Confucian Ideology as Expressed in the Story of Kurondondon Shinsonbi (The Marrying-In Snake)

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In the Choson period (a period of 500 years), South Korea was controlled by Confucian ideology. As a result, meaningless (虛無孟浪) imaginary tales were eliminated by the intelligentsia. In short, a large number of authentic ancient legends was suppressed by Confucian ideology and disappeared. Confucianism pursued that which was factual or realistic. In Confucianism, jitsu-kyuze was the final objective, considering the “pursuit of the factual truth” to be the ideal.

First, if we focus upon the process of how folktales are handed down, we can recognize two patterns. One is a pattern by which a tale is handed down as it is, with as few changes in expression as possible. The other is a pattern by which expressions in a tale are changed, so it is actually possible to put these on record. In this paper I sought to discover the extent of the influence of Confucian ideology on folktales.

I selected Sonbi, the Snake-Bridegroom (蛇新郎甲士人), recorded by Son Jin-Tae in 1927, as a folktale that was influenced by Confucian ideology, as well as Kurondondon Shinsonbi, which I recorded myself, as a folktale that was not influenced by Confucianism.

1) The term “Sonbi,” which was regularly used in the Choson period, refers to scholars in the Shih Ta-fu class. They were scholars who had not yet become bureaucrats or who did not want to become bureaucrats. In this ancient legend, the snake, who was the protagonist, was most likely called “Sonbi” to indicate those in the Yangban class (nobility) who had fallen from Yangban society.

2) In ancient legends, the term chojake was generally used, while in Confucian-influenced legends, the term saishoke was used. In today’s language, saisho refers to ministers, or the upper class.

3) In ancient legends, expressions such as “hide it in the chimney and put a lid on it” were appropriate. In poor households, it was common to make chimneys short and put lids on top of them to prevent drafts from coming in the house. However, in Confucian legends, expressions such as “hidden in the bedroom” are found.

4) In general, among commoners, the housewife in the family was responsible for the preparations and decision-making for a wedding. In Yangban society, in contrast, a male member of a family (the master)
made the decisions.

5) In ancient legends, the expression that a person was going to the Dragon’s Palace can be found frequently. In Confucianism, however, this did not conform to the doctrine of pursuing factual truth, so Confucian-influenced legends did not use such expressions and instead used expressions about people forsaking the world and starting on a wandering journey.

If we consider the elements described above, not only about this particular ancient legend, but also about other ancient legends, we can say that many ancient legends have been influenced by Confucianism and altered so as to conform to Confucian ideology.