, because it is difficult to collect dew, someone who eats only dew will have a hard time surviving. The meaning of dew is more diverse if we expand our exploration to other cultural contexts. Among the many possible interpretations of the meaning of dew, the following clearly relate to *The Tale of Haruk*. First, because humans do not normally eat dew, and only trees or insects do this, Haruk is not a human child. In fact, because the tree gives the child to the old couple as an egg which the old man...
incubates, Haruk is not a biological child of humans, although the human parents raise Haruk in a human way. Thus, the child is not human and does not have all the rights or freedoms that are granted to children of human origin. Instead, Haruk needs to abide by divine rules set by the tree. Second, because people normally eat food instead of dew, the tree’s order that Haruk should eat only dew implies that Haruk should control his appetite or desire. After all, a child who can eat only dew is a being of non-human origin whose rights the divine tree restricts, and a being who should suppress appetite or desire.

How is nature constructed in the play before Haruk eats rice, and how does this relate to the construction of childhood? Before Haruk eats rice, the major subject matter involving nature is the Spirit of the Tree, which is constructed in the following way. In the scene where the old couple meet the tree, they walk diligently in circles around the stage. As they walk for some time, it is clear that they are moving quite a distance. Deep blue stage lighting suggests darkness, which is confirmed by the lanterns the people hold as they walk. Ghostly sounds scare the old couple, and they stop at center stage, facing the audience. All of the above means that they have passed through a dark and scary space to reach their destination. Finally, behind the old couple, on the screen behind the stage, the huge black shadow of the Spirit of the Tree rolls back and forth. Blue lights shine on the tree and a crescent moon hangs amid its upper right branches. The image of the tree has dignity; it looks divine and mysterious. The couple set down their lanterns and cross their chests with their hands as if making a religious sign. They bow respectfully. The Spirit of the Tree makes strange sounds, causing the couple to wonder if the tree is angry. The woman asks her husband, “Did you do anything wrong?” Both are scared. Soon the tree’s ancient voice reverberates, “My honest, gray old pair, your sincere
prayer will be granted. Incubate the egg and you’ll get a child.” Shortly thereafter, an egg drops down to the couple. The tree’s voice, sounding both male and female, rings with authority, and because it moves, speaks and even expresses emotions, it strikes the audience as a person-like being. Because the old couple pray to the tree and believe that the tree will respond one day, the tree is a powerful divine figure which governs the world view of the old couple and whose orders are unconditional for them. Finally, the tree has the power to create life, a child.

The idea of the Spirit of the Tree as a powerful divinity has a socio-cultural background related to Korean folk religion, in which everything was alive and was possessed with spirits. Worship of nature was common, and tree worship was a major type of nature worship (S. Moon 56). In 1929, for example, 460 out of 1,800 ancient huge trees (노목 거수) were worshipped in village ancestral rites (동제), and 269 trees had signs prohibiting their cutting, out of fear of punishment [by tree spirits] (56). There is also a tradition called receiving Samshin (삼신받기). Samshin (삼신) are the three Gods controlling childbirth and women prayed to Samshin to become pregnant. One route by which people expected the Samshin to arrive was via trees. Some people served rice under gingko or other selected trees, for example, to attract the god, and prayed together with a shaman saying, “Ginko grandma and grandpa, please send a baby to this and this person [announcing the names of the persons who awaited babies]” (R. Jung 49). At the entry to a village, there was always a shrine to the village deity where people prayed to a tree to protect themselves from evil or to receive a baby (51). If so, the Spirit of the Tree in The Tale of Haruk is a representation of the nature or trees that were common in Korean folk religion. The tree is not a fictive reality but a product of a specific time and
place where trees were literally worshipped and feared. If the old couple are living in such a time and place, the idea about the child who comes from the divine tree, who needs to follow the tree’s rules and who should suppress the child’s appetite, is of an absolute and undeniable nature for them. This is also the most significant existential quality of the child living in the time and place of the play.

The Child after Haruk’s Experience of Rice

Dew or Rice?

The moment where Haruk tastes rice is one of the most significant and dramatic moments of the play. The old couple put three cubes in a line on the stage, covering them with a large cloth to make a long table. The old woman puts a large drop of dew on the middle of the table, at Haruk’s seat. Discussing how difficult it is to pick dew, the old couple busily prepare the meal. They put rice grains on each end of the table, at their places. Haruk looks at the drop of dew for a moment, then looks at the parents’ rice. Rice is not meant for Haruk. Haruk is dissatisfied, and says in a protesting manner, “Haruk”, the only word the child speaks. The woman and the man sit down on Haruk’s right and left. As the man starts saying grace in a celebratory manner, the three of them freeze. After a moment, Haruk (with his puppeteer) moves toward the front of the stage, close to the audience. Two musicians follow and stand just behind. The lights are dimmed. The puppeteer’s facial expression and the doll’s twisting and swinging movements show Haruk to be in deep thought. Haruk speaks in an aside, repeating the word “Haruk,” and the musician behind the child translates the child’s words into real words: “Who am I?
What do I live for? … Why do I have to eat only dew? What does rice taste like? Why do they prevent me from having rice? Ah, I wish I could have rice.” As the child continues asking fundamental questions about Haruk’s identity, the meaning of life and, finally, the most basic desires, the child’s voice becomes loud and desperate, expressing overwhelming emotion. The nearby instrumentalists produce shrill sounds that turn to noise, showing Haruk’s complex and conflicting emotions. Suddenly the old man’s prayer interrupts Haruk and the stage becomes bright again. The child hurries back to join the parents as they finish the prayer. Once again Haruk starts pestering the mother for a taste of rice. The old woman is surprised and refuses, escaping to the other end of the table. The old man jumps in and tries to explain to Haruk why rice is forbidden, but finally gets upset, saying, “Anyway, no!” and runs to the old woman. The child keeps nagging and finally starts to whine wildly. Haruk jumps to the opposite end of the table from the parents and wages a strong protest. The old couple are helpless and can only explain that they love their child. Haruk screams and fiercely hurls the dew onto the floor. As the screams continue, the old couple twist their bodies to the squeezing rhythm of the screams, to indicate their suffering from their child’s protest. After a short but heated debate over whether to feed Haruk rice, notwithstanding their promise to the Spirit of the Tree, the old couple make a decision. The woman carefully hands a bit of rice to Haruk. Haruk slowly takes the rice into the child’s mouth, showing caution and curiosity, and munches on it. Ultimately, Haruk is a gift of nature, the divine, but the child’s parents disobey that nature because of Haruk’s strong protest. Haruk breaks the taboo.

Why is this moment significant? This is the moment where Haruk, of divine origin, embraces humanness or human desires. While dew is part of nature, rice is food, a
product of culture. Every hungry human craves rice, not dew. Haruk’s parents eat rice daily, so it is only natural that the child becomes curious about it. Moreover, rice is the bread and butter of Koreans (Sunmi Kim 110). Rice agriculture started in the Kochosun period (2333-108 B.C.), and cooked rice has been the main dish since the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910) (106). “Koreans use the word rice (밥) to indicate all types of food, which reveals how much they have valued rice” (Lee and Lee 63). As rice has been the staple food, eating rice has been an issue of survival. “Because rice is the source of energy needed for humans’ survival, its lack is an essential problem making survival itself impossible” (Ji 286). Rice in Korean culture means more than just food necessary for the biological survival of humans. Lee and Lee point out that Korean people greet each other by asking, “Have you eaten rice?” (63). People say “Let’s meet and have rice” to express a desire to meet and connect with someone; and “Someone has put down his rice spoon” means that someone has died (63). Thus, rice or eating rice in Korea can be a metaphor of human relationships and/or of life itself. Haruk’s choosing to taste rice is thus a symbolic act where the child embraces humanity and the human desire to live. Haruk’s choice of rice or embracing of humanity is important because it changes the child’s existence dramatically, and fate, in turn, reveals who the child in The Tale of Haruk is. If so, where does Haruk’s embracing of humanness lead the child and what does it reveal about the meanings of childhood in the play?

A Hungry Monster Out of Place

After eating rice, Haruk becomes a monster. That night, having tasted the rice, Haruk is satisfied and has the happiest dream. The stage is dark and in the middle of it,
behind a cube, there is only a white shape. A musician announces, “The next morning, the strangest thing happened.” The center of the stage is lit and the white shape abruptly stands. It is Haruk, the same form but now many times larger than the child used to be as a small puppet. The gigantic puppet is much taller than a tall adult. Haruk rises up. Instead of the earlier screechy child voice, Haruk now cries out in a deep, loud, monstrous male voice. The scene is not scary, and one can even hear occasional laughter from the audience, but it is shocking. Haruk looks around, then stoops over like a hunchback. As Haruk cries out, a musician/story teller translates: “Oh, I’m hungry. I’m absolutely starving.” To the unstable rhythm of percussion instruments, Haruk moves left and right, trembling and helpless. These movements evolve into a dance to the percussion, but although staying synchronized with the rhythm, Haruk looks directionless, showing a kind of deficiency. Haruk finally springs up onto the cube at center stage, twisting and shaking fiercely with the wild percussion sounds, yelling as if unable to bear the hunger. Suddenly, a musician drops her instrument on Haruk’s feet (as if by mistake but with theatrical intent) and both the music and Haruk stop. As Haruk stares at the fallen instrument, a musician sneaks toward it as if she does not want to be seen by the monstrous Haruk. As she picks the instrument up and sneaks back, Haruk’s popping eyes follow her carefully. Haruk’s mouth opens wide. Haruk gives a yell and sucks her in, pulling her under the huge cloth that covers the monstrous body. Haruk has devoured the musician.

Who is the child after Haruk becomes a monster? Firstly, Haruk becomes an ambiguous child because the boundary of childhood becomes blurry. Because Haruk’s appearance does not change except for size, and because the change happens over one
night, the audience recognizes Haruk as the person Haruk used to be, a child. The old couple continue to treat Haruk as a child. So, Haruk is a child. In terms of size, however, Haruk has become too large to be a child. Many times, we recognize children as children because of their small bodies. It is obvious that Haruk is a child as a small puppet, first because of its size. But Haruk’s enormous body after the rice-eating scene makes it difficult to say clearly whether this is still a child. Importantly, Haruk starts eating everything around, and destroys the order of the world. It is always a socio-cultural system that demarcates childhood, which in the case of Haruk is the world of the Spirit of the Tree or Haruk’s family, but because Haruk devours the rest of the world, the major systems necessary to demarcate Haruk’s childhood disappear. After eating rice, Haruk becomes a child whose childhood is ambiguous, and a child without a system to situate childhood.

Other than the above, who is Haruk after tasting rice? Most importantly, as said, Haruk embraces humanness and human desire but is denied humanness for doing so. Haruk cannot exist. Starting to satisfy the appetite as most humans do, Haruk cannot control the hunger urge and devours the rest of the world, but remains hungry. Nothing can satisfy Haruk’s hunger, and so Haruk is deficient in a fatal way. Haruk cannot continue one of the most significant relationships in life, the parent-child relationship. Haruk’s gigantic size disallows a fit with the family, prevents communication with the parents, and makes it impossible for them to protect their child. Because, as said, Haruk destroys both the symbolic and physical systems which define Haruk’s and others’ places, both Haruk and the whole world around become placeless. The tasting of rice and
embracing of humanness bring a threat to Haruk’s fundamental existence. Because Haruk yearns for life, Haruk becomes the destroyer of all the things the child wants and needs.

If Haruk is simply following natural desires, then why is Haruk punished? Why does the divine tree prohibit Haruk from following natural desires? The play doesn’t explain why it is taboo for Haruk to eat rice, but historically, some people have thought that appetite needs to be controlled. For example, Ji points out that “in front of rice, everyone’s weakness is exposed... the desire for rice makes people abandon themselves, and the trap of such submission [to desire] lurks all the time” (296). A hungry person cannot easily resist rice. Ji explores how appetite can become the origin of human competition or pain. “Appetite and sexual desire are the most basic human instincts … human history has been basically a history of struggle for the production of food and the domination of sexual objects to leave one’s genes” (310). “Such struggle and the failure to fulfill one’s desire produce pain. Religion and ethics say that people should control such desires or that one should understand the mechanism of how such desires are produced to realize how empty they are” (321). Some people have therefore thought that the desire for rice can be dangerous because it is difficult to resist hunger, and because such desires can lead to struggle and pain. Again, the Spirit of the Tree doesn’t explain why Haruk should not eat rice. If the tree warns Haruk because the child may not be able to control desire after breaking the taboo, or because Haruk may suffer pain, which may or may not be true because one does not know why the tree warns Haruk, then that is exactly what happens. Haruk cannot resist hunger, and never recovers from the pain that results from eating rice.
The Finale: Nature and the Child in Harmony

The divine tree gives birth to the child, the child breaks the promise to the divine and shakes nature’s order, but finally it is that very child who becomes nature. After eating most of the world, Haruk returns home, but in a form so large as to be invisible on stage. One can only hear Haruk’s cries. The old couple appear as tiny puppets. Haruk is sad, still hungry and unable to see the parents since growing so enormous. The couple are worried and tell Haruk warmly how much they love and have missed their child. All of this makes Haruk even sadder. Finally the woman says, “If there’s no hope of living with Haruk, we’d better end it by soothing Haruk’s hunger.” Sad, lyrical background music plays, and the couple embrace each other slowly and disappear into the darkness. The musician announces, “In this way the old man and woman decided to be eaten.” The music continues with occasional percussion sounds. Under a dazzling white light that flickers on stage, a gigantic thin cloth is spread, and rolls back and forth. There is a huge round bulk under the cloth, indicating something like a hill. The stage turns dark. A blue light shines over the cloth, then darkness returns. A purple light shines. There is only the cloth and the hill under it filling the stage, and the music. The absence of any human soul makes the moment meditative. Then, a dim light illuminates the cloth and a musician narrates solemnly, “Haruk cried and cried with loneliness, and at last sank exhausted. Haruk’s tears became rivers and those rivers gathered into the sea. Haruk’s body became the lands and the mountains.” The light and the music fade. Soon one hears the melody of a lighthearted children’s song. From the right of the stage a light shines, and a group of musicians enter, carrying a lantern and a round object. They climb up the cloth hill slowly and carefully until they reach its middle. As they tread on the cloth, it becomes
obvious that the hill has been made by blowing it up like a balloon. They hold up the flat round object and make it face the audience. As they hold the lantern behind it, the audience sees that it is a shadow screen. A warm yellow light shines on it. A musician continues the story, “In the stomach of Haruk, everything remained as it was. The Sun, the Moon, the Tree, the hut. The old couple came to live there as they had in the past.” Soon, the old woman and man appear as tiny shadow puppets.

In this scene, Haruk harmonizes with nature as the child becomes mountains which embrace the sun and moon in them. Haruk, nature and the old couple appear all together as a peaceful landscape. Haruk becomes nature, and eventually nature including the sun, the moon and Haruk’s parents, comes to live eternally in Haruk’s stomach. Haruk continues life because Haruk is living the time of nature, which is eternal (nature does not die). Because Haruk’s body becomes a mountain range, gigantic nature has embraced Haruk, or Haruk has embraced everything of the child’s origins. Haruk belongs to the world again and is no longer lonely. The landscape represents a cyclical space where life does not stop but circulates. It is a moment where the border between nature and the child dissolves. Ideas from Korean folk religions or from Eastern thought traditions are useful in illuminating the ending of the performance. For example, S. Moon writes:

In Korean folk belief, nature and spirits are not separated, nor are humans differentiated from nature. Therefore, humans are children of nature and nature and humans are brothers and sisters. Humans are not born into human history but into nature, and die in it. Thus, the ideal in folk belief is to live together with nature. (62)

Kim and Park write about Eastern thought traditions where borders between humans or between humans and nature dissolve:

The Western thought tradition respecting the individual’s rationality, which is rooted in Christianity, is different from Eastern thought based on Confucianism,
Buddhism or Taoism, which stresses harmony within the group. The [Western] analytic self who is rational and consistent is different from the [Eastern] integral self who changes depending on the relationship in which the self is situated. In such integration, the exchange happens not only between humans but even between humans and nature. (Kim and Park 31)

Within the paradigm of Korean folk religion, Haruk and Haruk’s parents have reached an ideal state as they mingle in nature. Harmony between nature and humans is something which many Eastern thought traditions emphasize. Thus, if one understands the ending of *The Tale of Haruk* from the perspective of Korean folk religion or Eastern thought traditions, it is not unhappy or sad. If one considers Haruk as an individual separated from others, or nature, then the fact that Haruk becomes part of a huge collective means that Haruk disappears. From the individual perspective, Haruk separates from life and the people Haruk loves, and will never see them again, but from the perspective that humans do not exist as distinct individuals but belong to each other and/or to nature, Haruk does not disappear but infiltrates or expands. If there has been only a relationship between human beings, Haruk’s life cannot have continued, but the presence of nature, the mountain range into which Haruk is transformed and which integrates Haruk and Haruk’s parents, allows all to mingle and harmonize, and as said, promises continuing life. Thus, the ending of the performance combines both sadness and a feeling of consolation.

