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# The Animal in the Wild in *Hwang Sun-mi's The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*

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**Abstract**: Hwang Sun-mi's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* has become a contemporary classic children's story in Korea since its original publication in 2000. Since then, the story has been translated and redesigned with new illustrations in almost thirty different countries (Y. Kim). *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* centers on a hen that raises a duckling as her "baby," with the story drawing upon a rich reservoir of cultural associations between humans and nature in East Asian traditions. In this story, the hen leaves the human-dominated barnyard, based on profit, exploitation, and competition, for a reconnection with moral virtues in the natural world. By leaving the human-organized society, the hen Sprout realizes her name's potential for vitality and growth. This paper explores cultural connections between the animal and nature in Hwang's story within a Korean context, inviting comparisons between Western and Eastern environmental perspectives.

**Sarah Yoon**

# The Animal in the Wild in Hwang Sun-mi's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*

## Introduction

Compare Hwang Sun-mi's bestselling children's story, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, with Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling." In Hwang's story, a hen raised to lay eggs for sale is culled after she can no longer lay eggs. She escapes and befriends a duck, whose egg she discovers and hatches by keeping warm. When she returns to the yard with the newly hatched duckling, whom she describes as her "baby," the other animals jeer and mock her. She leaves the yard while fiercely protecting her duckling. Towards the end of the story, the duckling flies off to join other ducks while the enfeebled hen dies in a weasel's mouth. In Andersen's tale, a duckling that has been scorned as ugly grows into a "young and handsome" swan, the "most beautiful" among four swans on a lake (167). As Andersen tells us, the swan "remembered how he had been persecuted and scorned, and now he heard everyone say that he was the most beautiful of all the beautiful birds" (167). While Hwang's story does not directly reference Andersen's fairy tale, the underlying divergences between these children's stories highlight some cultural differences between stories for children in the East and in the West.

The assumption in Andersen's fairy tale is that a child reader will draw hope and encouragement from a story of success after prolonged suffering. The implicit intention of this tale, as with other Western fairy tales, is for a child to benefit from moral guidance. This attention to a child's moral encouragement in Western fairy tales was strengthened through a growing market for children's literature in Europe from the late eighteenth century (see Demers). This market for children's literature flourished in nineteenth-century Europe, resulting in what some have deemed "the Golden Age" of children's literature, departing from the religious pietism and moral didacticism of previous centuries (Demers 279). Children's stories become focused on entertainment, amusement, and imagination, even as they were fed by romantic conceptions of the child as evoking a pre-industrial and more natural condition (see Demers 279-81; Plotz). Andersen wrote his tales in the nineteenth century, publishing "The Ugly Duckling" in 1844. In contrast, the market for children's literature in Korea was the product of an accelerated modernization in the late twentieth century.[1] They often build upon folk tales originating from an earlier agrarian society, imbued with shamanistic beliefs.

It is widely known that children's literature generally borrows from the folk tradition or fairy tales of their culture, which are, in turn, nurtured by their religious or philosophical views. Korean folk tales impart wisdom (as do other folk tales), but also depict a world characterized by ecological connection. In Korean folk tales, animals and plants are frequently described as transforming into humans, and vice versa. In "The Serpent Bridegroom," an elderly couple give birth to a serpent, who marries a woman. In "The Son of the Cinnamon Tree," a tree gives birth to a man.[2] Even Korea's founding legend features a bear that transforms into a woman and marries a god, after eating garlic and mugwort for a hundred days. Their son, Dangun, becomes the legendary founder of the first Korean kingdom. Indeed, Hee-woong Cho observes that Korean folk tales featuring animals tend to be the oldest, recalling a time when "human beings … lived side by side with animals" (xix-xx). In Korean folk culture, animals were "considered to be gods or even ancestors of human beings, and thus were treated like humans" (H. Cho xix). Mee-yeon Cho concurs, noting that Korean folk tales depict animals in a "symbiotic relationship" with humans, providing them with various benefits (33). Collectively, such stories reveal an "ecological" mode of thinking, with living beings "organically entangled" and "interdependent" within a wider ecosystem (M. Cho 330).[3]

