

1. Introduction

The confidence man is an old figure in human history. He is a subset of the trickster in that he uses deception to get the better of his victims, but while the trickster may also use guile and artifice to bring the mighty down a notch, escape from a threatening situation, or even simply play a prank, the con man focuses his efforts on lightening the wallets of his marks. But unlike the thief, who uses slight-of-hand and stealth to earn his wages, or the robber, who takes them by force, the con man doesn't actually steal money from his victims. Instead, by gaining their confidence (thus the term), he convinces them to hand over their wealth of their own free will.

Of Korea's many trickster figures, Kim Seondal is the purest embodiment of the con man.¹ Some background on the figure, though, is in order before continuing. To start with, "seondal" is not the character's name, but his title. The title literally means "(having) first mastered" and was generally given to those who had passed the military service examination (mugwa) but had yet to be offered a government position. Although some of the folktales in which he appears have Kim Seondal fooling the examiners to pass the examination (and sometimes even be rewarded with a government position), the appellation here is almost certainly a courtesy title. His full name is never given in the folktales, although he is often referred to by his nickname, Bongi, or Phoenix.² He received this nickname when he tricked a merchant into selling him a "phoenix" that was actually a common chicken. This tale was seen as so characteristic of Kim Seondal that people began to refer to him as "Bongi Kim Seondal," and the early 20th century novelized version of the Kim Seondal folktales found in *Sindangongan*, which is the only source to give Kim Seondal an actual name (Kim Inhong), makes reference to the phoenix in the title. Korean researchers even use the term to designate a particular type of folktale figure, the "Bongi-type figure."³ However, since it is more common in folklore to see the character referred to as "Kim Seondal" without "Bongi" than it is to see him referred to as "Kim Bongi" without the courtesy title, he will be referred to simply as "Kim Seondal" throughout this paper.

Kim Seondal is thought to have been an historical figure, but little is known of him outside of what information can be gleaned from folktales and other fictional sources. It is estimated that he lived sometime during the mid to late 19th century, at the end of the Joseon period in Korean history (Cho H. U., 1987: 91), and many of the folktales in which he appears indicate that he hails from Pyeongyang (Pyongyang). Unlike many other trickster figures, he has a certain amount of personal wealth and uses this wealth to pull off his cons (Cho D. I., 1979: 259). In the novel *Sindangongan* he is said to be the son of a merchant, which shows that he was raised in the world of urban commerce (Choe W. S., 1983: 336-337). This background makes him markedly different from other Korean trickster figures in certain aspects: namely that, while tricksters like Jeong Manseo and Bang Hakjung will generally take action first and figure out how to deal with the consequences later, Kim Seondal is a "careful and deliberate" planner (Kim H. S., 1990: 133). No matter who the historical Kim Seondal may have been, the fictional character that has been handed down to us today in folklore and other tales has all the makings of the ideal con man.

In this paper we will examine the treatment of Kim Seondal in four different media: oral tales transcribed primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, a Hangul (vernacular Korean) collection of tales published sometime during the Japanese colonial period, called *Eongteorideul*, a mostly hanmun (classical Chinese) novelization that was serialized in a newspaper in 1906, called *Sindangongan*, and finally a collection of

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- 1 This paper is based on research conducted in my doctoral dissertation, a study of three Korean trickster figures: *Hangukseolhwaee natanan teurikseuteo yeongu – banghakjung · jeongmanseo · kimseondal jungsimeuro (A Study on Tricksters in Korean Folktales: Bang Hakjung, Jeong Manseo, and Kim Seondal)*.
 - 2 The phoenix referred to here is the Chinese or East Asian phoenix, not the bird of Western mythology that is said to self-immolate and then be reborn from the ashes. The East Asian phoenix is often said to be a combination of various parts from different animals, although there is no single definitive description; for the purposes of the Kim Seondal tales, it is enough to say that the phoenix, if it were to exist, would be priceless.
 - 3 See Choe W. S. (1983), to name just one example.

Kim Seondal tales published in North Korea from 2002 to 2004. Although all of these sources deal with the same character and the same tales, they each paint a different picture of Kim Seondal. It is hoped that this examination of a wide variety of sources will not only be a good introduction to the character of Kim Seondal, but that it will also illustrate his social significance and show how the con man may have different faces depending on the motives of those telling his tales.

2. If you believe that, I've got a river to sell you: Kim Seondal in oral tales

The stories of Kim Seondal may have originated in his hometown of Pyeongyang, but they have since spread to every corner of the Korean peninsula. The episodes in which he appears are numerous, and at times the distinction between different fictional characters is blurred when he appears as the protagonist in tales that generally feature a different trickster figure, such as Bang Hakjung and Jeong Manseo, and vice versa. But there are quite a few stories in which he traditionally features as the protagonist, and here we will be examining a handful of the representative tales.⁴

The most popular Kim Seondal tale, one that seems to best capture the essence of the character, is the selling of the Daedong River in Pyeongyang. In the two collections of tales we will be examining here, it is told eleven times⁵, more than any other Kim Seondal tale told. The story begins with Kim Seondal looking out over the Daedong River and devising a clever plan to make a fortune. He first waits by the river and pulls people aside as they come down to the banks to draw water. To each of them he gives a small sum of money and says, "Tomorrow I will come back and ask for the water fee, and then you'll give me this money back." The next day they do as he asks and a wealthy passerby witnesses the scene. His curiosity piqued, he asks Kim Seondal, "Why are all these people giving you money?" Kim Seondal nonchalantly replies, "It's the water fee. I own this river, you see." The mark, of course, takes the bait, and without Kim Seondal having to utter another word, he offers to buy the rights to the river for a large sum of money. Kim Seondal agrees and goes on his way, and his victim doesn't realize that he has been fooled until he goes out to the river the next day to receive the "water fee."

It is easy to see why this story is so popular: it is a classic long con (albeit generally presented in abbreviated form) that turns the tables on the rich and mighty. American listeners will probably think of the famous (and true) con of selling the Brooklyn Bridge to unsuspecting outsiders, and indeed the same principles are at work here. Kim Seondal provides a modicum of evidence for his claims and then allows greed to do the rest. The story is important in understanding the character of Kim Seondal, as it tells us a few key details about him: he is a schemer who thinks ahead, he has money and patience to invest in his schemes, and he targets the wealthy. As noted above, this sets him apart from other Korean tricksters like Bang Hakjung and Jeong Manseo, who are lower in social status and generally depicted as being poor and impulsive. And, like other tricksters, he has a good understanding of what makes people tick. Kim Seongal uses this understanding to pull off this and many other cons.

As is the case with all orally-transmitted tales, there are differences in the different versions. There is one departure from the basic structure of the tale: in one version, Kim Seondal does not sell the rights to the water, he instead fools his mark into thinking that the frozen, snow-covered river is a vast rice paddy that he needs to sell. The rest of the stories, however, follow the same basic plot of handing out money first, receiving it back the next day, and then selling the water rights to a rich passerby. Some versions are more detailed than others, but the one element of the story that stands out is the identity of the mark. In two early versions of the story (one from the 1930s and the 1940s), the mark is simply "a person" or "a rich person."