**The Old Couple’s Perspective: the Beloved Child Who Is Bound to The Parents**

In addition to the Spirit of the Tree, which defines the primary nature of Haruk, the old couple’s perspective plays a significant role in the construction of childhood in the play. I want to point out that the old couple’s attitude toward Haruk remains coherent
even while Haruk’s fate penduluses between the two extremes: “in place” or “out of place.” Most of all, the old couple’s perspective frames the child as a precious and special being. Before Haruk’s birth, the old couple’s life is boring and meaningless and the absence of a child is a chronic lack. Once Haruk arrives, they dance with joy. Their idea that the child is precious remains constant throughout the play. While Haruk is at home, the couple devote themselves to taking care of the child. After Haruk leaves, they look for the child everywhere, worrying and longing for Haruk desperately. Their devotion reaches its peak with the decision to feed hungry Haruk with their own bodies. Thus, the view of the old couple who love Haruk dearly forms a powerful framework that constructs the child as a precious being, deserving love.

Another major idea upheld by the old couple’s perspective is that children and parents are inseparable. The two parties seem bound by destiny, in a bond that cannot easily be broken. The longing on both sides is intense. Indeed, we would not know who the parents are or what they care about if not for the presence of Haruk, and vice versa. Haruk understands Haruk’s self through the parents, and they identify themselves as Haruk’s parents. They are mutually dependent. Haruk’s parents resolve not to continue living after Haruk becomes a monster. Instead, they feed Haruk with their bodies, giving up their lives. In fact, they do not die but continue living in Haruk’s stomach, but their external life stops. In making their resolution, they are in effect giving up their lives because they do not know whether there is another life after this one. Like the parents, Haruk cannot find meaning in life after they are gone. Haruk and the parents thus remain connected to each other, and Haruk’s identity as the child bound to the parents forms a major part of Haruk’s overall identity. The above construction of children and parents as
interdependent, differing from the Western idea of parents and children who think of themselves as separate, is a significant trope in Korean culture. The same applies to the metaphor I have explored earlier, the idea of the precious or beloved child. I will explore both of these at a deeper level when examining the tropes across the four archives.

**The Child in *The Tale of Haruk***

My analysis reveals that a number of ideas decide who the child is in *The Tale of Haruk*, including: the tree’s child who should suppress desires, the parents’ child who is loved unconditionally; and the child bound to adult caregivers. The idea of a child who should suppress the child’s desire, is a goal that cannot be fulfilled as long as the child is raised as a human. Thus, such an idea reveals that the child cannot avoid having appetite or desire. The child’s punishment for following this desire/appetite, which is normally granted to every human being, is unusual and shocking, and this fate emphasizes the idea that “(but) it is normal for a child to have appetite.” Thus the perspective of the spirit of the tree and the child’s fate reveal that children cannot but have appetite or desire. This child is a representative of general humankind. As said, the hunger for rice is a fundamental element of every human being, and the desire for rice in Korea represents the desire for life itself, a basic characteristic of humans. The child’s desires and appetite provide an answer to the existential question of what humans are: humans desire as long as they are humans. Here, the child is a symbol of the existential human condition.

The perspective of the old couple perpetuates the following ideas: 1) Haruk is a child who is precious and beloved, and 2) Haruk is a child inseparable from the child’s parents. Both ideas about the child are significant Korean tropes. In the first place, the
idea that parents and children are bound to each other touches on Korean ideas about how people “exist” or how they identify themselves-interdependently through their relationships with others. Thus, the child bound to the parents is also a symbol of a general human condition understood widely by Koreans. When Haruk stops suffering and is “good” again, after turning into mountains in which the parents and nature mingle, the child represents the typically Eastern conception of humans who belong to nature or return to it. This is an extension of the idea of the interdependent human, as the boundary of interdependence broadens from fellow humans to nature. Whether it is the child who belongs to the parents, other humans or nature, the child is a symbol of general human conditions, an idea with which many Koreans are familiar.

Finally, what about child agency? Haruk does not have voice. In the first place, if a “voice” is something that humans have, one cannot know what Haruk is. Haruk is a hairy puppet with two bells on its face. By appearance alone, it is hard to tell whether this is a human, an animal or a mythical figure. Also, as said, Haruk is of ambiguous origin: born from an egg, incubated by an old man and raised as human. To have voice one needs to be able to think and communicate. Haruk, however, cannot speak except to say the name “Haruk.” One of the few occasions where Haruk’s words are translated into real language, and where the audience gets to know that the child actually thinks, is while the parents are saying grace, but nobody in Haruk’s world hears those fundamental questions about “self” expressed in the laborious aside, nor are Haruk’s thoughts further developed. As stated, the self of Haruk constituted through the perspective of the child’s parents is obvious, but the child’s position about self, or about the parents, remains indistinct. Thus, Haruk does not have voice. While Haruk is loved dearly and taken care of devotedly,
Haruk is not greatly respected. The main role of Haruk, before breaking the taboo, is to eat, obey and be cuddled. Haruk does not feel able to intervene in Haruk’s crisis. If a child remains hungry throughout life, and dies of hunger and sadness, the child cannot do anything about the situation and does not even attempt to do anything. Although the parents cannot do much either, at least they feel responsible for doing something, whereas Haruk does not. Meanwhile, there is a hierarchy between the adult characters and the child. Haruk needs the permission of the child’s caretakers before the child fulfills the child’s desire. Haruk asks for the rice and manages to taste it but only with difficulty. And the child is punished for following the child’s desire. Haruk is also the only puppet on stage most of the time during the play, seemingly having different “genes.” A puppet cannot move unless someone manipulates it and has less freedom than characters performed by actors. Thus, humanness, an identity, language, and appetite are all denied to Haruk. Haruk does not have voice, is not heard or respected. Haruk is never competent in the child’s reality nor does the child feel able to intervene in the child’s crisis. The child is lesser than adults. Thus, Haruk does not have agency.
CHAPTER 3

NATURE AND THE CHILD IN GAMOONJANG BABY

This is an analysis of the construction of nature and childhood in Gamoonjang Baby. Gamoonjang Baby is a major work in the repertoire of the company Booksaetong. First performed in 2003, it won prizes at the 2004 Seoul Children’s Theatre Awards in the categories of good performance, playwriting and acting. The show has toured twelve countries including Germany, Russia, Croatia, Mexico, Australia, and Japan and recently celebrated its 10th anniversary, a rare achievement for Korean TFY repertoires. The work is an adaptation of the Korean shamanistic myth Samgongbonpulyi. While the original myth is the life story of a goddess, “the theatre shows the image of a human being and transforms the mythical world into a realistic one” (Sunok Im, 10). Sunghee Kim writes that “Gamoonjang Baby is a feminist family theatre work that interprets a traditional tale from Jeju Island [an island off the south coast of Korea] from a modern perspective, and that lets the audience confirm the liveliness and presence of Korean theatrical aesthetics” (608). I watched Gamoonjang Baby years ago in a small city near Seoul. This study is based on a video recording of the performance during April 30-May 5, 2009, at LIG Art Hall in Seoul, provided by the company Booksaetong. Also, in this study, I quote from the English script of Gamoonjang Baby, provided to me by the company.

Scholarly research on Gamoonjang Baby is almost nonexistent, although Sunghee Kim and Sunok Im have written theatre critiques on the performance, and Soonduk Ko, the playwright, wrote her MFA thesis about the script writing process. Ko writes meticulously and richly about the background of the script and about how she wrote and
developed the text after collaborating with the ensemble and meeting the audience. However, because Ko writes from a playwright’s perspective, her work is not an analysis of the text. Furthermore, her thesis is about the script and not the performance text of the play. Hence, this study is significant.

The plot of *Gamoonjang Baby* is as follows. Gamoonjang is the third daughter of a beggar couple. When Gamoonjang’s older sisters are born, their parents are happy. But upon third daughter Gamoonjang’s birth, they start to worry that there are too many daughters in their household who do not benefit the house economy. When Gamoonjang turns fifteen, her father asks his daughters to whom they owe their lives. Gamoonjang’s older sisters say that they thank heaven, earth, and their parents for their lives. Gamoonjang, however, answers that in addition to heaven, earth and her parents, she thanks her womb under her belly button. She shows her father a cloth soaked with her menstrual blood to celebrate her womb. Gamoonjang’s father is furious, and expels her from the house. Away from home, Gamoonjang meets fierce wind, water and deep, terrifying mountains where she undergoes a series of sufferings. Having barely survived, she travels through a yam pickers’ village, and there she meets Matoong, whom she asks to marry her. The two marry and Gamoonjang teaches her husband how to cultivate rice. Matoong’s brothers, angry that he is following a girl’s advice, interfere with Gamoonjang’s farming. Thus, she takes Matoong and searches for new land. Gamoonjang and Matoong cultivate barren, rocky land and their rice agriculture is a huge success. The rice fields turn gold with the production of abundant rice, and Gamoonjang announces her pregnancy. The couple celebrate their first harvest and Gamoonjang’s pregnancy, give thanks to heaven for this blessing, and invite their original families to
join in celebrating their success. *Gamoonjang Baby* is performed by an ensemble of four people: two actors perform as the main characters, and two musicians/storytellers play additional roles, narrate the story, and play the instruments.

**Demarcating Childhood in *Gamoonjang Baby***

*Gamoonjang Baby* covers a long period of the protagonist’s life; the play starts before Gamoonjang is born and continues until after she is married. Thus, in order to study the construction of childhood, one needs to demarcate its boundaries. When does Gamoonjang’s childhood start and end? According to the definition of *Eorini* (어린이), the Korean word for child, childhood ends at the conclusion of elementary school (Junga Kim, 9). But because *Gamoonjang Baby* is an adaptation of a shaman myth (무속신화), and/or an old Korean tale passed down orally (설화), a modern definition of childhood is not applicable to this performance. What, then, are the boundaries of childhood in traditional Korea, i.e., before the Chosun dynasty? One of the terms used to indicate childhood in traditional Korea was *Dongmongki* (동몽기), which started upon birth and ended by the age of fifteen (8). Similarly, most studies on traditional Korean childhood demarcate the ending of childhood at the age of fifteen (Shin and Kwon 12). Other studies show people had to do military duty or compulsory labor from the age of 16, and before the age of 15, one could not take the state exam (과거) (12). And according to the *Samguksagi* (삼국사기, the history of the Three Kingdoms between the 4th and the 7th centuries), the state drafted laborers from among persons older than fifteen to build
castles or fortresses (12). Thus, the idea that childhood in traditional Korea ended at the age of fifteen is recognized extensively and is useful in my study.

Further, the Korean traditional coming of age ceremony *Kwanrye* (관례) took place at the age of fifteen for girls. "*Kwanrye* is a ritual where people announce that the child no longer belongs to the group of children but has moved to the group of adults, where they change the dress of the child and teach the child the duties of adults, and after which the child is treated as an adult" (M. Lee 27). *Kwanrye* originated in ancient China and was accepted widely in Confucian countries (27). It is likely that the idea behind it influenced Gamoonjang’s society. "[*Kwanrye*] was imported from the Chinese Dang Dynasty to Korea in 686” (Im and Hong 3). Thus, the ritual and its ideas have existed in Korea’s culture for a very long time and cannot but overlap with the time in which *Gamoonjang Baby* was transmitted orally; and because *Gamoonjang Baby* continued to be passed on during the last Korean dynasty, Chosun, where the state ideology was Confucianism, the tale likely incorporates Confucian ideas. Furthermore, the questions Gamoonjang’s father asks her as she turns fifteen, overlap with the knowledge transmitted during *Kwanrye* to some degree. Hence, the demarcation of childhood in *Kwanrye* points to ideas about childhood useful in the analysis of *Gamoonjang Baby*. Lastly, one might argue that the play differs from the original myth, as it is a modern adaptation. However, because the plot is quite faithful to the original story, and because the performance clearly situates itself as a depiction of traditional Korea, I use ideas about childhood or adulthood that underlie *Kwanrye* in the analysis. Thus, in this study, first I demarcate childhood as the period up to the age of fifteen, then I use the ideas
behind *Kwanrye* to determine whether Gamoonjang is a child at different moments in the play.

I have explained why the idea that childhood ends by fifteen and the idea of adulthood behind *Kwanrye* are useful for this study, but the analysis becomes more complicated once such standards of childhood and adulthood are set up. Obviously, Gamoonjang is a child before she turns fifteen. The problem is, she does not immediately become an adult upon turning fifteen because she does not move smoothly into adulthood. To explain why, first I need to introduce some characteristics of the coming of age ceremony *Kwanrye*. As aforementioned, the ritual was performed at the age of fifteen for girls, but the biological age of fifteen was only one condition for this rite of passage. I want to point out that, just as childhood is always a meaning people inscribe on children, the nature of *Kwanrye* and the ideas of childhood or adulthood behind it are social or ideological. H. Lee writes in his study on *Kwanrye* that adulthood in traditional Korea relates to morals or dignity (품격) (146). Lee does not elaborate on the meaning of “dignity,” but it is a Confucian value as he uses it in such a context. Thus, “people thought that one should participate in *Kwanrye* after learning certain manners by studying *Hyokyung* (효경 ‘the book of filial duty’, a Confucian text) or *Noneuh* (논어 ‘the Analects of Confucius’)” (147). To enter adulthood, “what matters is not the [biological] age but to know one’s moral duties as an adult” (148). M. Lee elaborates on the contents of these moral duties. People expected an adult to “serve one’s parents with devotion, to respect elder brothers, to be loyal to the king as a liege and to respect people higher than oneself” (M. Lee, 29). *Kwanrye* was a ritual where such norms were passed on, and where people made vows to keep them (29). “Every procedure of the ritual was followed
by a celebratory message, i.e., a lesson passed on by the older generation, and which [the participants] engraved in their memories” (Jang 8). Based on the above information, adulthood in traditional Korea was not just socially constructed; one could not enter adulthood without internalizing and officially agreeing to the state or family ideologies handed down by one’s elders.

This explanation of Kwanrye helps build understanding of why it is difficult to say that Gamoonjang is not an adult even after the age of fifteen. At the age of fifteen, Gamoonjang is expelled from her household and community and thus removed from the socio-cultural institutions without which childhood and adulthood cannot be defined. Based on the above examination of Kwanrye, adulthood in traditional Korea cannot be entered if one loses membership in contemporary society. And as I will explain below, even after turning fifteen, Gamoonjang does not fully internalize the social ideologies to which she should agree for entry into adulthood. For example, instead of obeying her parents unconditionally and putting them before herself, she primarily praises her womb—mutiny in Confucian society, in terms of both age and gender. Furthermore, even after Gamoonjang turns fifteen, others do not treat her like an adult. Most scholars writing about Kwanrye indicate that a major change after the ritual is in how other people treat the person because people show a more respectful attitude to adults. But people in the play do not treat Gamoonjang respectfully even after she turns fifteen and/or leaves home. Hence, she is not an adult for some time following her departure from home. She remains a being in between, neither child nor adult.

If Gamoonjang’s adulthood does not commence at age fifteen, then what signs in the play mark its start? In this study, the idea that adulthood begins with marriage is
useful. Other possible answers are that her adulthood starts with her onset of menstruation, with her departure from her parents, or with her survival through independent labor. Most of these standards, I think, are debatable except for the idea that her adulthood starts with her marriage. It is incontestable that, at this point, she is no longer a child, because a married person in Korea, as in most cultures, no longer belongs to the social category of child. Indeed, “some people use marital status as a standard [which decides the stage of life] when studying protagonists from traditional Korea. Children [in such texts] are people who are not married …” (Kim and Chae 206).

Similarly, for the purposes of this study, Gamoonjang’s adulthood starts at the moment when she asks Matoong to marry her.

Thus, I divide Gamoonjang’s life into three periods: her childhood; the period between her childhood and adulthood; and her adulthood. Gamoonjang’s childhood lasts until when she turns fifteen, and up to the moment she is expelled from home. Adulthood starts when she gets married. Between the two periods, Gamoonjang is neither child nor adult, but a being in between. Could that period be called the teens or adolescence?

According to Shin and Kwon, the idea of adolescence or teens was not emphasized until Korea became an industrial society (12). Therefore, Shin and Kwon and others classify “under age” as childhood in their study. Additionally, in all of the studies about the coming of age ceremony, Kwanrye, people divide the life of traditional Koreans into two periods: childhood and adulthood. Nobody mentions teenagers or youth. Thus, it is likely that the idea of teens did not exist in traditional Korea. Gamoonjang’s social age is therefore ambiguous after she leaves home. Here, I will call this period “the time of in-between being.” In order to explore the construction of childhood in the play, I will
compare and contrast the relationship of nature to Gamoonjang as a child, as an in-between being, and as an adult.