The question of animal characters in children's literature, then, is linked to a broader perception of their roles in cultural memory. Whereas animals are seen as allegorical equivalents or substitutes for humans in many Western folk tales and children's stories, they occupy a somewhat different (but nonetheless anthropomorphic) role in Korean children's literature. Animals do not merely stand in for humans or represent comic extensions of human behavior in Korean children's stories, as they often do in Western fairy tales. Rather, they gesture to a worldview in which humans rediscover an interconnection with other species and with nature, arising from cultural memory. Specifically in Hwang's story, *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, the animal becomes a pivot towards a reimagined connection with nature that distinctly contrasts with a brutal and inhumane society dominated by humans. This is not to idealize or romanticize nature, as in a Western romantic manner. Indeed, the hen meets her demise when confronted with the weasel, but recognizes that her death will contribute to the growth of the weasel's cubs. As the hen becomes subsumed within the wider ecosystem of predation and growth, her physical death inversely parallels the duckling's maturation and independence. These natural phenomena contrast with the one-sided exploitation of animals by humans in the yard, where chickens are routinely bred for their eggs and killed when they no longer serve their economic function.

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[1] Throughout this paper, I refer to South Korea as "Korea" for convenience's sake.

[2] Versions of these folk tales can be read in (H. Cho 136-42; *Long Long Time Ago* 16-22). Other stories of animal-human transformation include "The Snail Lady" and "The Fox Who Became a Woman" (*Long Long Time Ago* 43-49; H. Cho 153-56). This contrasts with therianthropy in Western folk tales, which refers to humans taking on an animal form.

[3] Quotations from M. Cho's article are my translations.

Hence, this paper argues that *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* reveals a specifically East Asian cultural memory and philosophical attention to interconnection across species and to harmonization with the natural world. An implicit assumption of my paper is that nature is not objectively perceived. Rather, our perception of nature and animals are shaped by our culture and instilled modes of relating humans to other species. While East Asian philosophy is eminently humanist, it is rarely described in similar anthropocentric terms as Western philosophy.[4] Aristotle famously ranked humans as exceptional by virtue of their linguistic and rational capacity, placing them at the apex of a natural hierarchy above animals and vegetation. Similarly, medieval Christianity's the Great Chain of Being elevated humans above other species and closer to a divine figure. In contrast, Eastern philosophy has traditionally sought to understand humans within a pre-existent natural order. As Mee-yeon Cho writes, human can only understand themselves by first understanding their place in the natural world. She explains, "In the East, to understand nature is to understand humans. Through nature, one understands humans and nature, which is the source of human life. … humans cannot essentially be separated from nature" (331).

This view draws from East Asian philosophy, ranging from Taoism to Neo-Confucianism. It is not my intention to trace their differences in detail here, but critics have often pointed out that Eastern philosophy draws inspiration for thinking about human nature from the natural environment, as opposed to distinguishing humans from the natural order. This is most marked, perhaps, in Taoism, which sees human nature as intricately and indissociably linked with nature. Under Taoism, as John M. Koller observes, "humanity and nature [are] a unity" with the "basis of humanity … contained in the being and the function of the totality of the universe" (284).[5] One of the more common anecdotes of this mystical world-view is Zhuangzi's dream of a butterfly. In his dream, Zhuangzi dreamed that he was a butterfly, "fluttering about joyfully just as a butterfly would" (21). While he was a butterfly, he knew nothing about his life as Zhuangzi. However, when he awoke, he wondered whether he had been dreaming about being a butterfly, or whether the butterfly was now dreaming about being Zhuangzi. This anecdote is often taken to illustrate the theme of transformation and metamorphosis in Taoist thought, including the idea that humanity and nature are inextricably intertwined.