4 The orally-transmitted tales discussed here have been drawn from two collections, the 82 volumes of *Hangukgubimunhakdaegye* (*A Compendium of Korean Oral Literature*), recorded during the late 1970s and the 1980s, and the 12 volumes of *Hangukgyeonseolhwa* (*Korean Orally-Transmitted Tales*), drawn primarily from sources recorded during the late Japanese colonial period but supplemented with tales recorded in the 1970s. In citations, the former collection will be referred to as *Compendium*, while the latter will be referred to as *Tales*, with volume and page numbers following.

These two collections contain 73 tales featuring Kim Seondal, although the "tale" unit is somewhat arbitrary—when organizing the tales from audio recordings, some researchers divided distinct but connected episodes into separate tales while other researchers included numerous episodes in a single "tale." A more accurate means of measurement would be to count the individual episodes: there are 117 tellings of 62 unique episodes.

5 *Tales* 1: 266-267, 3: 192, 3: 193; *Compendium* 1-2: 463-464, 1-7: 748-749, 1-9: 601-607, 2-5: 827-831, 2-7: 198-199, 3-1: 213-217, 5-6: 76-79, 7-10: 54-55.

Of the remaining, later versions (from the 1970s and 1980s), varying levels of detail are given. Three versions simply have “a person,” “a rich man,” and “a merchant,” but the remaining six versions indicate where the mark comes from. Half of the stories have the mark as a rich man or wealthy merchant from Seoul, two introduce a wealthy merchant from China, and one has “a greedy old man from the area.” The versions that introduce the wealthy Chinese merchant are particularly interesting in that they introduce an element of nationalism to the tale: the Chinese merchant floods the markets of Pyongyang with goods and siphons off all the wealth into his own coffers, and Kim Seondal steps forward to save the day. While the other versions are cathartic tales of the well-to-do getting their comeuppance, these two versions have a ring of Kim Seondal as almost a Robin Hood-style national hero. We will come back to this idea later, in particular when dealing with the collection of tales from North Korea.

In addition to being a meticulous planner, Kim Seondal also has the ability to think on his feet. Another story tells of how Kim Seondal manages not only to get rid of some spoiled food, but to make a profit from it as well.⁶ It is customary in Korea to cook and eat red bean porridge on the winter solstice, and this tale has Kim Seondal cooking up a very large amount of red bean porridge and then being unable to eat it all before it goes sour. Even though he doesn't stand to lose anything by throwing out the food—in three of the four versions in our sources he gets the ingredients for the porridge from someone else, having none of his own, and in the fourth tale the food isn't even his, but a porridge seller's—he decides that he is going to sell the porridge. So he goes to the market and advertises it as “vinegared red bean porridge” and prices it higher than regular red bean porridge. The higher price piques the curiosity of the market-goers, but they are still not convinced, as no one has ever heard of putting vinegar in red bean porridge. Kim Seondal has their attention, though, and he seals the deal with a carefully calculated comment: “Well, of course, country folk like yourself wouldn't know anything about vinegared red bean porridge.” Fearing that they will be seen as country bumpkins, his customers pay extra for the spoiled food and then eat it lest they lose face.

Again there are differences between the different version of the tale, most notably the single version that has Kim Seondal coming to the rescue of a local merchant. As with the selling of the Daedong River, we can see a glimpse of Kim Seondal here as a folk hero, but in the other three versions the porridge and the profits are his own. There are also slight variations in the way he impugns his prospective customers, calling them “country folk” or “country gentlemen” in two versions and using less specific insults (“someone like you,” for example) in the other two versions. But the basic premise is the same: he first arouses curiosity by pricing the spoiled food higher, and then he guarantees the sale by implying that the market-goers are not sophisticated if they don't buy his product. Kim Seondal's insight into human psychology is so keen that one might wonder if advertisers today haven't take a page from his book.

It is not just the rich and the vain that find themselves the victim's of Kim Seondal's schemes, though. One popular tale relates how Kim Seondal extorts money from a group of blind men. In keeping with Confucian principles, it was customary in Korea to hold feasts for the old and infirm, or those who could otherwise not take sufficient care of themselves. Kim Seondal, however, takes this feast for the blind and turns it on its head. First he procures a large amount of broken crockery. Then he scrounges together scraps of meat, dregs from brewing alcohol, and other mostly worthless by-products. He puts the broken crockery beneath the floor of a rickety old raised platform, invites the neighborhood blind men to his house, seats them on the raised platform and begins to boils the dregs and scraps of meat. Once they smell the food, the blind men grow excited, thinking that Kim Seondal is preparing a feast for them. But Kim Seondal has something else in mind. In two of the versions collected he covers a stick with feces and holds it under the noses of the blind men, leading them to believe that one of their number has farted. In the remaining version he simply pokes a few of the blind men. Whichever method is used, the result is the same: the blind men begin to argue and fight, and the platform comes crashing down on top of the broken crockery. Kim Seondal feigns horror: “What have you done? I borrowed all those pots and dishes to hold this feast for you, and now I am ruined!” The blind men are mortified and give Kim Seondal all the money they have to pay for the crockery.

The blind men in this tale do not necessarily deserve the treatment that they get. Kim Seondal simply sees them as easy marks and takes full advantage of their weakness, namely that they are blind. Every element of this con would be easily detected by a sighted individual, but they are the ideal ruse to deceive those who must rely on senses other than sight. The boiled dregs and scraps play to the sense of smell, and the sound of the broken crockery being shattered relies on the sense of hearing. The feces on the stick is also

6 *Tales* 3: 184-185; *Compendium* 1-3: 415-417, 1-7: 744-745, 3-1: 213-217.

a powerful olfactory trigger, and the alternate version of the poke in the side relies on the sense of touch. As when he sells the Daedong River, Kim Seondal provides just enough evidence to earn the trust and confidence of the blind men, and that trust is important here because the men, though they cannot see, know exactly who Kim Seondal is and what he is capable of, and it is likely that they would not have stayed had they not been convinced of his good intentions.

This is not the only tale in which Kim Seondal preys on innocent victims. Although our two sources only record two versions of this next tale⁷, it is noteworthy in that it makes an appearance in both *Eongteorideul* and *Sindangongan* as well. The tale begins when Kim Seondal sees a Buddhist monk who has earned a large amount of money or rice as alms. He befriends the unsuspecting monk and invites him out the next day to watch the procession of some important government official (in one version it is the provincial governor, in the other version it is the county magistrate). He warns the monk that the procession is a dangerous place: one false move and he could find himself on the wrong end of the law. So he tells the monk to follow him and do exactly as he says. The next day, at the procession, Kim Seondal crosses the street just before the procession arrives. Then, as the procession nears, he signals for the monk to follow him across. The monk dutifully obeys, rushing out into the street right in front of the official. Guards quickly seize the monk, and Kim Seondal appears to save the day. “You can’t very well take a prisoner with you on the procession, can you? Let me hold this monk at my house, and you can come collect him tomorrow.” The guards agree, and after the procession passes Kim Seondal berates the monk for acting so foolishly. When the monk says, “But you signaled for me to cross the street!” Kim Seondal claims that he was only scratching his ear. When the two arrive back at Kim Seondal’s house, Kim Seondal tells the monk to flee or his life will be in jeopardy. The monk does so, leaving his alms behind. (In one version of the tale, Kim Seondal even reminds him about the rucksack containing the alms, but the monk claims that it will be too heavy and leaves it.) Thus Kim Seondal has achieved his original goal—stealing the monk’s alms—but he still has the guards to contend with the next day. So he finds another innocent monk and brings him home (in one version simply a monk passing by, and in the other version the chief monk of a nearby temple), and stalls until the guards arrive to drag away the innocent monk.