**Wild Nature and Gamoonjang in Between Childhood and Adulthood**

In the play, Gamoonjang’s first direct contact with nature is as soon as she is expelled from home. At that moment, her childhood ends by force and she enters the period of in-between being. Interestingly, wild nature is the place where she starts this period of her life. Wild nature is threatening. First she meets the harsh, dusty wind. On the left side of the dimmed stage, a musician/storyteller moves a fan to and fro to make the wind. On the right side, Gamoonjang cannot even stand, the wind is so strong. Her pants flutter (another musician sits by her feet to shake her pants) and she twists her body this way and that, unable to resist the force of the wind. Of course, a hand fan cannot really make a powerful wind, so a touch of humor is added to the serious scene. Finally, Gamoonjang squats. Then she manages to stand up again and says, “Heave-ho, here I go!” Yet even before she has recovered from the shock of the wind, two cloth ropes fly over her head. The two musicians/storytellers hold the four ends of the rope and swing them to and fro to represent fierce waves. Gamoonjang flounders up and down in the water, shouting desperately, “Save me!” At the moment she is about to drown, she shouts, “Mother!” and regains consciousness, starts swimming, and manages to get out of the water. Exhausted, she says, “I am all by myself. I am hungry. I miss my family.” Soon after, she is deep in the mountains, which are filled with *doggaebi* lights (도깨비 불 ‘will o’ the wisps’). The ghostly lights and sounds scare her half to death. Trembling with fear, Gamoonjang prays desperately, stretching out her menstrual cloth with both her hands,
and this finally scares the ghosts away. Having survived all these sufferings, she stands up straight and solemnly announces, “Heaven, Heaven. My swollen, cracked feet have finally understood the Earth. My pounding heart has finally understood the world.” She ties her menstrual cloth to her braid and says, “Remember my face. I am Gamoonjang.”

Wild nature filled with dusty wind, water and mountains is a site of suffering, challenge and growth for Gamoonjang. A girl expelled from home has lost “the basic support she needs for survival” (Ko, “A Study” 70), and the nature she meets next threatens her physically and spiritually. Moreover, hunger and separation from the people one loves are some of the biggest fears one can experience. Being alone in wild nature at a time of crisis, in the absence of a single human soul, is loneliness in the extreme. Wild nature is a site of suffering where Gamoonjang studies fear, hunger and loneliness.

Indeed, wild nature in the play is a symbolic space. The playwright of Gamoonjang Baby writes that the waves symbolize the hunger and loneliness of women who do not have the chance to work and survive in the male-dominated public sphere (Ko, “A Study” 70). Furthermore, Jungsook Kim writes in her study of women in myths that Gamoonjang’s suffering [in the original tale] is a result of her resistance to ideologies such as filial piety and gender roles, and which is visualized through her crossing of hills and mountains (54). Thus, wild nature is a metaphorical space of suffering.

But wild nature is also a site of growth, as Gamoonjang tests herself, collects her strength and transcends her limits. At the beginning of her suffering, she asks for help, calls for her mother and misses her family. She even prays. Yet in the end, she can depend only on herself, as she is the only one who can help herself. After all, it is her menstrual cloth that overcomes the final threat of the spirits in the mountains, and after
confronting and overcoming the challenges, she binds her hair with the menstrual cloth as if conducting a ritual by herself—as if going through a rite of passage. The performance itself does not provide detailed information about the menstrual cloth, but the playwright writes that “the menstrual cloth is a symbolic metaphor of Gamoonjang’s independent perception of her body” (Ko, “A Study” 33). Also, Sunok Im writes in her theatrical critique that the scene where Gamoonjang binds her hair with her menstrual cloth means that she has overcome her fears and has become independent (16). “Gamoonjang has learned through her sufferings what her womanhood means” and such learning made her use her menstrual cloth as an amulet [to avert the spirits in the mountains]. She has gathered the strength to live on in concrete reality” (Ko, “A Study” 73). Thus, the challenge and absolute solitude of wild nature causes Gamoonjang to face herself more honestly and to rewrite her own history more boldly. She grows. Wild nature makes both the girl’s weakness and strength visible, and finally, her weakness becomes her strength. M. Kim writes in her study on the meaning of space in the original myth, that the movement of characters in tales are all ritualistic walking (428), and that the hills and mountains Gamoonjang climbs are cosmic spaces that make her mature (429). Thus, wild nature is a metaphorical space of challenge and growth, a place where Gamoonjang becomes competent to a degree she never would have enjoyed if she had stayed at home.

**Agricultural Nature and Gamoonjang’s Adulthood**

Gamoonjang’s adulthood takes place mainly in agricultural nature, and/or Gamoonjang turns barren land into productive rice fields as she moves on to adulthood. Having survived her sufferings in wild nature, she arrives at the yam pickers’ village.
After picking her own yam-picker husband Matoong, Gamoonjang tries to cultivate land in Matoong’s village. However, Matoong’s older brothers bother her, mainly because they don’t like the idea of their brother listening to a girl. Thus, Gamoonjang and Matoong move to stony land, which they turn into rice fields. From the time she marries her husband, which is the start of her adulthood, Gamoonjang continuously cultivates land and plants rice. Thus, agricultural nature is inseparable from her adulthood.

Gamoonjang’s will to cultivate the land is strong. Even as Matoong’s brothers try to chase the couple off their land, Gamoonjang digs in the land to the very last moment. Expelled from the yam pickers’ village, the couple arrive at the new, poor land, where they remain devastated for a while. Yet Gamoonjang soon resolutely begins hoeing the rocky soil, her hoe ringing against the rocks. Matoong asks, “What are we digging for?” Gamoonjang answers with another question, “What is rice?” Matoong answers, “Rice is … rice is a fruit.” Matoong had never seen rice until he met Gamoonjang, and she showed and cooked it for him. All of this happened before the two got engaged in the yam pickers’ village. At that time, Gamoonjang taught him that rice is a fruit. This time, Gamoonjang elaborates, “It’s a seed now. A rice plant seed! Let’s sow rice plant seeds here.” The two gaze at each other solemnly and nod as if coming to a shared resolution.

Soon after, they and the musicians are merrily planting rice, singing and dancing. They climb up the valley to draw water for the parched, stony soil. After the joyful, rhythmic singing and dancing while farming, the musicians announce that the rice is growing. They spread out a long, shimmering gold cloth across the stage diagonally, to indicate a golden harvest. At the sight, the audience sounds a communal, admiring “Ah!” Matoong proclaims excitedly, “Look at the rice we’ve grown!” The couple looks around at the
golden harvest, deeply moved. Then Gamoonjang grabs Matoong’s hand and places it on her belly, indicating that she is pregnant. The couple’s joy escalates and they decide to thank heaven for their first harvest. Gamoonjang proclaims, “Thanks to Heaven, we were given a great, wonderful harvest. It is to the Womb that I owe my life!”

Agricultural nature is the site where Gamoonjang’s life comes to a climax, both through the golden harvest and her pregnancy. The most notable aspect in the juxtaposition of the two successes is the celebration of womanhood. Other than that, because traditional Korea is an agricultural society, the degree to which Gamoonjang can intervene in agricultural nature affects her identity significantly. One of the reasons why her harvest is so meaningful is that, as aforementioned, rice is significant in all Koreans’ lives. I have already mentioned in my analysis of *The Tale of Haruk* that rice, for Korean people, can be a metaphor of human connections or of “life” itself. For example, Gamoonjang and the yam picker Matoong fall in love while sharing the rice that Gamoonjang cooked. Part of the reason the play depicts yam pickers as barbarian people is that they do not know how to grow, cook or eat rice—and when Gamoonjang celebrates the harvest, she invites all of her original family members, and the actors even distribute rice cakes to the audience. The actors and audience all are all welcomed to the festival, and rice—or food—is the medium of happiness and community in that moment. Ultimately, the happiest moment of Gamoonjang’s journey is when cultivated agricultural nature rewards her labor and lets her be the center of the new community that she has built. Gamoonjang’s success in rice agriculture is marked as the highest moment in her journey because she has the power to produce rice, a loaded term in the Korea cultural context. Thus, the fact that Gamoonjang has the power to transform barren land
into rice fields and that she is in control of such productive nature is meaningful:
agricultural nature is a metaphorical space which represents Gamoonjang’s culminating power.

Meanwhile, whereas Gamoonjang’s life climaxes in agricultural nature space-wise, time-wise, it happens during her adulthood. Gamoonjang’s golden harvest is paired with her pregnancy as a married wife. If agricultural nature is valuable because it is productive, it is the married and pregnant adult Gamoonjang who controls it. The aura of the blessed harvest would be of a different nature if Gamoonjang was not married, if she was unmarried but pregnant, or if she was married but not pregnant. In Korea, many people think that humans finally grow up when they become parents. Thus, even though Gamoonjang’s adulthood in this study starts with her marriage, it is likely that many audience members understand the pregnant Gamoonjang to have reached a more mature stage of adulthood. Therefore, as the golden rice fields and Gamoonjang’s pregnancy mark the climax of her journey, the timely context of such success is Gamoonjang’s adulthood.

Yet what does it mean that Gamoonjang and Matoong invite both of their original families at the moment of their highest success? Inkyung Lee writes in her comparative study of the original myths of *Gamoonjang Baby* and *King Lear* that “as the story [the original myth] connects Gamoonjang’s personal success to the happiness of her original family, the message of *Gamoonjang Baby* is rooted in Confucian family ideology” (304). I. Lee argues that Gamoonjang’s success is acceptable only as long as it bolsters the life of the whole family. Of course, I. Lee’s study is not about the performance but about the original myth, where Gamoonjang reconnects to her parents more actively: she throws a
beggar party to find her parents and to reconcile with them. On the contrary, in the
performance, Gamoonjang is more passive: she mentions her parents only briefly at the
moment when she invites everyone to her harvest celebration. The playwright writes that
she wanted to exclude interpretations of the original myth, which understand the role of
women from a patriarchal perspective, when developing the script (Ko, “A Study” 21).
Thus, Gamoonjang certainly may not be playing the forever obedient daughter who
serves her parents unconditionally at the moment of her success. Still, because
Gamoonjang actually invites her original family members to her golden harvest, even if
not in the way the original myth celebrates filial piety, she is embracing her original
family, despite the violence they enacted upon her in the past. Sunghee Lee writes that
the reason why some deserted daughters [in old tales] embrace their original parents is
because of Korean collectivism—the idea that people do not separate the individual from
his or her parents—rather than because of filial piety (24). Thus, Gamoonjang’s act of
reconnecting to her parents points to a Korean cultural understanding of childhood also
mentioned in *The Tale of Haruk*: the child is inseparable from the parents, and in
Gamoonjang’s case, the child is so even after the child grows up.

**Nature, Gamoonjang and Womanhood**

Meanwhile, a central theme of *Gamoonjang Baby* is the woman’s experience or
female identity. A major reason why the work is powerful is that a female protagonist
leads all of the changes and successes. *Gamoonjang Baby* is not a complicated story, but
rather one with a straightforward, simple plot. The play would not be nearly as
impressive if Gamoonjang were a boy/man, because there are innumerable male
protagonists who overcome challenges, succeed, and lead women while doing so. But in *Gamoonjang Baby*, it is Gamoonjang who teaches her husband, the man, what rice is and how one can grow it, and who leads him to the new land and eventually through the successful harvest. Also, female identity is a central theme because womanhood, which remains an object of contempt until almost the last moment of the play, is the cause of Gamoonjang’s suffering. For example, Matoong’s brothers harass her just because she, a mere woman, tries to cultivate land and influence a man. Worse than that, one of the main reasons she is expelled from home is because she celebrates her womb or female identity. The oppression of womanhood is the reason for Gamoonjang’s challenges and the motivation for her journey, thus womanhood is a central theme. Furthermore, female identity is significant because Gamoonjang overcomes her challenges mainly by celebrating her femininity. For example, she passes the final test of wild nature by confronting the threat of the ghostly mountains with her menstrual cloth. To survive the most dangerous moment she faces after leaving home, she draws her strength from her femininity. And finally, womanhood is a central theme because the female womb is a double metaphor of Gamoonjang’s success.

The womb is a double metaphor of Gamoonjang’s success in the following way: the play juxtaposes Gamoonjang’s golden harvest with her pregnancy, and interestingly, the context of both the harvest and the pregnancy is the womb. First, when thanking heaven for the harvest, the performers proclaim that they owe their lives to the “Womb of Heaven.” Similarly and simultaneously, Gamoonjang is thankful for the baby growing in her womb. Thus, the womb is a metaphor of Gamoonjang’s victory in two realms: her rice agriculture, and her role as a mother who produces life. As Gamoonjang openly
celebrates the two wombs, which give birth to the harvest and the newborn child, she mutes the voice of misogynist people who abhor and oppress womanhood, menstruation and production. Culturally, most Korean people readily congratulate the production of rice, but whereas a woman is expected to produce children, her womb is often abhorred. Juxtaposing Gamoonjang’s success in the two realms of rice and human production, the play lifts up the status of the female womb to the same level as valuable rice fields and erases the negative meanings people have projected onto it as a female organ. Thus, the womb becomes the center of Gamoonjang’s success and womanhood is a central theme of the play.

Nature’s Absence and Childhood in Gamoonjang Baby

Finally, how is childhood constructed, which is the focus of this study? What is the relationship between nature and Gamoonjang’s childhood? In Gamoonjang Baby, the construction of childhood is revealed mainly through its irrelevance to nature, i.e., through the absence of nature during Gamoonjang’s childhood. While nature as a space of challenge, growth and success is closely related to Gamoonjang’s life as an in-between being and as an adult, Gamoonjang is not exposed to such nature during her childhood. Though wild nature is the setting where Gamoonjang overcomes her suffering, faces herself and transcends her limits; during childhood she is situated in a dense institutional grid of family and home that does not allow such room. Also, though agricultural nature provides her a space where she can display her ability and where she blossoms fully, the socio-cultural context during her childhood does not offer such a chance. Thus, if nature in the play in general means suffering but challenge, chance, growth and success for
Gamoonjang, the lack of nature during her childhood means the absence of such possibilities.

During Gamoonjang’s childhood, rather than nature, the ideologies of her father’s home dominate her life. The child has to obey her parents unconditionally, respect them, and be thankful for their support. When Gamoonjang’s father asks her sister Eunjang whom she thanks for her life, she answers in a flattering way, “I thank the sky, the earth, my father and my mother for my life.” Her satisfied father says, “You are surely my daughter since you are thankful for your parents’ support.” The main reason why Gamoonjang’s parents ask their children this question [in the original text] is to confirm how well they have internalized the virtue of Confucian filial piety (A. Jeong 7). And interestingly, the ideas behind the questions Gamoonjang’s father asks the fifteen-year-old overlap with the ideologies of *Kwanrye*, the coming-of-age ceremony. If parents and adults ask their children’s thoughts about filial piety at the moment when they end childhood and start adulthood, this suggests that the ideology of filial piety in traditional Korea exerts a heavy influence on children’s lives, and continues to influence them as adults. In addition, when Gamoonjang is about to be expelled by her father and asks her sisters for support, they blame her, saying that in front of one’s parents, one should lower one’s eyes, be silent as a mushroom and crawl like a centipede. There are moments in *Gamoonjang Baby* where filial piety is constructed as a positive or beautiful value; at the moment Gamoonjang is evicted from her home, she bows in courtesy to her parents, and she proceeds with such care and respect that she could be conducting a sacred ritual. She does so notwithstanding her father’s violent treatment just a moment before, and her mother’s silent witness of that violence. Gamoonjang never rebels against her father even
while he is committing violence against her. Thus, the child in Gamoonjang needs to respect, obey and thank the parents, and to practice filial piety.

Since womanhood is at the center of the work, Gamoonjang’s girlhood needs attention. How is girlhood constructed in the play? After Gamoonjang turns fifteen, her father asks her the same question he asked her sisters, i.e., to whom she gives thanks for her life so far. Gamoonjang steps out cheerfully and answers, “To heaven, to earth, to father and to mother … but it’s really to the womb under my belly button.”