In the revival of Confucian thought from the eleventh century, also known as Neo-Confucianism, inspired by the expanding influence of Buddhism, a primary focus on human virtue was maintained but also drew support from the observed ordering of the natural world. As Koller writes, "the order in society that issues from the ordering and rectification of the individual was held to have a foundation in the very structure of the universe" (312). This was apparent in earlier Confucianism, but became emphasized through Taoist and Buddhist influences. The Confucian text *The Doctrine of the Mean* observes that "the way of Heaven and Earth is large and substantial, high and brilliant, far-reaching and long-enduring" (*Four Books* xxvi, 420). From a distance, the sky may seem like a mere "bright shining spot," but closer inspection reveals the "inexhaustible extent, the sun, moon, stars, and constellations of the zodiac" (*Four Books* xxvi, 420). Similarly, earth may seem like a "handful of soil" at first glance, but in its full expansiveness is capable of maintaining the weight of mountains and the waters of rivers (*Four Books* xxvi, 420-21). A close observation of nature reveals both its complexity and regularity, its codependence across various forms. In the same way, Neo-Confucian thought emphasized the regularity of the social order based on an observation of natural principles. The leading Neo-Confucian thinker Cheng Hao wrote, "there is no difference between Nature and man" (*Source Book* 538). Cheng Hao also stated that the same heavenly principle "governs both Heaven and the human world" (qtd. in Liu 87).[6] Similarly, Mencius had earlier stated that "to understand one's nature is to understand the cosmos"

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[4] For more on this discussion, see (Callicott and Ames; Danta).

[5] Koller's book *Oriental Philosophies* is a somewhat dated, but nonetheless highly empathetic and accessible introduction to Asian philosophies, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and Taoism.

[6] As Liu explains, Cheng Hao posited that human norms are "part of the fabric of [a] world" that is already "organized, structured, and regulated by principles" (88).

(qtd. in Angle and Tiwald 51). Altogether, this cultivation of human nature based on observations of the natural order emphasized what a recent critic has termed as "the oneness hypothesis" (Ivanhoe 1). Philip J. Ivanhoe writes that East Asian philosophy tends to underscore that "our personal welfare or happiness – are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things" (1). With respect to Neo-Confucianism, Ivanhoe observes that "the self [is] in some deep sense not only connected or intermingled with other people, creatures, and things but coextensive with the universe" (25).

As earlier noted, it is not my intention to delve into the specific differences between these East Asian philosophical traditions, but rather to highlight a point of contrast between East Asian philosophy in general with a highly anthropocentric Western tradition. Understanding this distinction allows us to make sense of Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*. While the hen lives in constant tension with the weasel, refusing to make a "permanent home anywhere" to elude the weasel mother, the alienating force comes from an artificial ordering of a human-dominated society, rather than the reservoir or natural environment (Hwang, *Hen* 85). Another pronounced feature of Neo-Confucianism important to highlight here is its emphasis on social virtue. Humans earn respect based not on their innate genius or individual capacity, but rather in terms of fulfilling their social function in a virtuous way. Neo-Confucianism (and East Asian philosophy, more generally) rarely emphasizes individual virtue separate from the harmony of the social body. This again is underpinned by observations of the natural order, in which no species or element exists in a vacuum. Neo-Confucianism underscores what Brook Ziporyn has noted to be the "theme of dependence and interdependence" in Taoism, while attending to the ethics that emerge from that difference (qtd. in Zhuangzi 28fn). The ideal social order is manifest in "the way of heaven and earth," as seen in the sky, earth, mountain, and rivers.

## The Orders of the Human and the Natural

Animals have long featured in children's stories, dating back to folk tales and oral traditions from agrarian societies. Poultry in two Western children's stories, "Chicken Little" and "The Little Red Hen," are alternately associated with absurd or studious behavior, with an implicitly didactic message aimed at child readers or listeners. More generally, chickens tend to be "defined by their gender," as Boria Sax notes, "to a point where they hardly appear to belong to a single species" (*Mythical Zoo* 155-56). In particular, hens have served as "symbols of domesticity and maternal care," since they "seem unconcerned about all else, even the cock," when brooding on their eggs (Sax, *Mythical Zoo* 156). It is hence noteworthy that Sprout, the hen in Hwang's story, earns the respect of the barnyard animals and a sense of meaning in her life by laying a duck's egg and nurturing the hatched duckling. Sprout becomes indelibly associated with maternal feeling and sacrifice, to the extent that she subordinates her own well-being and health to raising the duckling. In this Korean tale, Sprout emphasizes maternal virtue within a constellation of social virtues highlighted by a traditionally Neo-Confucian culture. Perhaps more significantly, she and the other animals become a vehicle for thinking about the natural order, in which such virtues can be regained, in contrast to the human ordering of society in the barnyard. Animals in this story become an extension of a human world-view, encompassing the perceived relation between humans and nature, based on cultural memory and philosophical tradition.

Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* was translated into English by Chi-Young Kim and published by Penguin Books in 2013. This publication was followed by other translations of Hwang's stories, such as *The Dog Who Dared to Dream* and *Miracle on Cherry Hill*, published by Abacus in 2016 and 2019 respectively. *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* is not a direct translation of the original title, which would more literally translate to "The Hen Who Left the Yard" (*Madangeul Naon Amtak*). The Korean story, published in 2000, has become a contemporary classic, with an animated adaptation released in 2011.[7] The English translation with illustrations by Nomoco is only one of a number of forms in which this story now appears. Even the Korean publisher has released a twentieth anniversary edition of the story with a new format and illustrations. The multitude of ways in which this story is now enjoyed points to its emerging status as a classic children's tale in the making.

While it is not the goal of this paper to compare the different formats and media in which this story is now widely enjoyed, it is worth comparing the original version of the Korean story with the translated version. The illustrations in the original Korean story underscore some of the main themes observed even in the English translation. The first illustration in the original story features Sprout with her head turned away from the viewer, alone in her cage amid a snowy winter. Following this illustration, a double-spread image of chickens packed into cages under neon fluorescent lightbulbs interrupts the reading of the written narrative. In this illustration, chickens franctically gobble their feed, confined in row upon row of cages. The next illustration shows a wheelbarrow of dead chickens that have been culled, having spent their function as egg-producing hens.[8] Without even looking at the rest of the book, the illustrator Hwan-Young Kim sets the stage and context for the yard from which the hen escapes. The original title is telling here, as it literally translates to "The Hen Who Left the Yard." Visually, the hen leaves an oppressive and artificial society geared towards profit for a more natural order of life, maturation, regeneration, growth, and eventually death. The hen is conspicuous from the beginning for having left a human-organized society in which animals serve as mere tools for economic gain and exploitation. Instead, the hen seeks a form of freedom as well as an ecological connection through her journey in the reservoir.

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[7] To further complicate matters, the title of the film has been translated as *Leafie: A Hen into the Wild*. Chi-Young Kim has translated the hen's name (*saessak*) as "Sprout," rather than "Leafie." For more on the significance of this translation, see (Kiaer 65-66).