This is actually a rather shocking tale: Kim Seondal robs one monk of his sacred alms and sends another to an undeserved punishment—in one version, in fact, the monk is put to death—all for the sake of some money or rice. It shows just what a scoundrel he really is, and how far he is willing to go when conning his marks. But this tale type did not begin with Kim Seondal; a previous version of the tale, which is included in a collection of short tales thought to have been published in 1830, attributes this episode to a character called Baek Myeongseon (elsewhere known as Baek Munseon). It is identical to the Kim Seondal version with one important exception: Baek Myeongseon sees the monk at the procession, and his relationship with the monk begins only after the monk is caught by the guard and Baek Myeongseon offers to hold the monk at his home. In other words, Baek Myeongseon simply takes advantage of a golden opportunity that presents itself, while Kim Seondal makes his own luck. It is clear from this that both the folk (and, naturally, the written) tradition see Kim Seondal as a successor to a long line of tricksters and con men, but also perceive him as a far more meticulous planner and schemer than his predecessors.

The last tale we will look at before moving on to written records is the one that gave Kim Seondal his nickname, “the Phoenix” (Bongi). Interestingly enough, while the tale would seem to be an important part of the Kim Seondal tradition, our two sources only record one version that features Kim Seondal as its protagonist.⁸ There is, however, a similar tale that features another trickster figure, Jeong Manseo⁹, and the differences between these two tales again illustrate the distinction between Kim Seondal and other Korean tricksters. Let us begin with a summary of the Jeong Manseo tale. Jeong Manseo is a country fellow who goes up to Seoul to see the sights. He meets a chicken merchant in the market and asks him what he is selling. The chicken merchant, sensing the opportunity to make an easy profit off of a country rube, tells him that the bird are cranes. Jeong Manseo pays a high price, three nyang, and takes his “crane.” But then he goes to the merchant next door and asks him what he has purchased. The other merchant naturally tells him that it is a chicken, and Jeong Manseo reports this to the police, telling them that he paid the merchant thirty nyang for a crane and got a chicken instead. Having lied to Jeong Manseo in the first place, the chicken merchant is in no position to claim that he only received three nyang for his fraud, and so pays Jeong Manseo the thirty

7 *Tales* 1: 283; *Compendium* 1-7: 219.

8 *Compendium* 5-6: 76-79.

9 *Compendium* 7-1: 95-97.

nyang he demands.

The Kim Seondal version follows the same basic plot, but again there is one important difference: while Jeong Manseo asks what the chicken merchant is selling, Kim Seondal comes right out and says, “Ah, that is a fine phoenix.” Jeong Manseo takes advantage of a merchant who tries to deceive him, and his tale becomes the story of a country rube turning the tables on a street-wise city merchant, but Kim Seondal is no country rube, and he has everything planned out in advance. Not to mention that the crane is an actual bird, while the phoenix exists only in legends, making Kim Seondal's gambit that much bolder. Like any good con man, he presents the mark with the opportunity to make a quick (and dishonest) profit, and the temptation is too great to resist. Although it is not his most famous story—that honor of course belongs to the selling of the Daedong River—the “phoenix con” is classic Kim Seondal, and it was impressive enough that Koreans to this day still refer to this colorful figure as Bongi Kim Seondal.

3. He could have been another Shakespeare: *Eongteorideul*

The Hangul collection of stories known as *Eongteorideul* is something of a mystery. The author is known only as “Haeyangeobu” (Sea Fisherman), and no one knows exactly when the collection was published. Like other collections of this kind, though, it was most likely published during the Japanese colonial period. (Yi H.U., 2006: 299) The title refers to characters who are shams or quacks—those who foist deceptions on others and are not to be trusted—and the collection introduces four such shams: Jeong Sudong, Kim Bongi, Jeong Manseo, and Kim Baekgok. The book is an important resource because not only does it contain six Kim Seondal tales, but these tales are prefaced and interlaced with comments on and criticism of the character. In the introduction to the Kim Seondal tales, it becomes clear that the distinction between Kim Seondal and other trickster figures noted above is not a new one: “Kim Bongi first does his research and then takes action, while Jeong Manseo first takes action and makes others do the research.” (5) The author goes on to explain that this distinction comes from the fact that Kim Seondal possesses knowledge, while Jeong Manseo does not. However, the author shows a decidedly different attitude toward Kim Seondal than that seen in the oral tales we have today, lamenting that Kim Seondal could not make better use of his talents and intelligence. If only he had had a proper education, the author says, “there is no reason he could not have become a Shakespeare or a Chaliapin, but regrettably his precious natural talents rotted away in such a vulgar life.” (34) In the eyes of the author, it would have been far better had Kim Seondal been rewarded with a position commensurate with his abilities so that he could have strengthened the social structure from within, rather than attacking it from without: “If his era had allowed him his [proper] status, he would have exhibited his resourcefulness and courage through his character, but regrettably he was to the end a prisoner of his environment....” (15)

The six Kim Seondal tales in the collection are all based solely on popular oral tales concerning the character: “For some time now I have heard of Kim Bongi, but I have only heard his name and title, Kim Seondal, and episodes concerning him; I have not seen any written records about him.” (14) Yet the tales are recorded in greater detail than any orally-transmitted versions that we have today. This is not necessarily an indication of the deterioration of these tales; most likely it is due to characteristic differences between oral literature and recorded literature, as well as the fact that the author of *Eongteorideul* was a professional author, while most of the tellers of the orally-transmitted tales recorded in modern times have not been professional storytellers. They are two sides of the same coin, with recorded versions taking their inspiration from existing oral versions and exercising their influence on future oral versions.¹⁰ Two of the six tales included in the collection coincide with two that we have already examined in the previous section. The first is the selling of the Daedong River and the second is the deception and abuse of the monk. These we will examine in greater detail, although we will briefly discuss the other tales as well to see what they say about Kim Seondal's character and personality.

10 This organic relationship between recorded and oral literature, as well as some of the characteristic differences between the two, is illustrated in one of the Daedong River tales recorded in *Compendium*. Some of the tales are told in significant detail, but this tale is very sparse, and the teller confuses some of the details. It is only after some prompting by the researcher and others present there that he remembers the full story. Then, at the end, he says: “I read that in a book once.” (*Compendium* 1-2: 464) Given the age of the storyteller (born in 1922), the book he read might even have been *Eongteorideul*. At any rate, this shows both the inextricable relationship between recorded and oral literature and how much oral literature depends on the memory and skill of individual storytellers.