Gamoonjang’s father, unable to believe his ears, repeats his question. Gamoonjang repeats her answer and shows her father a red cloth, her menstrual cloth. She explains happily, “Look. A red flower bloomed between my legs!” Gamoonjang’s father screens his face with his fan and crouches down as if he has just witnessed something forbidden. Gamoonjang dances slowly and peacefully with her red cloth, and a musician sings a lyrical song: “Beautiful flower, red flower, pretty, pretty flower of life. The universe lives in me. A flower lives in me.” Gamoonjang’s face is full of happiness; she cannot take her eyes from her red cloth. In the meantime, Gamoonjang’s father has his back turned to the audience, but one can recognize by the movement of his back muscles that he is breathing hard, in anger. As soon as the song and Gamoonjang’s dance end, the father howls in rage, “You wretch! You horrible wretch! How dare you wave that dirty thing in front of me?” Gamoonjang kneels down at the left front corner of the stage and listens to her father, shocked and scared. He keeps on screaming angrily from the right front corner. The footlight below him creates a huge, monstrous-looking silhouette of him on the back wall. He leaps across the stage till he is directly in front of the kneeling Gamoonjang, and yells, “Leave this house!”
Again, the above scene reinforces the idea that the child should obey and respect the parents just as it was reinforced in the scenes where the father questions Gamoonjang’s sisters. It is disrespectful of Gamoonjang to praise herself at a moment when she should show respect to the sky, the earth and her parents. By doing so, she is exceeding her authority and breaking the hierarchy. But at the same time, female identity is the biggest issue of the moment. Gamoonjang’s father’s fury shows that the idea that the girl’s womb deserves celebration is not acceptable in her social context. There, the female womb and menstrual blood should not be mentioned, are dirty, and should be hidden. Menstruation and women who menstruate have been taboo in multiple societies and cultures (Jieun No, 7), and Kibok Yoon writes that traditional Korea was no exception. “[In Korean folklore … ] bleeding during child birth or menstruation is unclean or corrupted. That is why a good number of forbidden words are often related to pregnancy or childbirth” (Yoon 151). Thus, Gamoonjang’s praising of her womb is an abhorred act in her society. As she holds up her menstrual cloth, she is exposing something that society tries to hide. She breaks the taboo, under which “the derogation of menstruation was a widely accepted thought” and because “people used menstruation as a tool to control women in the male chauvinist society” (Y. Jung). Thus, the above scene demonstrates how specific parts of girl’s bodies were objects of contempt, and that women and girls were objects of control and oppression. Meanwhile, Gamoonjang, not even a woman but only a girl, is oppressed in multiple layers. As a child, she is lower than her parents. Gamoonjang’s father, as patriarch, has more power than her mother could have and—worse—that power figure enacts violence on Gamoonjang, who, as a daughter, has even less power than a son would have had, which I will explore further.
below. Thus, where women in Gamoonjang’s time were powerless, girls were even more so because they were children.

What other ideas about girlhood exist in the play? Daughters are not as valuable as sons. The more daughters that are born, the less they are valued, with the younger daughters receiving the least care. After the third girl, Gamoonjang, is born, there is regret in the family: too many daughters in the household are burdensome because they will not benefit the household economy. The storyteller grimaces at the sight of Gamoonjang and shouts regretfully, “A daughter, again!” and complains, “The baby’s crying is too loud if we consider that it is a girl!” Also, she treats the third girl differently, soothing baby Gamoonjang carelessly with one foot. And Gamoonjang gets a wooden bowl instead of the silver and bronze bowls given to her older sisters. Girls are not valuable, especially if there are too many of them.

Furthermore, a daughter’s goal is to get married and her main job is to prepare to be a good bride. Gamoonjang’s father orders her sisters to learn how to dress and how to sew. He rewards the obedient sisters by sending them to their rooms (Jungsook Kim 52). The room in a home was a place for girls/women, “in place,” because “in earlier times, the outside world was men’s public space, and women’s space was the home” (Ko, “A Study” 69). Parents arranged marriages so their daughters would move on smoothly to a new home and could remain “in place” there, and the more precious the daughter was, the more gifts were sent to her husband’s house before her marriage. Gamoonjang’s father promises her older sisters, who please him, an abundance of marriage gifts including pigs, cows and rice. Thus, daughters belong to fathers until they are sent to their husbands as
part of a bundle of gifts. Meanwhile, girls who do not fit the ideology of girlhood are punished and excluded.

Where the presence of wild nature and agricultural nature, metaphorical spaces of challenge, growth and success, let Gamoonjang write her own history after childhood, the absence of such space during her childhood means that the socio-cultural ideologies of her father’s home dominate that period of her life. Traditionally a girl was expected to obey her parents and practice Confucian filial piety unconditionally. Daughters were not as valuable as sons. Women were powerless, objects of control and oppression, expected to hide and abhor their bodies. Even though Gamoonjang continues to be exposed to misogyny after leaving home, she is more oppressed by such thoughts as a girl because she is a girl, a child, and because the child does not have the exit which the older Gamoonjang will have. The girl has to agree with the ideologies of girlhood or leave home and lose the very basis of her survival. Therefore, she needs to mute her voice; nobody respects her status, and she does not have the competence to influence her social context during childhood. The child does not have agency.
CHAPTER 4

NATURE AND THE CHILD IN OSEAM

In this chapter, I analyze nature and childhood in the movie Oseam (오세암).

Oseam is an animated movie directed by Baek-yeob Seong and released in 2003. The film received the Grand Prix at the 28th Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and won the Junior Jury [persons in the audience who are younger than 11] award at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. Interestingly, the movie did not attract much public attention when it was shown in Korean movie theatres. Many people questioned the commercial failure of the movie within Korea, mostly because it was an adaptation of a popular and culturally influential Korean story. The original story of Oseam is the tale of the Miracle of the Goddess of Mercy (관음영험설화), a legend passed down in multiple areas in Korea. Belief in the Goddess of Mercy started in Silla (B.C.57 - A.D.935), and continued to exist throughout Korean history until the Chosun dynasty (Jongho Lee 252). The goddess used to be a close and friendly savior for whom people searched during times of difficulty, believing she would rescue them from their suffering (252). In 1984, Chaebong Jung (정채봉) published the children’s story Oseam, based on the original tale of the Miracle of the Goddess of Mercy. Additionally, “[in] the 6th national curriculum, the 5th grade second-semester reading textbook includes the story. And it has been produced as a live action film, as an animated movie, and as a musical performance” (Shin 432). Thus, Oseam is a story that is culturally significant and widely known to the Korean public. The focus of my study is the adaptation of the story, the animated movie Oseam. And in this study, when quoting from Oseam, I use English subtitles that are part of the officially published DVD.
In preceding works on the animated movie *Oseam*, many scholars have compared the movie to the original tale of the Miracle of the Goddess of Mercy and to the children’s story by Chaebong Jung. The works of Jewoon No, S. Park, Hyewon Jung, Jongho Lee, Yongsang Kim, Jongmin Kim, and S. An belong to this category. Meanwhile, a smaller group of scholars have focused only on the animated movie: Sangwon Lee, M. Cho, and Hyunmi Cho, among others. Thus, the majority of available studies are comparisons of the different adaptations; studies focusing only on the animated movie are rare. Among the preceding studies, S. Jung’s and M. An’s works broadly address “the child” in *Oseam*. Thus, I will explore them on a deeper level.

M. An’s article is about the differences among the child characters in the tale, in the children’s story, and in the animated movie. M. An’s focus on the child protagonist reveals the differences among the three media in an interesting way, her analysis of the children’s story being particularly insightful. However, because M. An mainly focuses on the comparison among the children in the three media, she does not study the child in the movie on a deeper level. Also, she focuses mainly on the “colors” in the movie, which restricts the scope of her study. S. Jung’s MA thesis is about the meaning of the animated movie as a child narrative. To understand the movie, Jung compares it with other adaptations, studying the differences in the meanings of childhood in each of the three media. Even though Jung’s focus is the animated movie, she interrogates the animated movie in light of earlier adaptations, which frames the analysis in a certain way. Also, Jung does not study childhood as a construct but rather suggests an answer to what child narratives should or should not be. Therefore, both of the preceding works on the child in *Oseam* compare the movie to earlier adaptations, and neither focuses on the constructed
nature of childhood. This study, focusing only on the animated movie and the construction of childhood in it, fills the gap in the literature.

The synopsis of the animated movie *Oseam* is as follows. Five-year-old Gilson (길손) and his older sister Gami (감이) are orphans with no one to lean on but each other. Both miss their mother deeply. Gilson, not knowing that his mother is dead, because his sister doesn’t dare to tell him, is especially desperate in his wish to find her. The siblings are without a secure living place until they meet some Buddhist monks and start living in the temple. One day, a monk realizes how much Gilson misses his mother. He tells the boy that one who studies can see the invisible. [“Study” is a translation of the Korean word 공부, a Buddhist term in *Oseam*’s context. Here, study is a religious practice. And the purpose of “study” in *Oseam* is “to open the eyes of the heart” (Hyunmi Cho 182).]

At last, Gilson follows the monk to a hermitage deep in the mountains to study. He hopes to teach his sister Gami, who is blind, how to see the unseen, so that she can recognize their mother once they find her. Gilson himself will not recognize his mother because he does not remember her face. One day, the monk goes down the mountain to the weekly market, leaving Gilson all by himself in the hermitage. He promises to return soon, but meets a fierce snowstorm on the way back. He falls, passes out, and remains unconscious for a while. Because the monk cannot return, the boy is abandoned in the empty hermitage, isolated in the heavy snow. As he passes time waiting for the monk, Gilson discovers the mural of the Goddess of Mercy. He likes her right away and strikes up a conversation with her. Describing how much he misses his mother, he begins calling the goddess “Mommy.” As he waits for the monk, hungry, scared and lonely, he keeps returning to the mural. When spring comes, Gami and the monks manage to reach the
hermitage. They discover that Gilson has died, but they understand that he has entered Nirvana as he sought so desperately for his mother/the Goddess of Mercy. They witness with awe how Gilson attains Buddhahood as his mother, who appears as the Goddess of Mercy, embraces him with love. Thanks to Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood, Gami gains eyesight and the mother and the siblings reunite happily in Nirvana.

The Nature-Friendly Child

What does the study about the relationship between nature and the child in Oseam reveal about the construction of the child in this movie? A major thought about nature and the child in Oseam is the idea of the “nature-friendly child,” that is, the idea that the child is innocent and easily becomes a good friend of nature thanks to that innocence. The main character, Gilson, is carefree and goodhearted, and beautiful nature is his close friend throughout the movie. In the first scene, for example, one hears the flow of lyrical, light background music. An emerald green sea glitters beside a peaceful beach, surrounded by clean, tall trees. Gilson looks ecstatic as he plays beneath the falling maple leaves. He runs around the beach in circles, his arms outspread in imitation of the seagulls in the sky. He laughs and shouts joyfully, looking innocent and content. There are many other scenes showing the playful Gilson as a good friend of nature, all of which stress his innocence. For instance, as the monk takes off his robe to meditate in the river, Gilson picks it up and puts it on a deer, explaining innocently to the animal that the robe will keep it warm. In another scene, Gilson climbs up on the temple pagoda and talks to the birds kindly, as if they are his friends: “Hey birds, where are you going? My home is here” (Oseam). Gilson is doing things that are forbidden, taking away another’s
clothes and climbing up religious statues, but he does so playfully and without knowing the acts are bad. These scenes emphasize that the child is carefree. At the same time, the director has the child speak to animals as friends at such moments to confirm his innocence. Thus, a major idea about nature and children in *Oseam* is that children are innocent, demonstrated through their nature-friendly attitude.

**The Child Needs Home or Mother: Nature That Symbolizes Mother’s Absence, Substitutes for Mother, or Is Part of Mother**

Meanwhile, nature’s presence in *Oseam* reveals the idea that children need a mother, that they are incomplete without one, and that a mother is a positive being. How so? Nature as a site of consolation reinforces the idea that children need a mother. Gilson and Gami, without anyone to support them, find comfort in nature. As Soojung Seo mentioned in her study about space in Korean animated movies, “nature in *Oseam* is an image of motherhood, which accepts everything, consoles, empowers, and which leads to rest, salvation and hope” (70). At times when the children are lonely or sad, they are often in nature, which embraces them. Nature substitutes for the mother’s home (78), family and friends. For example, after his fistfight with two bad boys who tease Gami for being blind, Gilson runs up the mountain road, angry and sad. In the woods, he calls loudly for his mother, but nobody answers; the echoes of his cries spread endlessly through the hollow mountains. Gilson drops his head and talks to the air as if talking to his mother, “I’m bleeding in the nose, too, Mommy. I’m hurting a lot, too, Mommy” (*Oseam*). He talks in the woods because he doesn’t have his mother to turn to, and the mountain’s hollow echoes reinforce the absence of the mother the boy misses so much.
Similarly, the night before Gilson leaves for the hermitage, Gami confesses to her sleeping brother that she lied to him—that their mother is dead, and that they will never see her again. She is in deep sadness. Outside their humble room, in the silent temple yard, a lonely lamp shines and snow falls softly. Gami steps out of the room and onto the crisp snow. Nearly in tears a moment before, now she looks at the sky and smiles brightly. The beautiful background music becomes louder. The snowy temple yard is silent and peaceful, as if sheltering Gami. The snow substitutes for a mother, family or friend, none of which Gami has. In the above examples, nature is a site of solitude and consolation that embraces Gilson and Gami at difficult times. The fact that the characters find consolation in nature rather than in a home or family reveals the absence of the latter. Thus, nature as a site of consolation stresses the absence of mother or home and reinforces the idea that children need both.

Meanwhile, the imagination of mother or hometown in the movie always overlaps with beautiful nature, and such nature reveals that both the children’s mother and home, which they miss dearly, are positive things. Gilson’s only hope is to meet his mother. Whatever he does, he is always thinking about how to find her. And the mother in his imagination is a warm, loving being who gives only good things to him. And whenever such a positive mother appears in the sibling’s imagination, she usually is accompanied by a friendly version of nature. For example, in a retrospective scene, Gami is younger and her hair is shorter. She is carrying baby Gilson on her back as she stands in a golden rice field. She plays with stones to pass the time and stares at the empty lane as if waiting for someone. Hovering in the road, she waits and waits. Finally, far away, the silhouette of the children’s mother appears. She is carrying a bundle on her head and appears to be
coming back from work. Gami runs toward her joyfully. The mother takes Gilson on her back and Gami clings to her legs. The children are waiting for their mother in the rural nature of their hometown, and the beloved mother appears as part of the rice field. Similarly, home in Gilson’s imagination is a place where the siblings listen to their mother’s stories while lying on a low wooden bench (평상) in the yard, eating steamed corn and looking at the stars. S. Seo points out that the typical scenery of a Korean rural hometown is represented in Oseam mainly through the juxtaposition of the beautiful aspects of it, an image that has been inherited in the collective consciousness of Koreans (72). Thus, the beautiful rural hometown and the good mother are inseparable in Oseam. Both the beauty of the hometown and the warmhearted mother become the object of longing for the siblings, and the pairing reveals the idea that children miss their mother and that the mother is a good person.

Additionally, the mother as goddess dwells in utopic nature, where the final reunion between the siblings and their mother takes place at the end of the movie. When Gami grabs the dead Gilson’s hand, the boy asks her if he is dreaming and says that he wants to dream about his mother. In the next scene, Gami is holding Gilson in a beautiful flower bed. A moment after, Gilson, Gami, and their mother are sitting on a mat under a wonderful flowering tree with food spread out before them. The mother strokes Gilson gently and Gami kisses her mother on the cheek. Flower petals float in the air. Gilson dangles from a tree branch, and sister and brother plant flower trees. In this scene of happy reunion, nature is an ideal space where the mother as goddess awaits her children, where all things are good, and where children are happy. Natural subject matter becomes the signifier of a whole state. For example, as falling blossoms (꽃비) indicate Buddha’s
wisdom covering the whole world in Buddhism, the falling flowers in Oseam’s last scene represent descending mercy (M. Cho 217). Again the good mother, this time the complete divine goddess, dwells in beautiful nature, and as the children are happy and satisfied after meeting her in nature as Nirvana, the pairing of the mother/goddess and utopic nature reveals the idea that children need a complete mother who can provide unconditional care. Whether it is the mother in the warm hometown or the mother as a goddess providing complete love, the mother dwells in rural nature, or in nature as utopia. Again, the idea behind such pairings is the thought that a mother is good and that children need mothers.

Meanwhile, the two main constructions of childhood that I explore above, that is, the idea of the child who is innocent and nature-friendly and the idea that the child needs a mother, mingle in the relationship among Gami, Gilson, and nature. It is nature that connects Gami and Gilson—the two who long for their mother collectively, who survive by leaning on each other, and who eventually separate and miss each other. Whenever Gilson and Gami talk to each other, a good part of their conversation is about nature. Not many children in reality talk that much about nature, but for Gilson and Gami, it is an everyday topic. For example, when Gilson’s sister pricks her finger while sewing, Gilson says, “Oh, blood … It’s like a flower petal … Like the one I put in your hair last summer … That’s why you smell like a flower” (Oseam). And often nature is the medium that connects them. For instance, the moment Gilson leaves Gami to study at the hermitage, he realizes he misses her sorely. As he sits by the frozen water, snow falls. He tries to pull a leaf out of the water, but it breaks because half of it is stuck in the ice. Soon after, the song Namunnipbae (나뭇잎배), in Gami’s voice, is played in the background:
As I lie next to my mother
I think of the tree boat
The one I played with but left behind
It must be floating around calmly
On the pond
Where the round moon and white clouds are floating away

As the song recalls lyrical nature surrounding home and mother, Gilson thinks about his sister. In his memory, she is close to nature. Gami smiles, a maple leaf in her hand. Gilson hands her a leaf and smiles. The two hold hands and walk along a lane next to a reed field. They tickle each other’s faces with reeds. Thus, in Gilson’s memory, Gami is part of nature, and so are the pleasant memories they share about home or family. Additionally, the things Gilson wants to show his sister, once he learns how to see the unseen, are mainly natural objects such as flowers and birds. Nature is a significant part of the relationship between the two.