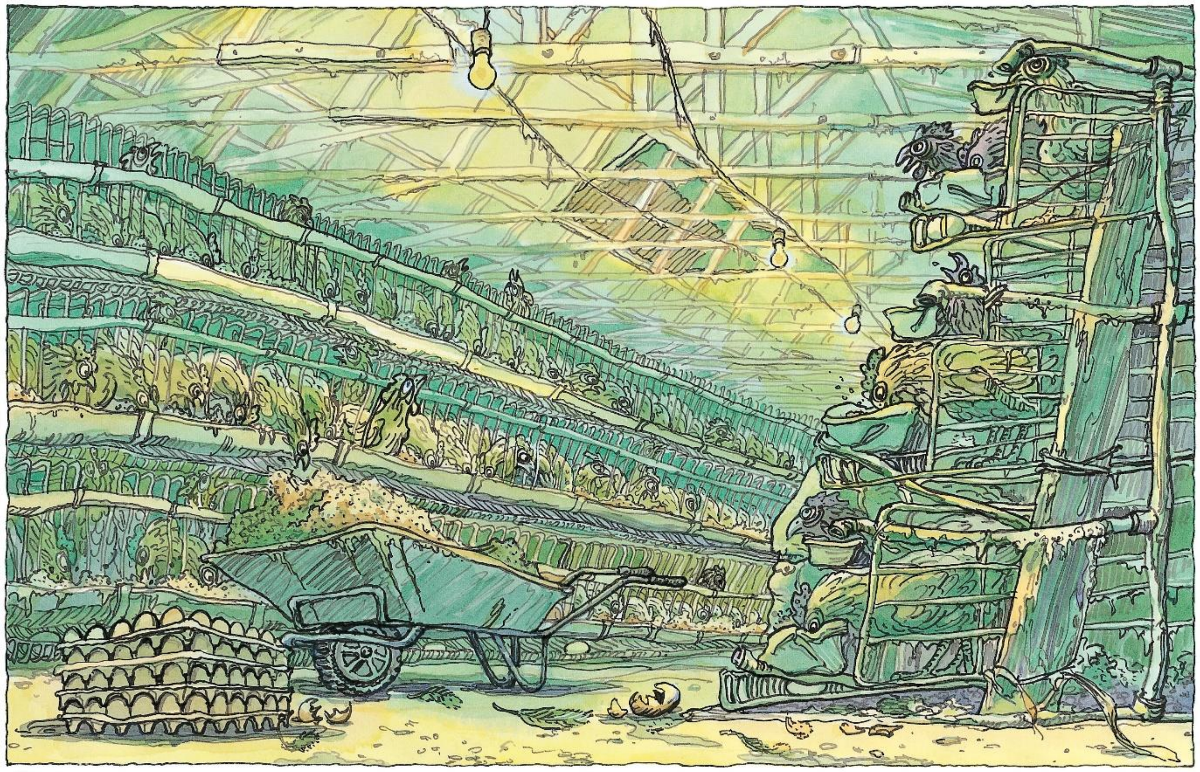

Fig. 1: "Go on, eat so you can lay lots of big eggs!" (Hwang, *Hen* 8).[9] Reproduced with permission.
© Sakyejul Publishing / Hwan-Young Kim

This distinction between a human-organized society centered on animal exploitation and economic gain, leading to a competitive hierarchy among the barnyard animals, is also apparent in the translated text. The hen peers out of her cage bars at "the world outside," inspired by the acacia trees blooming with white flowers (Hwang, *Hen* 6). She is envious of the tree for "laying" flowers again, "overcome with excitement" when she sees the leaves "reborn in light green" in the spring (7). Her meditations and reflections are brusquely interrupted by the farmer's voice. "Always so hungry!" he grumbles as he feeds the chickens, "You better make it worth it. This feed isn't cheap" (6). Hwang intersperses the hen's meditations and desire to lay an egg with the farmer's loud voice. "Go on, eat so you can lay lots of big eggs!" (8). Whenever humans appear, they sound like disembodied voices and, indeed, we never see the humans' faces in the original illustrated version. When Sprout falls sick, the reader hears the detached human voices float into the narrative. "We can probably get something for the meat, right?" the farmer's wife asks her husband, shortly before they cull the hen (16). When Sprout returns to the yard, the farmer spots her and remarks to his wife that perhaps they might "boil it for soup tomorrow evening" (69). When they see the duckling that she has hatched, they ponder whether to "put him in a cage or to clip his wings" (70). The animals are disposable to the farmer and his wife, who openly consider replacing their faithful dog for being too old. They tie up the duckling in the yard, hoping to fatten it so that it cannot fly away (see Hwang, *Hen* 103-5). Whenever humans emerge in the narrative, it is often to cast the animals in economic terms of value and consumption. The human voices represent an instrumental mode of seeing animal existence as subordinate to human needs.[10]

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[8] These illustrations can be found in (Hwang, *Madang* 11, 14-15, 22).

[9] This illustration from chapter one shows the imagined conditions in the coop where egg-laying hens, like Sprout, are kept and fed. Illustration from the original Korean storybook (Hwang, *Madang* 14-15).