The first tale begins with this line: “Strangely enough, the people who lived in the city of Pyeongyang did not trust Kim Bongi once they knew who he was.” (15) There is, of course, nothing strange about this at all, and it tells us much of what we need to know about Kim Seondal. He is a well-known con man and trickster, and in order to carry out his deceptions he must either disguise himself or find a mark who is not from his hometown of Pyeongyang. The following tale is one that is still attributed to Kim Seondal today: impoverished, he decides to burn down his own house and take advantage of the good will of his neighbors, who find him a new house, provide him with new clothes, etc. It is a traditional Korean version of an insurance scam. What makes this version different from the orally-transmitted versions we have today is the reason why Kim Seondal's household is in such sad shape. This is a common theme that runs through all Korean trickster tales, but generally the reason is that the man of the house, rather than taking care of his family and his home, is off deceiving people in some other region. Here, however, Kim Seondal's family falls on hard times because he decides to study and reads Sun Tzu a thousand times. This seems completely out of character based on what we know of Kim Seondal from the orally-transmitted tales, but it is consistent with the author's claim that Kim Seondal possesses knowledge.

The second tale has Kim Seondal taking a trip and using a variety of ruses to ensure that he does not have to pay for meals or lodging. There are orally-transmitted Kim Seondal tales that coincide with the various episodes, but the “free trip” motif is a common one to all trickster figures, so in the interest of efficiency we will turn our attention to tales that are more characteristically Kim Seondal stories. Suffice it to say that this second tale reinforces the image of Kim Seondal as a shrewd and clever observer of people.

The third tale is the famous selling of the Daedong River. It begins with the introduction of the mark, a rich merchant who has come to Pyeongyang from Seoul. Many of the oral tales have Kim Seondal coming up with the scheme first and finding a mark later, but in this version the scheme is designed specifically for the mark. To fund his venture, Kim Seondal extorts¹¹ 100 nyang in cash from an unnamed individual. It is interesting that he does not borrow the money, putting himself in debt, or steal it, making himself a thief. We are not given any other details, but it is easy to imagine that Kim Seondal might have blackmailed this individual, as he is often seen doing in other tales. Once he has this money, he invests it in his scheme: 20 nyang go to building a small hut on stilts by the Daedong River and buying a large money chest to put in that hut. Then he takes the remaining 80 nyang and gives 10 don¹² each to 80 water sellers who come down to the river each day: “From this one nyang, you water sellers can take two don, and of the remaining eight don I want you to drop one don per day into this chest when you come down to draw water in the morning.” This is another key difference between this version and the oral tales, since none of the oral tales have the water sellers making a profit. Rather than relying on their good will, Kim Seondal essentially makes them partners in his scheme, even though he does not reveal his plan to them.

With everything in place, Kim Seondal goes out the river the next day and sits in his hut. Most of the water sellers dutifully drop one don in the chest on their way up from the river, and the few who forget get an earful from Kim Seondal. Word quickly spreads through Pyeongyang and reaches the ears of the rich merchant from Seoul. When he hears that Kim Seondal made a trip to Seoul and then began selling water from the Daedong River on his return, the gears begin to turn in his head: “If one could sell the ceaselessly flowing water of the Daedong River, there would be no end to the money!” So he approaches Kim Seondal and offers to buy the rights to the water. Kim Seondal tells him that he went down to Seoul to receive a concession for a monopoly over the waters of the river, but now that he has started collecting the money he finds it burdensome to have to wake up every day and come down to the river. The introduction of legal terms such as “concession” and “monopoly” are another interesting difference in this version, and they lend Kim Seondal's scheme even more credibility (not unlike the false titles and deeds con men drew up for the Brooklyn Bridge). The Seoul merchant is hopelessly hooked and gives Kim Seondal 1,000 nyang, which would have been a tenfold return on investment had Kim Seondal made any investment at all. But this is not the end of the tale; each of the water sellers still has two don of Kim Seondal's money, so it is three more days before the merchant from Seoul even realizes that he has been conned.

The tale of Kim Seondal's deception of the monk follows directly after his selling of the Daedong River. In fact, he takes the thousand nyang from his con, travels to Seoul, buys a house just outside the city gate, and there cavorts with gisaeng for a few months. When his money runs out, the procession of the

11 The word used in the text to describe Kim Seondal's actions in procuring the money literally means: “To forcefully request or insist that someone do something unreasonable.”

12 In traditional Korean currency, one nyang was equivalent to 10 don.

government official presents him with an opportunity to make more money. Interestingly enough, this version of the tale focuses almost entirely on the second monk, the one who is eventually dragged off. Kim Seondal does not even attend the procession, and is at home when the guards come to leave the monk in his care. It turns out that this monk was on his way to a temple in the city to perform a ritual, and if he does not attend he stands to lose several thousand nyang, presumably in fees paid for the ritual. He offers Kim Seondal a hundred nyang to let him go, and Kim Seondal accepts the offer. He has made his money, but there is no con involved. The real con begins in the cover-up: finding another monk to take the place of the first one. He sees another monk passing by his house and asks him to write up a document (likely a written prayer) for a Buddhist ritual. The monk gladly agrees and goes into Kim Seondal's house to write the document. When he is finished, though, Kim Seondal claims that it is too long and would be worth far more than he is willing to pay. The monk rewrites the document, this time a little shorter, but Kim Seondal again complains that it is too long. This process is repeated until the guards arrive to collect the monk and take him away for his punishment. When he is released (the punishment is not specified in the text), he returns to Kim Seondal to finish writing the document, but Kim Seondal refuses, saying that he is now unclean and should come back next month.

The above story actually bears a greater resemblance to the earlier written version of the tale attributed to Baek Munseon than it does to the orally-transmitted tales of Kim Seondal. In this version, though, not only does Kim Seondal not devise a scheme beforehand to defraud the first monk, he actually has a positive relationship with him, taking 100 nyang but preventing him from losing several thousand. Instead, the second monk becomes the victim, receiving a punishment he does not deserve and wasting his time with Kim Seondal but apparently coming out of the ordeal relatively unscathed. With so few oral sources available—and none available from the time when *Eongteorideul* was published—it is hard to draw any meaningful conclusions about the relationship between the versions, but it is clear that the Kim Seondal portrayed here is less cruel than the Kim Seondal portrayed in the extant orally-transmitted versions.

Before relating the fifth tale, the author mentions that there are stories of Kim Seondal buying a chicken as a phoenix, but he dismisses these tales with the following reasoning: “As Kim Bongi is a person who uses the tricks of Sun Tzu, he would not have done such a ridiculous thing, so I'm going to write down the story of Kim Bongi selling the ducks instead.” (28) The story of the ducks is a repackaging of the sale of the Daedong River, with Kim Seondal planting domesticated ducks to fool a mark into thinking he owns all of the ducks on the river. This does reinforce the idea of Kim Seondal as a wily schemer, but more interesting is the fact that the author rejects the story that allegedly gave Kim Seondal his nickname—a nickname that the author uses exclusively throughout the text. Apparently such a con would be beneath this learned con man.