Why is nature the medium that connects Gilson and Gami? As both siblings are constructed as innocent, good persons, the idea that innocent children are nature-friendly, is applied to them as a collective entity, i.e., as a group of innocent children; and as Gilson and Gami long for mother, family and hometown collectively and think of each other as the only family on earth, natural objects carry their communal longing for mother and hometown and the sense of belonging to each other. As such, the relationship between Gilson and Gami is a site where the idea that innocent children are friends of beautiful nature, and the thought that children need a mother, family or home, mingle and are reinforced.
The Child’s Heart Is Buddha’s Heart

The child in Oseam is constructed as a person whose heart resembles Buddha’s. At the end of the movie, Gilson attains Buddhahood and enters Nirvana, which, according to the narration in the movie, is because of a number of qualities the child possesses. As the monks and Gami visit the hermitage and discover that Gilson is dead, the Goddess of Mercy announces, “This child is the image of heaven. He called to me with the pureness of heart and looked for me with a spirit undivided. This child’s innocence will light the world bright (이 어린아이는 곧 하늘의 모습이다. 변하지 않는 모습으로 나를 불렀고 나뉘지 않는 순수함으로 나를 찾았다. 이 아이의 순수함이 세상을 밝게 비추리라)” (Oseam). It is difficult to know what these words mean exactly because they are religious ideas full of metaphors. Still, to understand the meaning from a commonsense standpoint, i.e., as if they were secular words, they mean that Gilson resembles something ideal, has sought for the mother/Goddess constantly and has remained in a pure and complete state while doing so, which benefits the world. That is, Gilson attains Buddhahood because of the qualities he possesses such as faith, innocence and completeness.

What does it mean to attain Buddhahood? The movie alludes to the idea that Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood is not completely unrelated to the life he spends in the Buddhist temple where he becomes familiar with Buddhist ideas and culture. I trace the stages of Gilson’s experience of Buddhist culture rather meticulously in order to find clues to the meaning of “attaining Buddhahood.” I limit the object of my analysis of Gilson’s experience to the exact information the movie provides. As no one can
understand Gilson’s spiritual experiences thoroughly by observing only the representations of them in the movie, I cannot tell what part of his temple life concretely leads to his attainment of Buddhahood. However, the movie shows a number of scenes pointing indirectly to the fact that he is gradually getting to know Buddha’s ideas, which in turn indicates that his change can and should be explained from a Buddhist perspective.

For example, Gilson is so deeply moved as he stands in front of a Buddhist statue, that he kneels down spontaneously and prays. Also, as he looks at the women walking around the pagodas in the temple yard and praying, he tries to understand Buddha’s position, saying, “I wonder what she wants … probably to go to heaven. … I bet Buddha is sitting so still because he is so tired of their requests” (Oseam). Most decisively, Gilson decides to study in the distant hermitage because he so desperately misses his mother. Seeing him thus depressed, the monk explains that one can see the unseen once the heart’s eyes open, just as Buddha can see the breeze with his open soul. He elaborates that Gilson needs to study diligently to see the breeze or the space over the sky. The monk’s message deeply impresses the boy, and he finally resolves to study, and the purpose of his study becomes obvious at the end of the movie. Gilson tells the mural of the Goddess of Mercy about the content and motivation for his study: “I came here to study with Mister [the monk] … What kind of study? The one where I can see things with my closed eyes … Because we have to go look for our Mommy … soon find my mother, you know” (Oseam). Because Gilson does not know what his mother looks like and because his sister, who remembers her face, cannot see, the boy wants to teach his sister how to see with closed eyes. In that way they will recognize and find their mother. Thus, the content of Gilson’s study is to see with closed eyes and the object is to find his
mother. Still, Gilson does not always understand fully what he is studying. At the beginning of his life in the hermitage, for example, he is a little bored and asks the monk to play with him: “Mister! Sir, play with me. Is there something on the wall? [He does not understand why the monk is sitting in front of the wall.] If you’re just gonna stare at the wall all day, Why did you come here?” (Oseam). For a moment, Gilson himself sits in front of the wall imitating the monk, but one cannot tell what is going on in his mind as he sits with his back to the audience. Meanwhile, a brief scene shows the monk looking at a small, incomplete wooden Buddha statue lying on the floor and commenting that it resembles Gilson. Yet, until the end of the movie, there is no information about how Gilson studies or whether he makes progress. Shortly before his death he says, “… I called mommy with all my heart but she is still not here … tell me how I can make her hear” (Oseam). Thus, Gilson does not learn how to reach his goal through study until shortly before his death. The above is all the information the movie provides about Gilson’s experience of Buddhism, about the nature of his study, or how much he progresses in it. Oseam never makes explicit what or how much Gilson learns about the Buddhist way of study. Still, Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood happens after he has been exposed to and influenced by Buddhist culture and thought.

Even though I cannot know the exact content of Gilson’s spiritual experience, it happens time-wise after his most urgent crisis, which is also the moment shortly before he dies, and it is a result of his desperate prayers and longing. To explore the nature of that experience, I analyze the events before and after the moment on a deeper level. After the monk leaves for the market and Gilson is left alone in the hermitage, the boy starts up a conversation with the mural of the Goddess of Mercy. He easily becomes friends with
her. Contrary to his usual attitude, he seems shy, as if he has a crush on her. He keeps coming back to see the goddess as more days pass and the monk does not return. At one point, while telling the goddess how much he misses his mother, he is about to break into tears and asks if he may call her “Mommy.” From that moment on, he calls the mural Mommy. Later, when Gami and the monks arrive at the hermitage, they hear the dead Gilson’s voice continuously calling the Goddess of Mercy, chanting. One does not know how he came to call her so desperately, but because he is lonely and frustrated by being abandoned in the hermitage, because the monk has told him the goddess will come if he calls her with all his heart, and because the boy thinks of her as his mother, it is very likely that his longing for the mother/goddess has turned into prayer. After all, since Gilson’s mother came to him as the Goddess of Mercy, the encounter between the two is of a religious character, and even if it is difficult to know the full spectrum of Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood, it is obvious that it happens at the most desperate moment of his life and that his wish is fulfilled after the event.

Up to now, I have traced the information in the movie that provides clues about the process of Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood, mainly to explore the idea that the child’s heart resembles Buddha’s heart. The above reveals that it is difficult to know what the attainment of Buddhahood actually is or what it means to say that the child’s heart resembles Buddha’s. However, based on all the information provided by the movie, Gilson attains Buddhahood through his innate innocence and through his desperate prayers to see his mother. Meanwhile, the Buddhist conception of the child provides more background information. From a Buddhist perspective, “… the child can reach enlightenment because s/he is not stubborn and has a pure heart whereas the adult cannot
find enlightenment because s/he perceives the exterior world as solid and is obsessive about it” (Hyunmi Cho 178). Additionally, “the innocent Buddha (천진불) resides in the child’s heart as the child acts exactly in the way the child sees and feels … laughs when the child is happy” (181). While the above ideas, again, are hard to understand fully due to the metaphorical and complex nature of Buddhist sayings, two ideas appear: 1) the child is innocent and pure, and 2) the child is free of preconceptions and responds honestly to the world the child experiences. Both conceptions overlap significantly with the conditions of the child as Buddha that appear in the movie—the child’s innocence and desperate prayers. Innocence is obviously one characteristic of the child as Buddha, and in a way, Gilson’s desperate prayers are his honest response to his suffering and longing for his mother. Thus, as limited as the analysis is, the above reveals that the child as Buddha in the movie is the child who is innocent and who responds honestly to his or her experiences, such as suffering or longing for a mother/goddess.

Nature and the Child as Buddha

Does the idea that the child’s heart resembles Buddha’s relate to nature? Love for nature is obviously a characteristic of the child as Buddha if innocence is a primary condition of the child as Buddha, and if such innocence—as aforementioned—is mainly performed through the child’s love for nature. Furthermore, the child as Buddha’s place is in utopic nature. As previously mentioned, the mother as goddess lives in nature as Nirvana. Here, I emphasize that the child as Buddha joins the mother as Goddess of Mercy in their new home: nature as utopia. Thus, the child as Buddha belongs to nature as Nirvana. Also, if desperate prayers as a response to suffering and longing are another
condition of Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood, and if heavy snow arouses fear, loneliness, hunger and sadness and finally, an intense longing for the mother as a savior, then threatening nature, plays another role in the characterization of the child as Buddha. Lastly, if the practice of Buddhist culture affects Gilson’s attainment of Buddhahood in any way, nature becomes the context of many such practices. The temple is in the middle of nature, monks pray while piling up stones and meditate sitting in rivers, and the hermitage—the place where Gilson enters Nirvana—is in deep, dignified nature. Thus, as Gilson gets closer to Buddhahood, he gets closer to silence and to grand nature untouched by humans. As such, nature relates to the child as Buddha in multiple ways.

**The Child in Oseam**

This study shows that both nature and childhood are constructed diversely in *Oseam* and that both pair with each other for different ideological reasons. The main constructions of childhood in *Oseam* are the innocent child, the child who misses and needs a mother, and the child who resembles Buddha. Nature in *Oseam* is so rich that the protagonist’s world cannot exist without it; nature carries meanings such as mother, family, home, hometown, utopia, and site of suffering/prayer, among others. The child’s innocence is demonstrated through the child’s love for nature, and the child who needs a mother is paired with nature as a substitute for home or as the place of the warmhearted mother or goddess. The child as Buddha is performed through the nature-friendly child who belongs to nature as Nirvana, and who is paired with threatening nature as the context of suffering/prayers.
The three main constructions of childhood are in an interesting relationship: the innocent child and the child who needs a mother become the two major conditions of the child as Buddha. The most interesting fact is that “nature friendliness” becomes a sufficient condition for the child’s entrance to Nirvana. Gilson could have appeared as a person of mercy who performs benevolent actions, for example, but as aforementioned, his innocence is mainly represented through his love of nature, and because many Korean viewers identify the nature-friendly child with the innocent child, such an attitude persuades the viewer that Gilson is innocent enough to attain Buddhahood.

All of the major memes reflect the sociohistoric specificity of the Korean context. As mentioned, the nature-friendly child has been an influential meme in Korean children’s culture. Also, as mentioned in the analysis The Tale of Haruk, the child who misses a mother or who is bound to her is a well-known Korean trope. So is the mother who lives in the rural hometown. The child as Buddha resonates with the Korean public due to their familiarity with Buddhism, which has infiltrated Korean culture for a long time. Thus, all of the major tropes of childhood Oseam are specific to the Korean context.

Meanwhile, how is gender constructed in the work? The main character is a boy and boyhood is constructed as the following ways: it is the boy who reaches Buddhahood, the ideal state, and not his sister. Also, only the boy has the chance to leave for the hermitage and to deepen his study of Buddhahood. It is the boy who spends most of his time playing freely in nature, a signature of the child as Buddha. His sister, on the contrary, is occupied with domestic labor such as laundry or sewing. Of course, the difference between the siblings’ roles may also be a matter of age, i.e., the sister can work because she is older. Also, Gilson is not blind, whereas his sister is, and that affects their
roles to some extent. Still, the gender difference exists. Meanwhile, Gami cares diligently for Gilson with a motherly attitude. It is likely that Gilson longs for his mother so desperately because he is a boy. Gami can become a mother and already can take care of others in the way a mother does, but Gilson is less skillful at motherly tasks and thus might be more desperate to meet his mother, so she can take care of him. In fact, he actually mentions in a relieved manner, that his mother/the goddess, whom he met in Nirvana, plays with him at times he is bored and feeds him when he is hungry. Hence, the mother who provides care and the boy who needs and receives such care appear as a pair in the movie. I explore this aspect further in the study of *The Way Home*, as that movie has more relevance to the topic.

Last, does the child have agency? The child cannot be complete on his own. Gilson remains unsatisfied during his whole life, always thinking that he will not be “good” until he meets his mother, and he is satisfied only after he meets her in Nirvana. Also, Gilson is not taken seriously. He rarely makes conscious decisions or takes responsibility for his actions. Whether on the street, in the temple, or in the hermitage, the boy mainly plays (with nature) and has fun, and everyone allows him the time and freedom to do so, and thinks that he is cute and lovely. As Gilson mainly plays around, other people run after him cleaning up the mess he has made and/or scolding him to correct his behavior. As such, Gilson is always lower than the adult caretakers who know what is good for him. The only, somewhat serious decision he makes is to leave for the hermitage to study. Many people empathize with Gilson’s desire to find his mother, yet no one exposes the truth about her to the boy, that she is dead and that he will not find “the real” mother no matter how hard he studies. “… the non-disclosure of truth is
justified in the name of sympathy or love and Gilson is forced to wait and endure unconditionally” (S. Jung, 56). This implies that people think that the boy is incapable of dealing with his mother’s death and/or that he should be protected from it. The child does not have agency.

Also, the child in Oseam is a projection of adult desire. H. Yoon questions critically whether any of today’s children would be able to project themselves onto the child characters in Oseam (255). “The movie’s ending resembles the children’s charter and is an attempt to lock children up in the adult ideology of children as angels” (252), she criticizes. Indeed, not many children in reality think that they resemble Buddha or perform innocence by spending much of their time loving nature. Thus, the child in Oseam does not represent real children but adult ideas about children. And a study of the original legend or of Chaebong Jung, the writer of the children’s story, shows why the child cannot but be a symbol of adult ideologies. The original legend was part of the “Buddhist faith” section in an anthology of Buddhist tales and it emphasized a childlike, sincere faith rather than the [real] child (M. An 38). Chaebong Jung, the well-known and popular writer of the children’s story Oseam, thought the child’s heart to be “the hometown of the human soul,” through which one can resist evil or sin and move toward the divine will (Jongae Lee 139). Jung understood his works to be a materialization of the child’s heart as the hometown of the human soul (139). Thus, the other name of Jung’s children’s story is “children’s story for adults (어른을 위한 동화)” (M.An, 50). The writer thought that children’s stories were meant not only for children, but for people of all ages, as the texts existed to console and uplift the human soul (H. Kim 167). While the above study is more about the original legend and children’s stories, most of the ideas are
applicable to the movie as well: the child is not a representation of real children because the child was never meant to be. The child in *Osem* is a carrier of Buddhist faith and/or a metaphor of an ideal human condition that adults pursue.
CHAPTER 5

NATURE AND THE CHILD IN THE WAY HOME

*The Way Home* (집으로) is a popular Korean family movie released in 2002, about the friendship between a city boy and his grandmother in the countryside. It was the first family movie to attain Korean box-office success, and since its release, movies about families and children have become a new trend (Gu and Na 410). About four million Koreans watched this movie in theatres in 2002, and it has been loved by many since then. *The Way Home* won the Best Film award at the 39th Daejong Film Awards (대종상영화제), one of the most prestigious Korean film festivals, and was invited for showings in about 20 foreign cities. “The movie ‘caught the two hares’ of critique and commercial success through its marginal story about a seven-year-old boy and his grandmother, thereby encouraging the film scene to diversify its subject matter in terms of both management and production” (Sohee Kim 130). Thus, *The Way Home* is a meaningful work in both Korean film history and popular culture. Meanwhile, when quoting from *The Way Home* in this study, I use English subtitles that are part of the officially published DVD.

As for preceding research about *The Way Home*, there are film critiques by Sohee Kim, Kyungmoon Kim, J. Yoo and Heejin Jung. Jungyeon Kim studies the movie in a section of her MA thesis on ideology in Korean melodrama movie posters. J. An’s MA thesis on the relationship between film critiques and audience responses also addresses the movie. Among the above studies, Yoo, Jung and J. Kim all focus on “the woman” or “mother.” On the other hand, Gu and Na study images of children in five Korean movies about children released after 2000, among which one is *The Way Home*. Gu and Na’s
study is directly related to this study and deserves further exploration. The authors are interested in adults’ understanding of childhood in the movies, mainly to see how such understanding benefits childhood education. They regret that the children in the movies are overwhelmed by their reality and responsibilities, that they are deprived of a childhood [as a given, biologically fixed period necessary for growth that children deserve]. As the authors compare five movies in a single article, they cannot interrogate *The Way Home* and the full spectrum of childhood within it on a deeper level. Most importantly, Gu and Na are less interested in the constructed nature of childhood, focusing rather on whether the ideas about childhood are harmful or beneficial in light of the “truths” about childhood that they themselves hold. Thus, there are few previous studies of *The Way Home*, and there is no substantial scholarly work dealing solely with the movie. Among the few studies that do exist, some focus on “the mother” or “woman” but not many consider “the child,” even though the movie is a “family movie,” a genre that officially includes children. The only study that deals with the child in *The Way Home*, neither interrogates the subject on a deeper level nor examines it from a childhood studies perspective. This study therefore serves to fill in this gap in the literature.