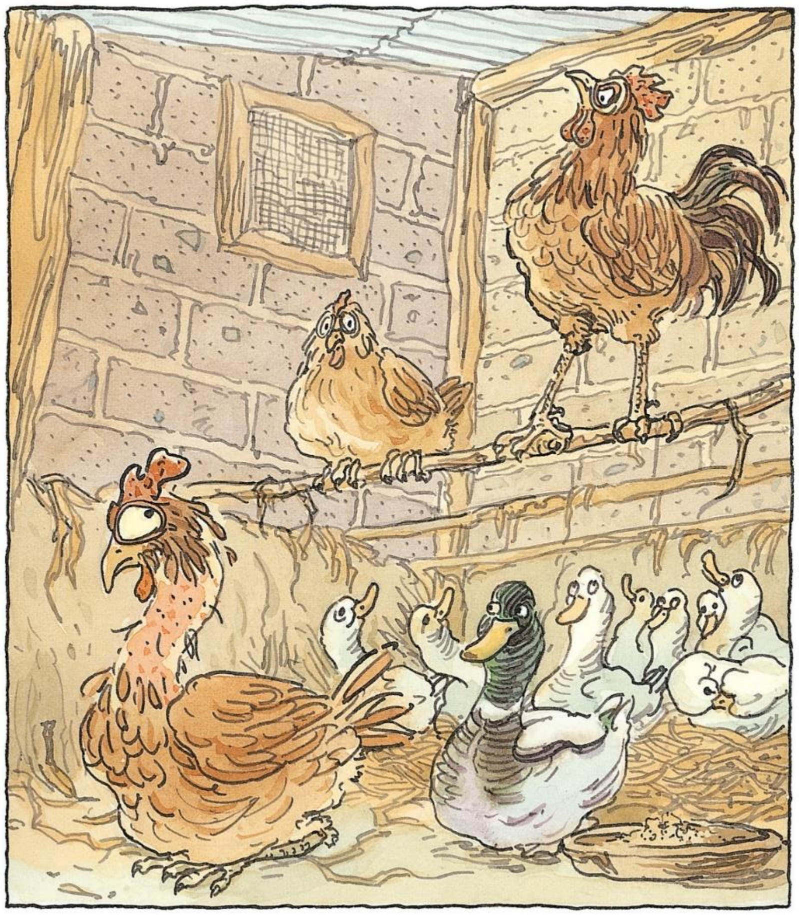

Fig. 2: "Nobody wants you!" the rooster scoffs at Sprout (Hwang *Hen* 30).[11] Reproduced with permission.
© Sakyejul Publishing / Hwan-Young Kim

If the humans only emerge to vocalize an economic valuation of animal life, the animal society in their barnyard is shaped by the competitive politics and petty comparisons between animals that serve human-designated functions. The dog takes pride in guarding the yard, often with contempt for outsiders like Sprout and her friend duck, Straggler. The roosting hen disdains Sprout for being unable to hatch her eggs, basking in her "voluptuous body, lustrous feathers, and neat comb" in comparison to Sprout's scrawny appearance (Hwang, *Hen* 28). She insists, with an implicit understanding of her importance to the human owners, "If I'm to hatch chicks, everything must be peaceful. I'm sure everyone remembers that I've lost all my chicks" (28). The rooster dismisses Sprout, crying out that he is "the head of the barn" that makes "every decision" (27). These barnyard politics are more visually apparent in the original illustrated book, which feature a partly plucked Sprout cowering under the rooster's contemptuous glare. The animals in the barnyard acquire their sense of importance from human-designated functions in an artificially ordered society. In leaving the barnyard, Sprout grows and matures with a new sense of confidence. As a barnyard duck observes about her towards the end of the story, "You seem different from our hen. It's odd: you're more confident and graceful, even though you're missing some feathers" (123). Having left the barnyard, Sprout acquires a new appreciation for the ecological connection between species, even when it leads to her own death.

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[10] This contrasts with a more intimate, cross-species companionship between a human owner and his dog in *The Dog Who Dared to Dream*, which nonetheless involves some measure of human aggression against animals.
[11] "In this barnyard hierarchy, Sprout is at the lowest of the pecking order. Illustration from the original Korean storybook (Hwang, *Madang* 40).