The final tale is titled “The Firewood Con” and involves Kim Seondal's wife as his accomplice. His wife calls a woodseller to the house, which happens to sit at the end of a narrow alley and has a very narrow front gate. The “con” is that with each trip the woodseller makes, bit and pieces fall off the ends of the wood bundles as he travels down the narrow alley and through the narrow gate. Three versions of this tale are recorded in the two modern collections of oral tales, but two of the three are attributed to Bang Hakjung instead of Kim Seondal. The tale does seem to be a better fit for the poor and lowly Bang Hakjung, but it is also not unreasonable to think that a man who would burn down his own house might pull a simple scam like this.

From these six tales we can see that the Kim Bongi of *Eongteorideul* is basically the same character as seen in the orally-transmitted tales of Kim Seondal we have today, but the author has a different evaluation of him than what is often seen in the oral tales. Oral storytellers sometimes attempted to make excuses for or explain away Kim Seondal's immoral behavior, but the author of *Eongteorideul* laments that he did not make better use of his talents. Kim Bongi is someone who would read *The Art of War* a thousand times, which means he is educated and most likely has the intellectual capacity to be a scholar. He deceives people using schemes ranging from the very complex (selling the Daedong River) to the very simple (scamming a woodseller), but such preposterous scams as buying a chicken as a phoenix are beneath him. That the collection is written in Hangul shows it was meant for a general audience, but the text itself shows that the author was educated, and his comments betray his bias. Yet even though he regrets Kim Bongi's missed opportunities, he clearly enjoys the stories themselves and takes pleasure in telling them, and at no point in his comments does he blame Kim Bongi for his actions or pass any sort of moral judgment. If there is any judgment passed, it is on the world into which Kim Bongi was born: “Just by looking at the case of Kim Bongi, we can see how the world buries exceptional human beings.” (15) The author recognizes that

Kim Seondal was a man not fit for the society of his time, but he places the blame at the feet of society, not the man. When seen in that light, all of the author's lamenting that Kim Seondal could not make proper use of his talents is revealed to be more a criticism of society than of Kim Seondal.

4. The dark cloud and the white heron: *Sindangongan*

Unlike *Eongteorideul*, it is known precisely when the novel *Sindangongan* was published: it first appeared in the newspaper *Hwangseongsinmun* as a serial novel from 19 May to 31 December in 1906. It was written in a mixture of hanmun and Hangul, with hanmun being used for a majority of the text and Hangul being used for grammatical cues such as articles and verb conjugations, in order to make it easier to read for those who might not be as familiar with pure hanmun. The title literally means, “To solve public cases like a ghost,” with the simile “like a ghost” being roughly equivalent to the Western phrase “like a whiz.” In other words, it purports to be a police or detective novel, although not all of its contents follow this formula. The novel is a collection of seven different stories, and while five of these stories follow the traditional formula, the fourth (concerning Kim Seondal) and the seventh (concerning a Bang Hakjung-like figure called Eo Bokson) are in fact trickster tales and, like *Eongteorideul*, are based on the orally-transmitted tales of these character types that were circulating at the time. The author of the stories remains unnamed, but he appears in the text through commentary offered by two critics: Gyehangpaesa (literally, “legends of laurel street”) and Cheongcheonja (literally, “he who listens to the stream”).

As mentioned in the introduction, Kim Seondal is given an actual name in this work: Kim Inhong. The story begins by telling us when he was born (shortly after King Injo took the throne; i.e., around the turn of the 17th century) and then relating how he took a minor government post, disappeared for a while, but then returned home when reproached by his family. Two episodes relate how he rents a house from his uncle and then runs a pharmacy with a famous doctor but manages to keep all the money for himself. Then, beginning in part 16,¹³ we have the story concerning the deception of the monks. Like the oral versions, Kim Inhong plans the deception of the first monk from the start, but like the written versions (both the version found in *Eongteorideul* and the earlier Baek Munseon version), the actual focus of the scheme is the second monk. That is, the first monk is simply an innocent bystander that Kim Inhong tricks into being arrested just so he can have the real target take his place later.

The story begins with the introduction of a rich monk named Haeun. Kim Inhong asks Haeun to lend him 5,000 nyang, but Haeun refuses. So Kim Inhong hatches his plan to teach Haeun a lesson. He finds an unsuspecting monk, causes him to walk in front of the government official's procession, and then has the monk confined at his home. Then he simply lets this monk go and asks Haeun to visit him at his home. When Haeun realizes that he is to be taken away as a prisoner, he begs Kim Inhong to let him go. Kim Inhong tells the monk that he will spare him if he pays 20,000 nyang. Haeun pays the money—but Kim Inhong hands him over to the guards anyway, and he is dragged off and beaten with clubs.

One interesting aspect of this story is that, even though Kim Inhong does take 20,000 nyang of the monk's money, it is less a con and more a tale of revenge. The victim of the deception is the first monk, but aside from a small fright he suffers none of the consequences. Haeun, on the other hand, is not deceived except in that he does not know what is in store for him when he goes to Kim Inhong's house. Even the extortion of Haeun is depicted more as punishment for avarice—how better to punish a rich man than to take away that by which he defines himself—than as a simple scheme to make money. This is reinforced in the comments by Gyehangpaesa appended to the end of the episode.

There is truly nothing to criticize in Inhong's cunning ruse. And those who discuss Haeun all take issue with his stinginess, but I believe that there is no reason to insist on criticizing his stinginess. Generally speaking, even a ghost is sparing of its wealth and no one would want to lose it, so how is one to protect wealth if not through stinginess? Yet if one knows how to protect wealth, then naturally one must also know how to use it. But in Haeun's case he was merely stingy; he did not understand the way of succoring the world and bringing profit to its people, so there is no reason to regret the misfortune he suffered. (150)

13 The story of Kim Inhong is divided into 45 parts; these are not narrative divisions, but simply the amount published in each edition of the paper.

Kim Seondal targets monks in many oral tales, although it is never made explicit why he does so. Here it is clear that monks are deserving of punishment when they fail to live up to the higher standards to which they adhere, and it is clear that Kim Inhong is not just a con man but an instrument of judgment.

Beginning in part 24, directly after the commentary above, is the story of Kim Inhong buying the “phoenix.” It more closely resembles the Jeong Manseo version at the start, as Kim Inhong puts on shabby clothes and tells the chicken seller that he is a mountain farmer and that this is his first time outside his mountain village. Then he points to a chicken and asks what it is, and after some thought the merchant replies that it is a phoenix. Then the story departs significantly from the oral tales as Kim Inhong begins referencing passages from classical Chinese texts that deal with the legendary phoenix. This recitation takes up the final third of that day's column in the paper. In the next issue, Kim Inhong blithely says, “Anyway, how much is it for a phoenix?” Completely unfazed, the chicken seller says that they run several hundred nyang a piece. Kim Inhong says that he only has a little over ten nyang, and the chicken seller agrees to cut him a deal—but he makes Kim Inhong promise to tell others that he paid two or three hundred nyang for the bird. Kim Inhong does him one better and tells him that he will tell everyone he paid six hundred nyang.