The synopsis of *The Way Home* is as follows. Seven-year-old city boy Sangwoo (상우) comes to live with his grandmother for the summer while his mother is looking for a new job. At first, Sangwoo does not like his grandmother or the life in her rural village, but her love and care gradually make him open his heart. He comes to like his grandmother and becomes familiar with her world. By the time his mother comes to pick him up in the fall, he has grown very close to his grandmother. He can carry many beautiful memories back to the city, but their farewell is not easy.
The Transforming Relationship Between Nature and the Child

How is “nature and the child” constructed in The Way Home? The most outstanding characteristic of the relationship between Sangwoo and nature is that it transforms: the distance between the two changes as the movie develops. I explore the change in the relationship between nature and the child by studying a number of significant moments of the movie in detail. In the earlier part of the movie, Sangwoo does not harmonize with the diverse, abundant nature of his grandmother’s world, and rather attaches negative meanings to it. This period overlaps with the time when the boy is unable to adapt to the overall different life with grandmother and to connect with her. For example, at the very beginning of the movie, as Sangwoo and his mother ride the bus to grandmother’s village, a hen gets loose and flutters around inside the bus. The sight amuses the village farmers in the bus; only Sangwoo is annoyed. When Sangwoo enters his grandmother’s house, the camera, representing his perspective, moves slowly around to reveal various objects, including an occasional spider web or other untidy feature. The scene expresses the disgust the boy feels. Also, Sangwoo stays inside the house, obsessively playing electronic games, eating Spam and drinking Coke. This scene is out of sync with the analogue, natural background of his grandmother’s home. Sangwoo has brought his inline skates, but he skates only on the narrow floor area in front of grandma’s room, or inside the room. The village’s dirt roads offer no place for skating. Visiting the outdoor toilet at night frightens him, and he is threatened by the crazy cow living in the village because he does not know how to handle it. “Chicken” for Sangwoo means fast food like KFC, but his grandmother brings home a live hen and cooks healthy, traditional chicken soup Samgyetang (삼계탕). The boy, expecting KFC, is disappointed.
Looking at the soup, he complains, “This sucks! I said Kentucky chicken! Fried! Why is it in the water?” (*The Way Home*). Sometimes Sangwoo is even aggressive toward nature. Upset at seeing a bug in the room, he makes a huge fuss, screaming at his grandmother to kill it. In the earlier scenes of the movie, nature annoys and disgusts the boy. He cannot find a meaningful activity in the context of nature. Nature threatens the child and sometimes the child is aggressive toward nature.

While nature and the child are in disharmony, the boy’s perspective alienates nature, which makes nature stand out as the other. Sangwoo’s presence reminds the viewers of the world the boy comes from, the city with its machinery and consumerism, distant from the grandmother’s world. And the boy’s attitude shows how he perceives nature and what meanings he attaches to it. For example, when Sangwoo pops out of his grandmother’s house holding his robot up high and shouting, “Fly away!” (*The Way Home*), the boy and the robot appear in sharp contrast with the green environment around the house. There is total dissonance between the green and the robot. Thereafter, Sangwoo walks along a narrow mountain path as if exploring the village. But his body lacks energy. He moves his arms and legs carelessly, as if bored and annoyed. Looking around despondently, he finds only random nature everywhere. His face shows disappointment. Finally the camera focuses on his upper body. He is the picture of discontent, surrounded by the green leaves of the trees that fill the background. Here, Sangwoo’s perspective decides the meaning of nature: nature is different, the unknown, and a source of boredom and disappointment. And because of the disharmony between nature and Sangwoo, viewers become aware of nature’s presence, and nature stands out.
The distinction between nature and Sangwoo, so sharp at the beginning of the movie, disappears and the presence of nature becomes less obvious as the story proceeds. For example, in the scene where Sangwoo connects to his grandmother for the first time, the boy waits on the mountain road for her to return from the weekly market. The bus arrives, raising dust and breaking the silence of the empty mountains. At last the boy sees his grandmother walking out of the dust. He complains, “What took you so long?” (*The Way Home*). Sangwoo, who so far mostly despised or ignored his grandmother, has changed. He was lonely and longing to see her, and now is pleased by her return. At this moment, the nature that fills the bus stop in the mountains becomes a site of waiting and encounter. As the two persons connect with each other meaningfully, the spatial context of the connection carries meanings for both. Here, the context is nature. Also, in the same way that the grandmother has been part of nature throughout her life, and vice versa, nature here is no longer the other for Sangwoo but has become a part of the boy’s life that he cares about. Meanwhile, this is the first moment in the movie where Sangwoo willingly and voluntarily starts a constructive conversation with his grandmother. And for the first time, the two walk together, relaxed, along the road into the mountains, going in the same direction. As the mountains embrace grandmother and grandson, nature becomes a space of comfort for Sangwoo. Furthermore, the two have begun growing into a family as both head to their communal home. Thus, the mountains form a “way home.”

Later, nature becomes a synonym for the mother who embraces Sangwoo. One day, the boy falls and hurts himself, and at that moment the notorious crazy cow appears. The village children immediately warn each other away from the cow and run away. But because Sangwoo limps, he cannot escape quickly enough from the crazy cow, which
chases and nearly tramples him. Making his way home after the accident, he is greatly relieved to see his grandmother waiting for him in the woods. He breaks into tears. His grandmother’s eyes are those of a caring mother, full of worry and sympathy. She approaches her grandson, looks carefully at his wounded legs, and wipes his tears away lovingly. In that moment, the woods surrounding grandmother become an extension of her, an incarnation of motherhood. And as I will explain below, the grandmother is often depicted as a part of nature in the movie. Thus, in this scene, nature as mother embraces the boy and his tears, just as his grandmother does.

At the end of the movie Sangwoo becomes part of nature, as the boy embraces nature as his soul home. In the last scene, when his mother comes to take him back to the city, Sangwoo, his mother and his grandmother wait at the bus stop in the woods. His mother speaks friendly words to his grandmother. Sangwoo, on the contrary, stands one or two steps away from his mother, withdrawn, shy and silent, as if overwhelmed by the sadness of the farewell. He has grown so close to his grandmother that it is difficult to say good-bye. The right side of the movie screen contains the bus stop and the three people waiting for the bus. The left part of the screen is empty or filled with nature; it also is the direction of the city, where the bus will go. The bus will drive through the mountains toward the city, leaving the nature of grandmother’s world behind. And Sangwoo’s movements tell the viewers clearly that he is not ready to leave. As the bus arrives, he reluctantly climbs onto it with his mother. But as it is leaving, he runs to the wide back window, looking eagerly for his grandmother, who is left behind. The window reflects the sky, clouds and mountains of his grandmother’s village, which he can see as he continues looking at his grandmother. He rubs his chest, which means “I am sorry” in his
grandmother’s sign language. The boy carries images of nature to his city home, together
with memories of his grandmother and her hometown. In this moment, emotionally,
Sangwoo has become a part of grandmother’s world and its nature. And in the end, the
dissonance between nature and Sangwoo, which was so shrill at the beginning of the
movie, disappears. It is a huge change. Nature has become part of the boy’s home, or
hometown.

The Child and Nature: the Child and His Grandmother

What does the change in the relationship between nature and the child suggest
about the construction of childhood? The transformation of the relationship between
nature and Sangwoo shows that it changed mainly as the boy’s relationship to his
grandmother changed. The change in the rapport between Sangwoo and his grandmother
has a great effect on the distance or harmony between nature and the child. Therefore,
when exploring the meaning of nature and the child and eventually the construction of
childhood through it, it is necessary to explore the relationship between Sangwoo and his
grandmother. What is that relationship? The Way Home is all about the growth of
friendship between the two. As I remarked briefly in my synopsis, Sangwoo hates his
grandmother and her alien world upon first encounter. His mother, being urgently
preoccupied with finding a job, drops him off abruptly at the home of this grandmother
he has never met. The boy has not previously experienced family warmth and is
emotionally unstable. Grandmother’s house and rural village are simple and old, different
from the city where he has lived so far. Sangwoo feels multiple dissatisfactions with the
new environment, and is mean, rude and aggressive toward his grandmother, who is mute,
stooped with age and poor. Still, the grandmother, who is loving, generous, thoughtful, graceful and wise, consistently cares for the boy with devotion. And gradually her love moves the boy subtly and makes him open his heart. No dramatic event changes their relationship. Rather, a series of small happenings in their everyday life makes the two grow quietly closer.

The growing friendship between the grandmother and Sangwoo affects distance between nature and the child in a number of ways: As the boy connects to his grandmother, is filled with her love and finds a home, his fundamental discontent and instability disappear and he views his life and environment more positively. As a result, his negative attitude toward nature changes as well. This aspect needs no further exploration, as the point is obvious when we follow the plot of the movie. Then, as I note in my close analysis of the key scenes, as the boy makes emotional connections with his grandmother and builds a family with her, he does so within nature, which turns into a meaningful space for him. Furthermore, the grandmother carries a number of meanings which are made clearer by her symbolic relationship to nature. And those in turn affect the child’s relationship to nature and the construction of childhood. This point I explore below.

**Nature, Utopia, Hometown and the Grandmother**

The grandmother is an ideal mother, and utopic nature as her place reinforces this idea. She personifies love, goodness and benevolent motherhood, and can give unconditionally to her grandson. She walks through the pouring rain to find the chicken that her grandson so badly wants to eat. She uses all the money she has earned selling her
few items in the village market, to buy her grandson Chinese noodles and shoes. While Sangwoo eats, she gestures that she is not hungry, which of course is not true. She sips silently from her water cup, just watching him eat. And these are just a few of the many examples of her endless giving. Her love is so unconditional that she seems super-human or pre-human. The good, selfless, idealistic grandmother belongs to nature as an ideal, uncontaminated space. There are many “… Edenic narratives, stories of an initial state of harmony, perfection and innocence in which humans lived as one with other living creatures…” (Spirn 252). In such stories humans are often separated from nature by force and feel nostalgic about the perfect past, thinking that native people live in a “more worthy, morally superior relation to nature” (252). Similarly, there has been “a long tradition of pastoral art and poetry celebrating nature and the countryside as the true home of humanity” (Ginn and Demeritt 300). Also, in Oseam, for example, Nirvana appears in the form of beautiful nature as the place for the mother as goddess and the child as Buddha. And such nature as a timeless, ideal space appears in The Way Home as well. At the end of the movie, for example, as Sangwoo returns to the city, the farewell is sad and the grandmother must be lonely, left to her solitary life. But she walks back into the landscape calmly, naturally and slowly, as if she is perfectly okay, has belonged to that place since antiquity and will remain there forever. Here, nature serves as a symbolic venue for the grandmother who is filled with love and motherhood. The grandmother remains in the sanctuary of nature, ready to love and give to her grandson whenever he wants to return to her Edenic space.

Another context of the grandmother as a benevolent mother is nature in the rural hometown. Her village is represented as a typical agricultural hometown, a context that
reinforces the idea of the benevolent grandmother, as the Korean imagination often returns to the mother in one’s hometown. As mentioned, the hometown of the Korean imagination is still mostly the rural village rather than the city (Y. Park 486). Also, as studied in Oseam, Koreans often connect motherhood and rural hometown in their memories. Sohee Kim’s film critique of The Way Home explains the relationship between the two in Korean culture:

Here [in The Way Home], the grandmother is motherhood or a transformed motherhood. The old mother lives in the country. The Way Home replicates exactly the image of mother and the rural village that is built into us [Koreans…] It is interesting that the young generation, which has not experienced the history of growth [the economic growth and urbanization process] in person, is enthusiastic about The Way Home. I wonder if the image of motherhood and rural village is not reproduced artificially and repeatedly in the collective consciousness of Koreans. [Kim gives examples of other TV shows where similar patterns of mothers in rural hometowns appear.] [In the shows,…] the TV monitor creates a safe distance which lets the viewer take only the nostalgia [from the content]. (131)

As such, the good mother living in the rural hometown is a well-known Korean trope. And Sangwoo’s grandmother, because of both her benevolence and her membership in the warm village, serves as a good example of this. The village is constructed as a warm community inhabited by good, kind, simple and humble people who care genuinely about each other. And not a single character is mean or selfish. For example, during a visit to the weekly market, grandmother hears from the village bus driver that her old friend, who runs a tiny shop, is missing her. As she steps into the tiny old grocery, her friend welcomes her happily and mentions that she has heard about Sangwoo’s visit. This indicates that the village people know and care about each other. When the grandmother asks for two chocolate pies for her grandson, the friend gives her extras, saying, “I’ll give you some more. It’s on me” (The Way Home). And she refuses
to take the grandmother’s money. In return, the grandmother gives the friend some vegetables. After the exchange, as the grandmother is about to leave, her friend says, “Come by again … Come again … Before one of us dies … ” (The Way Home). The short scene constructs the women as warm, human and wise, by focusing on their sincere friendship, their generosity and their attitude of detachment toward the matter of death. This is just one example of the village way of relating to others, but the hometown is constructed as a community of warm, human persons, which is an extension or context of the grandmother’s personality, her humanness and warmth. Thus, the grandmother’s benevolence is stressed through her image as a typical good mother in a rural hometown. And whether the grandmother is the perfect giver in utopic nature or the benevolent mother in the rural hometown, each affects the child’s relationship to nature and the construction of childhood, which I will explore further.

**The Child in The Way Home**

To return to the main question of this study, what does the nature-child pair in The Way Home reveal about the construction of childhood in the movie? The main characteristic of the relationship between nature and the child in The Way Home is that it transforms: the two are distant and discordant but grow close to each other and harmonize. And the nature of the transformation reveals that the changing dynamic between nature and the boy is mostly affected by the changing relationship between the boy and his grandmother. Sangwoo remains emotionally unstable and dissatisfied until he builds a connection to his grandmother, and this time overlaps with the period when nature and the boy are dissonant. During the time when the boy is getting closer to his
grandmother/nature, meanwhile he is becoming more content and, finally, happy. Therefore, the transforming relationship between nature and the boy eventually reflects the significance for the boy of his connection to his grandmother: the boy is incomplete until he connects to his grandmother and is loved and helped by her.

The main construction of childhood in *The Way Home* is that the child is incomplete until the child connects to a motherly figure, i.e., the child needs a mother and/or a home. This child has a number of characteristics: the child can never be satisfied as a mere individual but always needs someone’s support. The child is dependent. Also, the child deserves and needs a mother’s love. Thus, the child is valuable or precious. And the child needs protection. The ideology of motherhood and the idea of protected childhood come into existence together. Children need a mother because they need protection and the two ideologies are in symbiotic relation.

Meanwhile, as said, the mother (grandmother) in *The Way Home* appears as the perfect giver and also as the typical Korean mother of one’s hometown. The two identities add additional layers to the above main construction of the child. As the mother is a perfect giver who gives endlessly and unconditionally, the child paired with such a mother may demand and receive endlessly. Indeed, Sangwoo demands without hesitation, sometimes even rudely or cruelly. Yet, the child is forgiven unconditionally. Not only is the child precious, as noted, but this reaches an extreme degree. The idea that the grandmother is a perfect giver elevates the status of her “taker,” making the child an extraordinarily loved and precious person.

Moreover, the representation of the grandmother as a typical mother in a rural hometown, stresses her benevolence in the first place. And the child paired with her,
similar to the child paired with the perfect giver, is a loved person. Additionally, the child is someone who belongs to the warm village and who may return to it at any time. The child becomes a container of adult nostalgia. Nostalgia means “pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again” (“nostalgia”). Timewise, the object of nostalgia is mostly subjective childhood; thus, in Freudian psychology, nostalgia is “a desire to return to a space as safe and warm as the mother’s womb, or to an imagined place of childhood or community-based life where there is no tension, conflict or disagreement” (Jun Kim 93). Also, the most frequent object of nostalgia is the hometown (91). Hometown as an object of nostalgia, however, is not “subjectivity’s concrete hometown” but rather indicates a “sentiment of being homeless or rootless, an inescapable human condition in modern society” (92). Thus, nostalgia is a longing for the past, often for an ideal childhood or for a community such as the hometown, where all things are good, stable and warm, and to which one can return and be safe.

*The Way Home* arouses nostalgia, as a number of film critics have already mentioned in either critical or praising manner. Kyungmoon Kim, for example, writes that “the home in the movie resembles the mother’s womb, a place to which everybody wants to return, a small but great cottage” (168). By the end of the summer, when the boy returns to the city, the grandmother has charged him with love. The grandmother has healed the boy, who was unstable, lonely and dissatisfied until he met her. Sangwoo will be happy whenever he recalls the village where his loving grandmother waits to welcome him. In this way, the grandmother as the mother who gives and endures, and the warm human community of her village, become a soul home in both Sangwoo’s and the film
audience’s hearts. In other words, a time and space is constructed that easily serves as the object of nostalgia for the film audience. Timewise the movie takes place in the protagonist’s childhood, when he is protected by a loving mother, and this can provide an imagined childhood for the majority of the audience. Spatially, it happens in the hometown, which is constructed as a stable, safe, warm place where community is alive. Thus, the audience may miss their mothers and hometowns, real or imagined, or feel nostalgic, as they follow Sangwoo’s journey. And as mentioned, the idea of the warmhearted mother dwelling in the rural hometown is a widespread image inherited by the collective consciousness of the Korean people. In short, Sangwoo’s grandmother and her village in *The Way Home* arouse nostalgia in many ways, even more so in the Korean context.

