

The Role of Folktales Today

by Dr Hae-ri Kim¹

Folktales have been shared in every society to entertain, educate, and preserve culture. As emphasized in UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), folktales play an invaluable role, along with other cultural traditions, in bringing people closer together and "ensuring exchange and understanding among them." As globalization and social transformation demand renewed dialogue among communities, educators and artists are more motivated to protect and promote oral traditions and related cultural heritage.

Telling Tales from Southeast Asia and Korea presents some of the narratives long held by the people in this region, and reflects their culture, values, and beliefs. The book is envisioned to revive stories and ways of telling them not only in schools but also in everyday life as a tool for communication, learning, and entertainment in a rapidly changing world.

Today's children may think of folktales as old-fashioned or even irrelevant. However, the influence of folktales is alive and well even today. Despite the advent of contemporary literature, folktales are unique and different from other types of literary fiction in many ways, some of which are enumerated below.

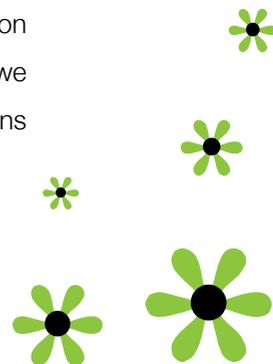
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First, folktales transcend the generations of people who passed on these stories. The original tales were transmitted orally from storyteller to storyteller and were eventually written down. Folktales continue to evolve, and are shaped according to the conditions of the times. Therefore, folktales never cease to be relevant even today and will remain so in the future. Moreover, the indigenous knowledge and wisdom found in the folktales keep us connected to our traditions and indeed help shape our culture.

Second, folktales take place long ago in a faraway place. Talking animals, giants and fairies, prince and princesses, as well as peasants and ordinary folks are featured characters that give life to stories. Through folktales, children are given a glimpse into a world where fantasy and reality meet.

Third, folktales have obvious and recurrent themes. Goodness is always rewarded, heroes and heroines live happily ever after, while villains are suitably punished. Throughout the generations, the story may change, but its core message remains the same. We, teachers and parents, do not need to try to teach values explicitly. Instead, we just tell tales, thus maintaining folktales as a tool to educate children on how to live with integrity and peacefully with others.

Fourth, folktales reflect society's attempt to give form and shape to its hopes and fears, and answers to its questions. Folktales provide order to seemingly random experiences, as well as express the culture's belief system. Today, many of these old tales are regarded as flights of fancy, but they live on because they capture our sense of wonder and aspirations. Moreover, we recognize their visions which are often more powerful than the explanations science provides.





Fifth, folktales allow children to experience adventures they cannot attain in real life. For example, when heroes from folktales are facing monsters, giants, dragons, and other evil forces, the stories impart courage and wisdom in overcoming problems. Folktales may sometimes frighten children, but at the same time the stories excite and then comfort them.

Finally, the language of folktales is an important part of children's literary heritage. Because of the oral tradition, the language in a folktale is musical, rhythmic and melodic. In addition, the characters' direct dialogue punctuated with quick action excites readers' and listeners' interest. By listening to and reading these tales, children acquire language. Moreover, folktales provide them with writing models.

Recognizing many contributions of folktales in education, we collected 27 folktales for children from the 11 countries in Southeast Asia and Korea. This collection of folktales includes fairy tales, tall tales, trickster tales, myths, and legends. Some of these tales will make you think, some of them will make you laugh, some will make you wonder, and some will open the readers to new discoveries.

Despite these stories' age, they still carry important messages to learners today. Frequently emphasized values for global citizenship, such as respect for diversity, human rights, and sustainable development, which stories touch on, still remain to be discovered and translated into daily life. Folktales also embody the popular attitudes, beliefs, customs, traditions, and values of the society where the stories originated, thus, enriching children's consciousness and appreciation of the cultures of other people. It is our hope that teachers can help children in developing such awareness and competency through these folktales from Southeast Asia and Korea.