Kim Inhong then takes his “phoenix” and walks back and forth in front of the police chief's house shouting, “Buy my phoenix! Buy my phoenix!” The police chief has Kim Inhong brought in, and when he hears his story he has the chicken seller arrested. The chicken seller claims that he only got a little over ten nyang for the bird, but Kim Inhong, as promised, tells the police chief that he paid six hundred nyang. In the end, the chicken seller is beaten and forced to give six hundred nyang to Kim Inhong.

Once again, the story emphasizes the punishment of the wicked. While the oral version of the tale has the schemer Kim Seondal lie his way through the con (he lies by calling the chicken a phoenix, he lies about how much he paid), with the exception of lying about where he is from Kim Inhong acts (or at least seems to act) in good faith and allows the chicken seller to dig his own grave. The passage that refers to classical Chinese texts is something that would never appear in an oral tale, and most likely it functions in large part here to add flavor to the hanmun novel, but it could also be seen as Kim Inhong giving the chicken seller one last chance to back out. That a farmer in an isolated mountain village would be familiar with classical Chinese texts is an absurd idea, and shows just how blinded the chicken seller already is by his own greed and guile. At the end of the episode, Gyehangpaesa says that the chicken seller was deceived because he looked down on others, and Cheongcheonja comments on the chicken seller's carelessness in being snared by a carefully planned scheme. As before, there is no word of censure for Kim Inhong.

The narrative then moves into the selling of the Daedong River, and the plot follows the same basic structure seen in the oral tales and the written version in *Eongteorideul*. There are, however, three key differences in the *Sindangongan* version. The first is the mark. Rather than being a rich man from Seoul or a Chinese merchant, the mark here is Kim Inhong's uncle (the same uncle from whom he rented his house at the beginning of the story). And the reason why Kim Inhong sets out to con his uncle is similar to his reason for targeting the monk Haeun: revenge. One day, Kim Inhong's uncle comes by, lectures him for spending his time deceiving people, and exhorts him to live like he himself does, honestly, with no greed or malice in his heart. The very next day, Kim Inhong sets his plan in motion in order to find out just how honest and selfless his uncle is. The second difference is in Kim Inhong's relationship with the water sellers. While the oral versions have the water sellers not making any money off the venture at all, and *Eongteorideul* depicts them as partners or accomplices in the scheme, *Sindangongan* paints an almost Robin Hood-like picture of Kim Inhong: “While Kim Bongi has always freely played all sorts of tricks, he is always so kind to such lesser folk as this, giving them money and grain.” (159) He merely gives a single nyang to each water seller and asks for it back, but when his plan succeeds and he bilks his uncle for 70,000 nyang, he keeps his promise to pay them back by using several thousand nyang of that money to hold a feast that lasts all day. On top of that, he gives out cash to each water seller, amounting to another several thousand nyang. The third difference lies in how Kim Inhong ropes in his mark. As in the phoenix story, Kim Inhong does not begin with a lie. Instead, he allows his uncle to jump to his own conclusions. Even when his uncle sees the water sellers giving his nephew money and asks him what the money is for, Kim Inhong just smiles. It is only after his uncle guesses that they are paying for the water does he spring the trap. Unlike the first two episodes, there is no commentary after this one, so apparently the author felt it spoke for itself.

These three episodes present a different picture of Kim Seondal than what we see in the oral tales, and even what we see in *Eongteorideul*. He is still a con man, and he still profits from his cons, but he plays a specific social function, punishing those who deserve it. These are a monk who thinks only of money and forgets his sacred duty, a merchant ready and willing to take advantage of a simpleton, and a self-righteous

relative. No reader will sympathize with these “victims” because they all had it coming to them. Kim Inhong, on the other hand, despite acting immorally, is held up as worthy of admiration.

But the story does not end here. Oral tales are simply self-contained episodes and thus have no real beginning or end. Even *Eongteorideul* is just a collection of such episodes, however detailed. *Sindangongan*, however, is a novel, and just as it has a beginning it must also have an end. The conclusion of the story begins with the appointment of a new deputy governor in Pyeongyang. The first thing this deputy governor does is call his underlings together and say that he is worried about this Kim Inhong, of whom he has heard many disturbing stories. He says that his ability to govern effectively will be undermined if Kim Inhong is not held accountable for his crimes. However, an old official steps forward to defend Kim Inhong, citing his Robin Hood-like qualities: “But when he deceived others and deprived them of their wealth, he never touched a hair on the heads of the poor common people, he merely used those artifices on corrupt officials and wealthy misers.” (177) He then goes on to say that although he has exceptional abilities, he never expected any position in the royal court or any help from powerful families. In spite of this plea for leniency, the deputy governor orders Kim Inhong to be brought before him to be punished, but Kim Inhong threatens the guards, saying that he might be beaten with clubs today, but there was no telling what might happen to those holding the clubs tomorrow. The deputy governor realizes that he cannot punish Kim Inhong and so changes his strategy, saying that he simply wanted to test his abilities, and he asks him to remain as his guest. Kim Inhong, however, politely declines, saying that one who was a criminal a moment ago would not dare join the deputy governor on the dais. The conversation that follows is worth quoting in full, as it goes to the heart of who Kim Inhong is.

“Is that so? If you think of yourself as a criminal then you shall receive the club, and if you expect to be a distinguished guest you will come up onto the dais; yet you will not receive the club nor will you come up onto the dais, so what is it that you expect to do?”

Kim Bongi replied, “I do not desire to be a criminal to my lord, nor do I desire to be your guest. I only want to be free between heaven and earth.”

“What sort of dauntless man are you that you would say such a thing? As long as you are a subject of this land, how is it that you would not be bound by another?”

“There is an old saying: ‘If the ruler of a nation acts haughtily before his subjects he will lose his nation, and if a nobleman acts haughtily before others he will lose his household.’ I am just like a dark cloud or white heron that wanders here and there, so my situation is different from yours, as you are bound by your post and cannot move about as you please.” (183-184)

Upon saying this, Kim Inhong agrees to go up on the dais and share a drink with the deputy governor. But the deputy governor still does not know what sort of man he has invited to be his guest. The deputy governor sees things in black and white: either Kim Inhong is a criminal or he is a guest, there is no in between. But Kim Inhong has lived his whole life in that “in between.” His use of imagery to describe himself is particularly telling. By saying that he is a dark cloud or a white heron, he turns the deputy governor's dualistic worldview on its head. He is both black and white—and at the same time he is neither.