As for the child, he or she is not only a container of this adult nostalgia, but has characteristics that help people experience such sentiment more strongly. Older adults who actually were children in rural hometowns may project that childhood onto the child protagonist. But even persons who have never experienced childhood in the kind of rural village that Sangwoo visits, may project their nostalgia onto the child protagonist with ease. Because the child is constructed as a precious, beloved person who may demand love and who needs protection, the audience can escape to the shelter of motherhood and hometown in nature more effectively by projecting themselves onto the child character. The child who deserves such protection and love may enter the sanctuary of motherhood and hometown without guilt or hesitation.

What about boyhood? Boys are constructed as people who may be bad, rude or selfish and who can demand the care of older women. This overlaps with the
unconditionally loved and forgiven child mentioned above, but I am illuminating the idea from the perspective of gender. Sangwoo is a rascal. He is selfish, does bad things and has never learned how to respect or behave properly toward others. For example, he steals his grandmother’s hairpin while she sleeps and tries to sell it to buy batteries for his electric game machine. Also, after his grandmother pays a fortune to buy him new shoes, he does not wear them but instead mocks them for being out of fashion. These are just a few examples of the many rude and bad things the boy does. But Sangwoo is full of fun. The movie frames his bad acts as funny or mischievous, and stresses the boy’s playful attitude and charm while he is behaving rudely. Thus, it is difficult to judge him for his bad acts. In effect, the movie gives Sangwoo permission to be bad, the more so because the grandmother keeps embracing him the way he is, enduring everything he does. Boys in The Way Home are constructed as persons who may be bad and who may take everything their grandmothers give them. Meanwhile, some people point out that The Way Home follows the rules of melodramas centering on the relationship between a romantic woman and a selfish man. For example, Heejin Jung writes that “The Way Home has become so popular because it appeals to the Korean public in the most conservative and familiar way. The movie depends heavily on the gender roles and age roles of the female and male protagonists” (349). In other words, The Way Home appeals to the majority of Koreans because Korean people are familiar with the gender role of aged women who give endlessly and young boys who receive without hesitation. “… the movie would not have been as moving if the protagonists were a grandfather and a grandson, a grandmother and a granddaughter, or a grandfather and a granddaughter”
The idea of self-centered boys who are permitted to demand care relentlessly is an idea familiar to the Korean public.

Does the child have agency? On the surface, the boy does not fear to express how he feels or to act the way he wants. But he never expresses an opinion, and mostly pesters his grandma irresponsibly. The movie lets him speak, but nobody really takes him seriously, nor do his opinions or actions significantly affect his social context. Of course, Sangwoo’s grandmother embraces him just the way he is. But her action is done out of love and forgiveness rather than respect. The village people relate to each other in a traditional manner that is often of Confucian nature. Thus, adults scold young ones and children are supposed to obey adults. The child is lower than the adult. Also, as said, the main construction of the child in the movie is as a person who needs a mother and is incomplete without one. Literally, Sangwoo does need help to survive. He can do few things on his own. The grandmother feeds him and does chores for him. An adult villager helps him find his way home. An older boy helps him escape from the dangerous cow. Of course he cannot make money, so he badgers his grandmother constantly to buy him the things he wants. The child is not capable of many things. For a long time, he is dissatisfied with his life in many ways. But he does not know how to reflect on his problems, nor does he try to solve them in any way. The child lacks agency on many levels.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

How are children and the child constructed in Korean TFY works and family movies, where nature plays a meaningful role in the meaning-making process? This project began with this question and the following sub-questions. How are children and the child constructed in each of the works in the archive? How is nature constructed? What are the ideological relationships between childhood and nature? Do the child protagonists practice agency, and if so, how? What can these constructed narratives tell us about Korean social and educational norms? In the main analysis, I have explored the above questions, focusing individually on *The Tale of Haruk, Gamoongjang Baby, Oseam* and *The Way Home*. Here, I focus on how the four works relate to each other in the exploration of these questions. I first introduce the connections between the four works in detail, point by point, and ultimately explain how each point relates to the research questions.

**Children Need and Long For a Maternal Figure or Parent**

To begin with, the analysis reveals that most children need a maternal figure, parent or caretaker, hope or long for that figure if it is missing, and are incomplete without it. In *Oseam*, Gilson’s longing for his mother is the driving force of his journey, which ultimately leads him to Nirvana. In *The Way Home*, Sangwoo misses and longs for his grandmother once their friendship blossoms. In *The Tale of Haruk*, one of the major reasons that Haruk cries until the tears become rivers is that the child cannot see the parents anymore. Not only do Gilson, Gami, Sangwoo and Haruk miss a maternal figure
or caretaker, but they are all incomplete without one. Gilson remains desperate and emotionally unstable until he meets his mother. Sangwoo stops being a rascal only after he builds a stable connection to his grandmother. Haruk’s sadness only deepens until the child embraces the parents within Haruk’s body, thus transcending sadness. The children’s lack is filled only as they reunite with a maternal figure or caretaker. Thus, in *Oseam, The Tale of Haruk* and *The Way Home*, the child appears as a person who misses and needs such a figure and is incomplete without it.

Motherhood and nature overlap significantly in many parts of these works, influencing their constructions of childhood. First, the benevolent mother or grandmother in *Oseam* or *The Way Home* lives in a rural hometown. The image that Gami has of her mother is as part of romantic, rural nature, whether it is the yard of their humble, sweet home or the golden rice fields. As said above, Sangwoo’s generous grandmother is inseparable from her rural hometown. These good-hearted maternal figures all live in rural hometowns. Second, the maternal figures in *Oseam* and *The Way Home* also inhabit nature as a utopic space. As explored above, an ideal type of nature embraces the superhuman benevolence of Sangwoo’s grandmother. Gilson’s mother, who appears as the Goddess of Mercy, lives in a version of nature called ‘paradise.’ Rural nature is the context of the warm mother, and utopic nature is the setting of the ideal mother who is merciful to a divine degree. In these cases, two types of nature are the main settings of motherhood. The child needs a maternal figure and connects to that person whether she is in a rural hometown or an Edenic utopia, and so the child grows closer to the specific nature that is her setting. Because nature in these cases is mostly positive and beautiful,
the child is mostly constructed as a person who longs for, returns to, or belongs to such nature.

**Parent’s Position Strongly Influences Child’s Identity**

In many parts of these works, the parent’s perspective plays a significant role in constructing the child’s identity. First, because many parents sacrifice themselves for their children and give to them endlessly, the child becomes a beloved being who may demand endlessly. As mentioned, Sangwoo’s grandmother cares for her grandson lovingly and gives him everything she has, unconditionally. Haruk’s parents feed their child with their own bodies. The mother of Gilson and Gami always appears as a warm person in the memory of Gami, and dies while saving Gilson from a fire. In the end, as a goddess, she embraces Gilson with divine love. Because the grandmother, parents and mother in all the above cases are extremely devoted, the children are constructed as beloved, precious beings.

The idea that children are precious and deserve love is a typically Korean trope. Similar ideas exist in other cultures, including Western cultures, for example, where the idea of the valuable child bolstered by ideologies such as Western childhood innocence, has been widespread in the past centuries. Korea’s case, however, has its own history. For example, Korean proverbs reveal the idea that parents love their children unconditionally, as the most precious beings (Kim, Seo and Lim 40). Kim, Seo and Lim provide examples of proverbs, such as “You can put children in your eyes and it will not hurt,” or “One raises children as if they are gold or jade,” which means that children are precious and raised with care (40). Proverbs such as “Children are the flowers of the family” or “There
is nothing to laugh about if there are no children” show the idea that children are an absolute necessity (41). “Because proverbs have been handed down for a long time and because they reflect the understanding of the public” (38), the above examples point to Korean parents’ general perception of their children. In the Chosun dynasty, for example, which had an extremely family-centered culture, parents were regarded as the root of the children and children were valuable because they carried on the family line (Baek and Lee 50). Indeed, the idea that children are precious has been common in Korea throughout the past century. Western missionaries who worked in Korea in the 1920s and 1930s pointed out that one problem with Korean family education in contemporary society was parents’ excessive love and generosity towards their children (Kang 179). Jungeui Kim writes that the investment of today’s parents in their children is exceptional. Husbands and wives even choose to live separately so that one can accompany their children to study abroad (26). The enormous investment of Korean parents in their children is internationally recognized. Of course, the idea that a child is necessary and precious is not the only idea about children that exists in Korean society. The low birth rate has become a social issue in the past decade, for example, and these days more people do not consider children an absolute necessity. Thoughts about children are changing, but the idea that children are precious is still a major trope familiar to many Koreans.

Another identity of the child that is built up by the parents’ perspective in these works, is the idea that children should respect their parents and caretakers and obey them unconditionally. For example, Gamoonjang’s parents determine the girl’s identity until the time she leaves home. As she disagrees with the patriarch’s ideology, her father
punishes her aggressively and expels her. Gamoonjang at home is thus constructed as the child who should respect and obey her parents unconditionally. As she is forced out of the house, she bows courteously to the very parents who have inflicted violence upon her just a moment before. In Oseam, the monk makes Gilson kneel down as he teaches him a lesson about his improper behavior in the temple. In The Way Home, an adult villager hits Sangwoo’s head with his grandmother’s hairpin, scolding him for having tried to sell it. Making a young person kneel down or hitting the child’s head playfully when correcting behavior for educational purposes was not an unusual act until several decades ago. Thus, in the worlds of the four works, there exists a hierarchy between adult caretakers and children where the latter group has a duty to respect and obey the former.

Just as the idea of the precious child is a well-known trope, so is the child who should obey parents or adult caretakers unconditionally. The obedient child is a Confucian idea. As explained, Confucianism was the state ideology of Chosun, the last dynasty of Korea. The Chosun dynasty collapsed at the beginning of the 20th century, but its value system has left traces in contemporary Korean culture. In the Confucian hierarchy, children have lower status than adults and are regarded as immature beings (Baek and Lee 49). People in Chosun (including children) had to follow the morals of Samgangoryun (삼강오륜 ‘the three and seven morals of Confucianism’) (K. Cho 380). Among Samgangoryun, children had to cultivate the virtues of Bujayuchin (부자유친 ‘morals about the close relationship between father and son’) and Jangyuyuseo (장유유서 ‘morals about the subordinate order between younger and older people because of their biological age’) (380). “Parents had to love, protect and teach their children, while children had to respect and obey their parents unconditionally” (Baek and
Lee, 50-51). For example, Hyunggeun Cho quotes an 18th century text that says, “Children should go to bed later than adults and wake up earlier than adults” (qtd. in Kang 170). Moreover, “Children should stand up when adults exit or enter the room, and they must fold their hands together and listen solemnly when an adult teaches a lesson” (170). All of the above suggest that in Confucianism, children are lower than adults and have to obey their elders unconditionally. The idea of “elders first” still exists in many parts of Korean culture. For example, many people in my parents’ generation did not dare to cuddle their children in front of their parents’ generation because such an action would be disrespectful, and the elder generation had priority over the younger. Thus, children who respect and obey their parents are a well-known Korean trope. After all, the parents’ position plays a major role when constructing the child, whether their perspective builds the child as a precious being or as one who should obey parents and other adults. Both ideas, the precious child and the obedient child, are major Korean tropes of childhood.

**Children and Parents Are Bound by Destiny**

Parent and child are not separate entities but are closely bound to each other in many cases. This overlaps with both the idea that the child needs a maternal figure or caretaker, and the idea that parents strongly influence a child’s identity. This points also to a further idea, because the two parties are not just close to each other but are bound to each other, almost inseparably. The bond between child and parent is sometimes so tight that neither can live without the other, or else they live always as a pair. Haruk’s parents decide to stop living because they can find no meaning in life without their child. Gilson in *Oseam* not only misses his mother but thinks about almost nothing but her, and orients
most of his actions towards meeting her. Neither Gamoonjang nor her parents show such extreme devotion, but Gamoonjang does not forget to invite her parents to her celebration of success, despite their having deserted her earlier. Sangwoo and his grandmother never form such strong bonds while they live together, but by the time Sangwoo returns to his city home, the boy leaves his mute and illiterate grandmother a series of postcards with carefully prewritten messages, so she can send them any time she needs to. The notes include “I miss you” or “I am sick,” for example, and show the boy’s promise to take care of his grandmother and to stay connected even from a distance. Children and their parents or grandparents thus often think that they belong to each other or that they share a destiny. Furthermore, they define themselves through their relationship with each other.

The idea that parents and children are bound to each other or that they identify themselves through the existence of the other is a typically Korean thought. According to Kim and Park, people in the West emphasize the independent self who is different from others, and this idea of the self is called ‘independent self-construal’. In the East, by contrast, the individual is more connected with others and a person’s identity is built through relationships, which is called ‘interdependent self-construal’ (3). Thus, according to Kim and Park, Koreans understand themselves more through meaningful relationships with others than by perceiving themselves as independent subjects. For example, Koreans internalize their identity as parent or child through the parent-child relationship (5). Similarly, Hyun writes that the Korean parent-child relationship is different from that in the Western context, where significance lies more in how individuated each person is. Hyun writes that “the frequency of emotional interchange between parent and child, as well as the child’s caring response to the parent’s care, decides a person’s growth in
Korean culture” (104). After all, Korean parents and children identify themselves through their relationship to each other, and their mutual understanding and empathy are important. Thus, the idea that parents and children are bound to each other, which appears in most works in the archive, reflects typical Korean ideas about parent-child relationships.

**Children Cannot Help Themselves**

Many child protagonists are without help during a certain period of the play or movie, but are unable to help themselves. Haruk becomes gigantic, hungry, emotionally uncontrollable and threatening. Gamoonjang faces dangers from patriarchal violence and fierce nature, and loses her basis for survival both socially and biologically. Sangwoo’s helplessness is more subtle, and mainly emotional in character. The boy rebels and nags his grandmother continually due to his discontent. He also experiences physical accidents, getting lost in the village and is almost killed by a cow. Gilson suffers from emotional instability when he can’t connect with his mother. He faces further crisis when the snow isolates him in the hermitage. All the children fall into difficulty, but they do not manage to help themselves. Gamoonjang overcomes her crisis through her own efforts, but that happens as she is moving into adulthood. In the cases of Haruk, Gilson and Sangwoo, there is not much the children can do to help themselves.

How is the children’s helplessness resolved? Children are helped by persons or beings who are not children. The children themselves do not feel responsible for overcoming their helplessness. Sangwoo is helped mainly by older people. He becomes “good” only after his grandmother fills him with love. Other adult villagers help him find
his home, and an older boy helps him escape from the cow. Both Haruk and Gilson get over their helplessness only after they stop being children. Haruk’s helplessness does not disappear until the child transforms into something else, mountains. Gilson’s crisis, too, is overcome only after he enters a different realm of existence, Nirvana. Ultimately, greater nature embraces Haruk, and the Goddess of Mercy helps Gilson. Both nature and the goddess are subjects that Korean people personalize as caretaking entities, though they are not actual human beings. In a sense, Haruk and Gilson are eventually helped by caretakers greater than they. In fact, in the cases of Haruk and Gilson, even human adults cannot do much about their crises. Even so, the responsibility for changing situations lies primarily in the hands of caretakers, rather than children. Haruk’s parents and the monk, Gilson’s temporary caretaker, at least reveal that they are embarrassed by their lack of power to intervene in the children’s crises. Conversely, Haruk and Gilson themselves remain mainly passive victims of disaster, making no attempt to change their situation.

The idea that a child is helpless without the help of a caretaker plays into the thought that children are dependent, which is common to many cultures. Nick Lee writes about the well-accepted notion of the dependent child: “If a child needs assistance, this is understood to be because (she or he is) a dependent kind of person … children’s participation in social life tends to be interpreted through dependence, while adults’ participation in social life tends to be interpreted through independence” (25). Although Lee is writing mainly about the Western context, the idea of the dependent child is equally well-accepted in Korea and many other places, and thus, it is likely that the audience of the works understands the crisis to be more serious and dramatic because it is a “child” who is suffering. People feel that a child should be helped by someone who is
not a child, as a child is in danger. Indeed, in three cases, at the moment when the child’s helplessness disappears, the child reconnects with a caretaker: Sangwoo to his grandmother, Haruk to the parents who continue living within the child and to nature as an extension of the relationship between the two, and Gilson to his mother as goddess. While this overlaps with the idea of children in need of maternal figures or parents who are bound to them, I stress here that the child remains helpless without such a figure.

Threatening nature often plays a significant role in revealing a child’s helplessness. Gamoonjang faces her hardest challenge in wild nature. Gilson’s final crisis happens amidst heavy snow. One of the most serious disasters Sangwoo experiences is the attack of the crazy cow. The pairing of threatening nature and helpless child implies the following: the dominance of threatening nature signifies the absence of home and elements often thought to be part of home, such as a maternal figure or family. The idea that a child “in place” is at home with a family, and protected, is a Western norm accepted in many Westernized societies. Based on such an idea, the absence of a “home” environment means a child is “out of place,” or in danger. Threatening nature is thus a useful device to emphasize the helplessness of the child, with its implication of non-home, being “out of place” and a lack of protection.