The deputy governor, of course, understands none of this, and when there is a mysterious murder that no one can solve, he calls upon Kim Inhong for help. Kim Inhong is not enthusiastic about helping the deputy governor, but he agrees to do so and quickly solves the case. When the people hear this, they exclaim, “Kim Inhong truly has been gifted with exceptional talent, but he was born out of his time and into a needy plight, so he has used his head only for fraud and swindling; how pitiful this is!” (191) This might as well have been the author of *Eongteorideul* speaking. But even presented with this opportunity to be a productive member of society, Kim Inhong spends his days drinking and swindling rich folk, until one day he cries, “The three thousand li of Korea are so narrow that there is no longer anyone to swindle!” (192) With this he takes his family and disappears, never to be heard from again.

The character of Kim Inhong seems to be quite a paradox in *Sindangongan*. On the one hand, he is a Robin Hood figure who swindles the rich and gives to the poor. On the other hand, though, he has no interest in acting in any official government capacity, even if doing so would allow him to do good. But this paradox dissolves if we abandon a dualistic view of society. There are more possibilities than simply being a criminal (against the social structure) and a distinguished guest of the deputy governor (for the social structure). Kim Inhong realizes that the most efficient way to attack and expose the flaws in the social structure is from

without that structure, not from within. Still, he has come a long way from the Kim Seondal we see in oral tales, a figure who is not nearly as honorable when choosing marks for his cons.

5. Hero of the people: *Bongi Kimseondal*

The previous texts have all either been produced in a pre-war Korea or a post-war South Korea. This last text, titled simply *Bongi Kimseondal*, stands apart as it is not only the most recent, but it was published in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The text consists of five volumes published from 2002 to 2004 and contains a total of 63 Kim Seondal tales. The introduction to the first volume says that these tales have been passed down by word of mouth over many generations. However, many of these tales are episodes that are usually attributed to a number of different characters, including Kim Seondal, and there are even episodes that are not traditionally associated with Kim Seondal at all. It would seem that any reasonably popular trickster tale that coincided with the portrait of Kim Seondal that the editors desired to convey was included. Although it is noted that the stories are all entertaining and that everyone enjoys them, the following quote, attributed to "Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il," hints at a greater purpose: "The stores of Bongi Kim Seondal are by no means stories of a braggart or libertine, nor are they simply stories concocted to make people laugh. If they had been such stories, then they would not have been remembered so clearly among our people." (4) A few paragraphs later, a portrait of Kim Seondal as the editors see him is presented: "As neither a famous general or famous person but just an ordinary farmer, in tales sparkling with astonishing satire, humor, and wit, everywhere he goes Bongi Kim Seondal confounds corrupt and impotent ruling aristocrats and rich fellows who know nothing but money, and he helps the poor." (5)

Of the 63 tales included in this collection, three coincide with the oral tales examined above. Chapter 3 of volume 1 tells the tale of the spoiled red bean porridge, although here the food in question is mung bean porridge. The basic premise and plot are the same as in the oral versions, but this story begins not with Kim Seondal making porridge, but with the people of Pyeongyang going out to buy firewood. The only problem is that a miserly aristocrat has hoarded all the firewood, artificially driving up prices and becoming rich in the process. The common people, on the other hand, are unable to buy enough wood because it is so expensive. A few people ask Kim Seondal to help, and he suggests that they go get something to eat while they wait for the boat carrying the firewood to come in. They arrive at a nearby mung bean porridge restaurant, where the owner tells them that the heat and lack of customers (the mung bean sellers have been driving up the price of mung beans, of course) has caused the porridge to spoil. So Kim Seondal brings the aforementioned aristocrat to the restaurant, where the owner tells the servers to bring out the porridge in their largest brass bowl, but to not put any vinegar in the porridge. When the aristocrat asks why, Kim Seondal explains that only high government officials from Seoul or the governor of Pyeongyang like vinegared porridge, but "country aristocrats" don't have a taste for it. Insulted, the aristocrat demands vinegared porridge as well, and though he has a hard time stomaching it, he ends up eating not one, not two, but three large bowls of the spoiled porridge.

The story does not end here, though. While the oral tales end with Kim Seondal's swindling of the marks, this version provides a detailed depiction of the consequences to the aristocrat. He ends up rolling around on the ground with a severe stomach ache, suffers from explosive diarrhea three times by the side of the road, and ends up at the doctor's. Everywhere he goes he is a laughing stock, and even the doctor laughs at him when he hears what he had for lunch. At the very end, Kim Seondal, who had been following the aristocrat to see what would happen, confronts the aristocrat as he lies on the ground in pain. "Listen here," he scolds him. "You put on airs as if you alone were high and mighty, and now look how humiliated you are. Those who put on airs all think that they alone know the ways of the world, but in truth they are just like hollow trees with nothing inside." (52) Kim Seondal then sees to it that the aristocrat is never able to sell firewood in Pyeongyang again.

Perhaps the most striking difference in this version of the tale is that Kim Seondal doesn't actually make any money. In fact, the only time money is mentioned in the story is in connection with the artificially inflated prices of firewood and mung beans. There is no mention of the aristocrat even paying for his meal, or of Kim Seondal profiting from his scam. This is only natural, though. While the core of the story is the same as in the oral versions, the framing elements—the depiction of the people suffering due to inflated firewood prices and the consequences suffered by the aristocrat after eating the porridge—all make it very clear that the only purpose of the scam is to punish this haughty aristocrat. Not only is Kim Seondal not censured for his immoral or unethical actions, he is seen as a hero of the people.

Chapter 7 of volume 1 depicts the selling of the Daedong River and begins with a brief lesson on the history and prosperity of the city of Pyeongyang. Then the mark is introduced: a fat rich man who plans to buy up wholesale goods and put the retail merchants out of business. Once again, the people go to Kim Seondal for help. After thinking about it for a while, he asks them to gather up a sack of brass coins. Unlike the other versions of the this story, though, the people he enlists in his scheme are not water sellers, but the residents themselves gathering water for their own use. As the fat rich man watches, they each drop a brass coin in Kim Seondal's sack, and Kim Seondal greets each of them by name. One young girl forgets her coin, but Kim Seondal kindly tells her to bring it the next day. Then he asks a boy about his ill mother, and when he hears that the woman has gotten worse, he refuses to take the water fee. When the rich man offers to buy the rights to the water, Kim Seondal at first refuses, and the rich man takes him to a nearby inn to wine and dine him. At last Kim Seondal agrees to a price of 20,000 nyang. The rich man spends all night by the Daedong River waiting for dawn, but he soon discovers that he has been deceived, and he become the laughing stock of the city: "All who had come to draw water, men and women, young and old, clutched their bellies and laughed so much that the Daedong River rolled and swelled, seeming to shake with hearty laughter." (114) In the end, even the river laughed at him.

And what became of the 20,000 nyang Kim Seondal got from the rich man? That same day he took all the money and divided it up among the poor people of Pyeongyang. Of all the Kim Seondal tales, the selling of the Daedong River has always presented the most heroic portrayal of its protagonist, but this version in particular make him almost a saint. As with the spoiled mung bean porridge, he does not act on his own greed or mischievous nature, but at the behest of the people of Pyeongyang. And, once again, he makes no profit from his efforts and gives all the money to the poor. His relationship with the people drawing water is also that much more intimate. They have gone from mere tools in the oral tales, accomplices in *Eongteorideul*, and favored subordinates in *Sindangongan* to practically family here in the North Korean version. Narratively speaking, there is no need for Kim Seondal to be as familiar and friendly with the people as he is, but it cements his reputation as a kind soul who looks after those less fortunate than he.

The third tale can be found in chapter 6 of volume 4: the story of the feast for the blind men. As with the previous two tales, this tale also begins with a framing element that is not present in any of the oral versions. Kim Seondal's nephew comes to visit and tells him that he is in debt for 150 nyang, an amount that Kim Seondal exclaims is equal to the price of four oxen. When he finds out that his nephew borrowed the money to give to a gisaeng (a courtesan), he agrees to help, but first he lectures the young man on the evils of consorting with gisaeng. "You were born a man, so you should be taking care of your family, not having affairs with gisaeng! ... Spending money on gisaeng is like throwing money into the Daedong River. Even the king of the land is no equal for a gisaeng." (70) The Kim Seondal of the orally-transmitted tales would never say something like this, mainly because he would be too busy consorting with gisaeng himself. But the Kim Seondal pictured here is a morally flawless individual.

This opening might at first seem to be an odd one for a tale about conning a group of blind men. But these are no ordinary blind men—they are in fact a group of five or six men who make their living as usurers, and these are the men from whom Kim Seondal's nephew has borrowed the 150 nyang. After the blind men are sufficiently demonized, we move on to the main part of the tale, where Kim Seondal erects a makeshift hut on stilts and invites the blind men to his house for a birthday feast. Relying on the usual ruses—broken crockery beneath the hut, pig fat sizzling on a hot griddle, and feces rubbed under the blind men's noses as they sleep, all as onlookers barely manage to suppress their laughter—he puts the blind men in an awkward position and demands 300 nyang for the broken crockery. This is, of course, an exorbitant price for broken dishes, but Kim Seondal claims that the dishes were family heirlooms borrowed from a wealthy neighbor for this special occasion. Left no choice, the blind men humbly pay the three hundred nyang and go on their way. The tale ends with Kim Seondal jingling the coins in his pocket, thinking that he will still have 150 nyang left over after he gives 150 nyang to his nephew. There is no mention of what he does with the money, but it is assumed that he keeps it for himself, unlike in the previously discussed tales. One possible explanation for this change in behavior is that the previous tales have him acting on behalf of the people of Pyeongyang, but here he is acting on behalf of a younger family member, so perhaps he feels more entitled to a share of the profits.

In *Bonggi Kimseondal* we have a figure who would be almost unrecognizable to the tellers of the oral tales discussed above. The basic plots are the same, of course, but these core stories are all framed with careful justifications for Kim Seondal's actions. As the quote attributed to Kim Jong-il in the introduction made abundantly clear, these are not tales of a braggart or libertine, but stories of a clever, kind-hearted hero.

Rather than acting to fulfill his own desires, he acts on behalf of others. He does not remain outside the social structure but is a very integral part of it, a pillar of society who defends and upholds the virtues of the system. Indeed, he has become the perfect propaganda tool. And lest there be any doubt at all about the message, each of the deserving victims becomes a laughing stock—the literary version of a laugh track to remind the readers when and at whom they should laugh.

6. Conclusion

The tales examined above are some of the most famous and recognizable of stories featuring Kim Seondal. They are not, of course, the entirety of his repertoire, but they should suffice to paint a vivid picture of Korea's consummate con man. In particular, the comparison of four different texts—orally-transmitted tales, a written collection of tales in Hangul, a novelization primarily in hanmun, and a modern North Korean collection—show the different faces of this multifaceted character.

In the oral tales, Kim Seondal is a conniving trickster with no regard for social conventions or mores, choosing his targets indiscriminately and acting primarily out of his own greed and lust. Some storytellers do try to explain or justify Kim Seondal's actions, and others apologize for telling ribald tales in mixed company, but this is likely a reaction to having to tell the stories in the presence of the researchers, all of whom are scholars and college professors and are perhaps considered people in front of whom décor must be observed. These cases are relatively rare, though, and most storytellers lose themselves in the enjoyment of the story. It might not be correct to say that the Kim Seondal portrayed in these oral tales is the “purest” form of the character, as that would invalidate or at least lessen the importance of the other versions, but it is probably safe to say that the Kim Seondal here is seen at his most free, unbound by the constraints of social norms. He is a trickster and a con man who acts for himself alone. In the process he may point out the flaws and cracks in the social structure, but he by no means seeks to cure those ills or aid those who suffer from them. He fits in no neat category or pigeonhole because he does not recognize the distinctions that make such categorization possible—to him, a rich merchant is just as viable a mark as a group of blind men stuck on the lowest rungs of society.

The written versions we have examined all show Kim Seondal at some point along the spectrum from the unfettered trickster at one end to the righteous savior of the people at the other. The author of *Eongteorideul* respects Kim Seondal for his talents and abilities, and he correctly states that this particular trickster figure is possessed of a unique intelligence. It would seem that he misses the point somewhat with his comments on how regrettable it is that Kim Seondal squandered this intelligence on trickery and deception, but the true point of the tales is to point out how broken the system is—that a man like Kim Seondal would be forced to use his abilities for selfish ends is a harsh criticism of society. In the end, though, the fact remains that the author of *Eongteorideul* is incapable of seeing Kim Seondal as meaningful in and of himself, instead seeing him as an example of a flawed society. *Sindangongan* paints a more sympathetic picture of Kim Seondal, but there is no getting around his fundamental nature. He may be less a selfish trickster and more a kind-hearted rogue, but he still does not and never will belong to the social structure. While the author of *Eongteorideul* bemoaned the fact that Kim Seondal never had a chance to prove himself as a force for good (i.e., society), the author of *Sindangongan* not only offers him this chance, he takes the story to its logical conclusion. In the end, Kim Seondal is neither black nor white, here nor there, and he cannot exist in a system that views the world only in such dualities. When faced with a choice between one side or the other, he does the only logical thing and opts out of the situation entirely. The author or authors of the North Korean collection, though, drop all pretense of Kim Seondal as a liminal trickster and present him as a wholly good figure. No longer does he act on his own motivations; now he develops and carries out his schemes when approached by one member or another of the downtrodden populace. It is no coincidence that the rich and greedy are constant targets of his artifices—the tales are a barely veiled criticism of unfettered capitalist tendencies, and Kim Seondal exposes these greedy capitalists for what they are: empty shells of men. He is now fully part of the social(ist) structure, and everything he does is aimed at strengthening and upholding that structure. While this image is yet another aspect of the con man character and not necessarily any less “true,” there is no denying that we have come a long way from the opposite end of the spectrum.

It is my hope that this cursory examination of Kim Seondal as he appears in several different texts will serve as an introduction to the character, an example of how the same character can appear in vastly different lights depending on the intentions of the teller, and a stepping stone for further study on the Korean trickster.

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