**Children Compliant With the Dominant Paradigm Are Close to Beautiful Nature**

In many cases, children compliant with the dominant paradigm are close to a beautiful type of nature. The theme coined as “the nature-friendly child,” the idea that the innocent and playful child is often a good friend of nature, is the most obvious example. I explored this at a deeper level when analyzing *Oseam*, in that Gilson’s friendship with
nature is a sign of his innocence and makes him a desirable child both in terms of Korean secular culture and from a Buddhist perspective. The idea of the nature-friendly child appears in the other movie and plays as well, mainly in scenes where the children comply with the dominant paradigm. Haruk’s parents, for example, please their child with games and songs, implying nature-friendly ideas, while Haruk is still under their protection and not yet discordant with the divine tree’s values. They cuddle their child in a protective home or family setting which frames Haruk’s “in place-ness” in a typically Western way.

In *The Way Home*, the village children, who are innocent and respectful to their elders and thus in harmony with the village’s Confucian ideologies such as “elders first,” sing songs with nature-friendly subject matter. In this case, the child’s “in place-ness” is framed by Confucian ideas, among others. In all the above cases, the child who is compliant with the dominant paradigm is nature-friendly, a friend of beautiful nature. Interestingly, a wide spectrum of ideologies frame the child’s “in place-ness,” which ranges from Buddhism and Confucianism to Western ideas, but all the children who are “in place” in diverse ways are “nature friendly.”

As explained, a child who needs a maternal figure is inclined to get close to nature as an extension of motherhood, whether this is the nature of the rural hometown or a utopic nature, both of which are “beautiful” types of nature. A child who needs a maternal figure is often in a symbiotic relationship with the protected, dependent or precious child, all characteristics of the child “in place.” The child who needs a mother and is thus put “close to a beautiful type of nature” is often “in place.” The idea of a protected beloved childhood in a rural hometown with a benevolent mother dwelling there, as explained, is a typically Korean trope. The idea of a divine figure living in
Utopic nature is not unusual in East Asian religions and cultures. In summary, whether it is the nature-friendly child or the child who returns to mother/nature, the child who is compliant with dominant ideas about childhood such as the innocent child, protected child, precious child or child respectful to elders, the child becomes a pair with a “beautiful” type of nature. Whereas the pairing of beautiful nature with the child who is compliant with dominant ideologies is a meme that exists in multiple places, the Korean pair in the four works is based on the unique socio-historic context of Korea: the child’s hybridity of “nature-friendliness” reflects the diverse cultural interactions within Korean culture, and the child’s proximity to mother/nature is based on Korean or Asian understandings of the mother/divine and nature.

**Children Are Projections of Adult Desire**

Children in the four works do not usually represent children’s real lives but carry meanings which adults impose on childhood for diverse reasons. To give a few examples, children represent the existential qualities of human beings, children are ideal humans, or they embody an imagination of childhood about which adults are nostalgic. As Buckingham writes, “Cultural representations of childhood … frequently say much more about adults’ and children’s fantasy investments in the idea of childhood than they do about the realities of children’s lives…” (69). Haruk is a commentary on human existence. Haruk’s fate reveals that “humans desire as long as they are human.” Gilson represents an ideal human, being an incarnation of innocence and Buddhahood. At the same time, he is a projection of the adult desire for children to remain carefree and nature-friendly. Sangwoo is a projection of adults’ nostalgia, of their longing for a mother,
home, hometown and a childhood where they are loved unconditionally. Not many children therefore represent the reality of children, but rather are carriers of meanings adults impose on them. “The adult gaze directed at children is a projection of adults’ expectations of or ideologies about children” (K. Choi 15).

Ideologies about children that are familiar to the public are used to construct children as symbols of existential human qualities, or of the ideal human. Haruk’s existential helplessness before human desire, the idea that humans cannot avoid desiring as long as they are human, is demonstrated by the helplessness of children who are away from home or hungry. Even though there is no actual continuity between the helplessness of children familiar to the audience, and the existential helplessness of human beings that Haruk ultimately represents, the play relates the two qualities based on the seeming similarity between the two. Likewise, Gilson represents the ideal, pure and innocent human who qualifies to enter Nirvana. Oseam, however, stresses the idea of a nature-friendly, innately innocent child who displays these characteristics. People therefore use well-known ideologies about children, such as their helplessness or nature-friendliness, to reinforce the symbolic meanings the children are seen to carry, based on an apparent but in fact ambiguous connection between the ideologies and symbolic meanings.

**Children Transcending the Limits of Time and Space**

Some children in the archives transcend the limits of human time and space. After reaching the saddest point of his life, Haruk is transformed into mountain ranges, through which the child embraces the whole world including the parents. Haruk’s life is prolonged as the child melts into nature, and expands in terms of both time and space.
The distinctions between Haruk, the parents and the world, which were the cause of the child’s pain, dissolve. Gilson, having reached the lowest moment in his life, crosses the boundary of life and death to enter Nirvana. In a utopian realm beyond reality, his mother as the goddess embraces him. The boundary between Gilson and his mother, which has caused his tragic fate, disappears. Thus, even though the nature of transcendence for Haruk and Gilson differs, there is a significant overlap between the two. In each case, it happens after the child protagonist has been pushed to the extreme limit. After each transformation, the separation between child and parent disappears, ending the child’s major suffering. Both transcendences resituate the child in an afterlife, on an unrealistic or super-realistic plane. Both children become something larger than they used to be. Haruk turns into nature and Gilson into a spiritual entity. Finally, the children are symbols of existential or ideal human conditions: the human who desires, or the human who resembles Buddha. Thus, some children transcend time and space and enter a conflict-free realm after extreme suffering; and they are symbols of the fundamental human condition.

In the meantime, as the children transcend their time and space, they do so mostly within nature. Haruk’s tears become rivers and Haruk’s body becomes mountains. Gilson is deep in the mountains when he enters Nirvana, which appears in the form of utopian nature. What does it mean that the context of children’s transcendence is mostly nature, mountains or nature as paradise? Because Haruk and Gilson, as said, are symbols of human beings in general, their relationship with nature probably provides clues to ideas about the overall human relationship to nature. Firstly, both return to nature at journey’s end and are consequently well off, especially because they find their parents or mother
there: nature becomes their home. The children’s relationships to nature imply that humans return to nature and belong to it. Such an idea is related to an Eastern conception that I mentioned earlier, “Eastern monistic views which do not differentiate nature from human beings” (Y. Park 486), which differs from “Western dualistic epistemology which prioritizes humanity over nature” (486). Children becoming transcendent in nature thus reveal ideas about children/humans who belong to nature.

Second, in both cases nature is a realm beyond reality: the mountains/Haruk, which embrace the whole world, are a context of magical reality and Gilson’s Nirvana shows nature as paradise. Because both are spaces beyond reality where the children’s major conflicts disappear, Haruk’s and Gilson’s relationships to such spaces reveal that humans do well in an ideal realm beyond reality. On the other hand, they are not happy before they cross the boundary of reality. Haruk desires, and both Haruk and Gilson long for beloved persons with whom they cannot connect as long as they live. Both these actions cause pain in some way. The relationship between transcendent children and nature as a place beyond reality thus implies the idea that children/humans suffer as long as they live.

Agency

What about agency? First, not many of these child protagonists have voice. Among the few thoughts the children make public, not many influence their reality. Gamoonjang is punished for speaking out and disagreeing with her father. Haruk raises questions about who Haruk is and what Haruk wants, but only in an “aside.” No one in Haruk’s reality hears this; only the audience is able to know Haruk’s thoughts. Although
Haruk’s parents reluctantly accept their child’s request for rice, that child becomes “out of place” as a result. Gilson has a strong motivation to find his mother. Most people sympathize with him, but not many people respect his position seriously. Nobody lets the boy know that his mother is dead, which would help him move forward. Sangwoo has certain preferences, for specific entertainment or food, for example, but he expresses his tastes mainly by pestering irresponsibly, and never gives an “opinion” by speaking out seriously. Thus, although these children are at times loved and cuddled, they are not really listened to or taken seriously. Second, many children rarely think or make conscious choices when acting, let alone take responsibility for their actions. Sangwoo and Gilson both play around, and it is mostly other people who run after them and clean up. Third, as mentioned, most children are dependent and incomplete without the help of a caretaker. Fourth, a hierarchy between adults and children exists in most of the worlds portrayed in this archive. As said, most of the children are scolded by adults who think they need a lesson. Finally, most of the children do not represent reality for real children, but are projections of adult desires. Based on the above analysis, not many children are independent, not many are able to intervene in their social context by making conscious choices and taking responsibility for their actions, and many represent not the real lives of children but rather adult desires. Thus, most of the children in the four works have little agency.

Gender

What about gender in the archives? The girl in Gamoonjang Baby is a person who is expected to despise her femininity and hide her body, one who needs to be controlled,
one who is punished if she does not agree with the reigning ideologies about girlhood, one who is powerless in front of her parents and their violence, one who is less valuable than a son. In both *Gamoonjang Baby* and *Oseam*, girls are persons who are potential brides or mothers and thus need to fulfill “female duties.” In *Gamoonjang Baby*, because the daughter’s goal is to get married, her main job is to prepare to be a good bride. The girl belongs to the private domain of the home. Gilson’s sister Gami spends most of her time doing domestic labor such as laundry and sewing, while caring for Gilson like a little mother. Conversely, the boys Gilson and Sangwoo have much more freedom and perform more significant roles. Sangwoo is allowed to be “bad,” rude and selfish, and to demand care from his grandmother, but is loved and forgiven no matter what he does. Gilson is permitted to indulge in play within nature, and given the freedom to travel to a farway hermitage to study. Most importantly, if *Oseam* gives high praise to innocence and the attainment of Buddhahood as the ideal condition of humans, Gilson is the incarnation of this ideology. In terms of attitude, Gilson and Sangwoo are louder and more active, whereas Gami is more docile, passive, mild-mannered, quiet and “feminine.” Her blindness further restricts her actions and is linked subtly with her femininity. (Meanwhile, Sangwoo’s female partner, the grandmother, is mute. Although she is not a child protagonist, I wonder if this work is stressing the relative power of the male protagonist, by pairing and contrasting him with this female character with a disability.) Unlike Gami, Gamoonjang is outspoken, but this attitude is not accepted in her environment. In summary, all four works show different constructions for boys and girls, and those constructions have their roots in discriminatory ideologies.
Conclusion

Let me return to the very first question of this study: “How are children and the child constructed in Korean TYA works and family movies where nature plays a meaningful role in the meaning-making process?” What does the above analysis reveal about the main question and sub-questions of this study? To start with, how are children and the “child” constructed in the various works of the archive? The analysis reveals the following. First, children miss and need a maternal figure or caretaker. Second, the parent’s viewpoint heavily influences the child's identity. Examples of such constructions are children who are precious or children who are lower than adults. Third, children and parents are bound by destiny and identify themselves through their relationship with each other. Fourth, children cannot help themselves but need the help of a caretaker. Fifth, children often do not represent children’s lived reality but are projections of adult desires: children represent existential qualities of human beings, children are symbols of ideal humans, or children are carriers of adult imagination or nostalgia about childhood, for example. Examples of ideas about human beings that are carried by the child as a symbol of human existence are that: 1) humans desire as long as they are human; 2) humans can and should be “innocent” or “good,” (such as Buddha, for example); 3) humans are nostalgic about a childhood where they are carefree and forgiven; 4) humans long for protection and love.

How is nature constructed in the archives, and what are the ideological relationships between childhood and nature? First, nature and motherhood overlap significantly in many cases, and the overlap in turn influences the construction of childhood. The types of nature that overlap with motherhood are mostly nature in a warm
rural hometown or nature as a utopian paradise. Since most children need a maternal figure, they are inclined to be close to nature as hometown or utopia, the settings of motherhood. Secondly, children who are “in place,” and do not conflict with the dominant paradigm, are mostly close to a beautiful type of nature. An example, in addition to the above idea of children returning to their mother/nature, is the idea of the nature-friendly child. Often the innocent, protected, carefree child is the best friend of beautiful nature. Thirdly, the helpless child is often paired with threatening nature. Since threatening nature often signifies the absence of home, the child so threatened is automatically made helpless by being stripped of the protection provided by home. Thus, the pairing of helpless child with threatening nature is related to the Western norm of the child “in place” at home. Finally, some children transcend their time and place, and they do this mostly in nature. As these children generally represent existential human qualities, their return to nature and their happiness after entering utopian nature reveal ideas about general human identity, which is drawn from human positions toward nature: 1) humans return to nature and belong to it, and 2) humans are in a good situation after entering a realm beyond reality; humans suffer while living in reality, because they desire, and because they separate from people they love.

Do the child protagonists practice agency, and if so, how? Not many children have agency in this archive. Not many of the child protagonists have voice, are heard, are taken seriously or exert influence on their reality. Not many take considerate actions or assume responsibility for what they do. Most are dependent and incomplete without support from a caretaker. Additionally, the children are lesser than adults in most of these works. Clearly, the archives show little or no child agency.
What can these constructed narratives tell us about Korean social and educational norms? Of the constructions of children in the archive, many reflect Korean social norms about children, some of which I became familiar with while surveying theories on Korean children during the early stage of this study, and others that I discovered while analyzing the movies and plays. Examples of ideologies about children in the archive, which are also Korean social or educational norms, are: the child who needs a mother and is deficient without one; the mother who lives in the rural hometown and the child who misses such mother/nature; the thought that innocent, carefree children are friends of beautiful nature (the ideology of the nature-friendly child); the child/human who returns to or belongs to nature; the precious child whom the parents care for devotedly; the idea that parents and children are bound to each other and identify themselves through each other’s existence; the thought that children are lesser than adults; the idea of the dependent child who needs a caretaker; and the idea that the child “in place” is at home (and/or “out of place” in threatening nature).

After all, constructions of childhood in Korean child narratives are products of the socio-historical context of Korea. Korean childhood is a hybrid cultural assemblage and elements from different historical periods have left their imprint on the current construction. Traditional notions have not changed easily, persisting and mingling with more recent thoughts, altogether becoming part of the Korean childhood. For example, the idea that children are symbols of fundamental human conditions such as goodness, comes from Buddhist or Cheondoist philosophies, among other thought traditions. The idea that children are lesser than adults is a remnant of the earlier Confucian culture, which retains a significant hold over Korean culture today. Major tropes have persisted,
while evolving over the past century, incorporating diverse influences from Korean history. The spectrum of the “valuable child,” for example, includes the Confucian idea that descendants are valuable, the influence of Western child-centered culture, and today’s hyper-investment by parents in children as “successors of the glory of the family” (Kang 187). Finally, this study reveals that Korean childhood is a complex product of the unique cultural context of Korea.

While Korean childhood is unique, there is a significant overlap between it and childhood in other cultures. Like many other childhoods, Korean childhood, as represented in the four works, is a projection of adult desires, and the study of the archives has led to an analysis of adult ideologies. Like many other cultural contexts, children in the works do not have much agency. Like childhoods in many other countries, Korean childhood is a site where contradictory ideas about children collide. Children in these works, for example, possess ideal human qualities such as innocence, goodness, and closeness to the divine, and inhabit timeless places such as the past loaded with nostalgia, or a utopia beyond time. Children are not free from burdens and constraints, however, as they are dependent, powerless and lesser than adults. As such, Korean childhood, as unique as it is, shares a good number of characteristics with childhood in other cultures.

This study reinforces the idea that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary and productive in the study of TFY and childhood. One of the most interesting discoveries I made through this study was of norms for Korean childhood that I had never come across while studying major theories/texts on childhood. I had not expected that my focus on a handful of artistic works would lead me to such insights into major Korean tropes. While it is well accepted that the perspective of childhood studies is necessary to better
understand TFY, the findings of this study suggest that the study of Korean TFY works
adds significantly to our knowledge of Korean childhood. Studies of Korean childhood
and research on Korean TFA thus inform each other, and the marriage between childhood
studies and TFY benefits both areas. The study also reveals that childhood is a construct
which one cannot understand fully without understanding the history, culture or religion
and other layers of the cultural context producing it. Discussion of nature and childhood
in Korea, for example, often prompts reflections on fundamental human conditions which
require a deeper knowledge of Korea’s philosophical traditions. An interdisciplinary
approach crossing fields such as philosophy, religion and Korean studies, among others,
is thus necessary for deepening and expanding the current findings of my analysis.

This study also shows that a cross cultural approach is efficient when exploring
the specificity of Korean or other childhoods. The framework of this study is cross-
cultural: I explore Korean childhood from a Western childhood studies perspective and
maintain a distance from my own culture by writing for a Western audience in English.
The potential readership made me aware that things with which I am familiar may be new
to my readers, and that I need to consider the non-Korean perspective as much as possible.
Such alienation from my own culture led me to the realization that it is not only
childhood and nature that are constructs but that “Koreanness” is also a construct.
Certainly, the question “What is Korean?” can be explored effectively by illuminating the
subject cross-culturally, from a position between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This
study divides cultures more or less into Western and Eastern due to its particular
framework, and thus situates Korean childhood roughly in the Eastern realm. To
crystallize the specificity of Korean childhood more meticulously, a cross cultural
approach situating Korean childhood within the grid of adjacent East Asian cultures such as Japanese or Chinese will be useful.
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