It helps to consider here the perceived condition of Korean children around the turn of the century. While statistics have since improved, Korea has long been known for its unhappiness index among children (see Byun; C. Kim). Until recently, Korea also had the highest suicide rate among the OECD countries (see Yoon; "Korea's suicide rate"). The education system in Korea remains highly competitive, ranking students according to their test scores on a regular basis ("Art and Science"). Bullying is also prevalent in Korea, fuelled in part by an intensely competitive and meritocratic school system. Test scores at school are often the earliest indicators of a person's future success, their university placement, and eventual income level. As a highly collectivistic and group-oriented culture, Korean children are acutely aware of appearing "different" or being cast as outsiders. These social phenomena are indirectly referenced in *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly*, such as the scenes of the barnyard animals denigrating the hen as being useless, worthless, and unwanted. The rooster mocks her, upon learning that she was culled, scoffing that "nobody wants you" (Hwang, *Hen* 30). Sprout is conscious of her own "bedraggled and featherless" appearance in contrast to the roosting hen (28). The fertile hen scorns Sprout when she returns with a hatched duckling, remarking that if she had been "sold to a restaurant, then [she] wouldn't be such a disgrace" (66). The alternative to this oppressive barnyard hierarchy is the reservoir, where Sprout must fend for herself and protect her duckling. Despite the dangers of the reservoir, the natural order allows Sprout to fully come into her own as a mother – in other words, to attain an ideal of social virtue undistorted by human influence.

The animal, then, is located at the nexus of adult perceptions of child needs and the perceived deficiencies of human society. The animal character becomes a vehicle for exploring imagined child desires, while moving back and forth between the human and natural orders. The work of Philippe Ariès and, more recently, Jacqueline Rose, has made it possible to study children's literature as revealing adult perceptions of child desires, occasionally projecting adult desires onto the imagined child. Colin Manlove also points out that "adult constructs of children and childhood" have evolved over time (10). Children's literature may seem intended for children, but also distils an imagined idea of childhood that, in turn, fulfils adult needs. As Manlove writes, "childhood … [became] an object of nostalgia and veneration" in the nineteenth century, "divided by its purity from adulthood" (13). Children's fantasy, in particular, "met a strong emotional need in the general public" in Victorian England, since "it often portrayed another and often pastoral world in which the imagination could be free and evils might be overcome" (14). Kimberley Reynolds adds that since "childhood [was] presumed to be innocent … many writers have felt it safe to let their private fantasies find expression in writing for children" (24). Similarly, the animal as allegorical figure acts as a cover for human desires in fables and children's stories. The animal in Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* thus reflects not only adult concerns over children in their society, but also an adult desire to be reintegrated into a less competitive and more harmonious order. Representations of animals, nature, and children in this story serve as a foil for adult expressions of the exhaustion of post-industrial life.[12]

The animal is also situated squarely within the ecological connections of death, life, and rebirth. These, in turn, seem inspired by Buddhist ideas of interdependence and universality (Hwang's own religion). Animals do live within a human-coordinated society, but at the expense of their freedom and independence. The duck Greentop is tied to a wooden stilt in the barnyard so that, as the weasel remarks, "he'll be so fat he won't be able to fly" (Hwang, *Hen* 103). Sprout also learns in the reservoir that chickens had once been able to fly before they had been farmed. She is informed by a duck that "your wings grow weaker and your behind grows bigger," as chickens become too heavy to fly (81). By leaving the barnyard, the hen reintegrates herself into a natural order of death and regeneration, the principles of which she had first observed with excitement in the acacia tree bordering the yard. As she looks over the reservoir, she notes, "someone died, and someone was born. Sometimes a farewell and greeting happened at the same time" (59). Her own name is taken from the desire for regeneration and growth, but remains, by definition, a fleeting and ephemeral state. "A sprout grew into a leaf and embrace the wind and the sun before falling and rotting and turning into mulch for bringing fragrant flowers into bloom" (7). As she further explains, "a sprout is the mother of flowers … it breathes, stands firm against rain and wind, keeps the sunlight, and rears blindingly white flowers" (52-53). Ironically, it is only through embracing the ephemeral condition of her life in the natural order that Sprout finds the confidence to devote herself to raising a duckling. She finds value, in spite of the transience of her life, in contributing to the beauty and vitality of the living world. It is by venturing into the wild that she finds not only her connection to the wider ecosystem, but also the possibility of holding onto and cultivating an ethical bond.

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[12] This social critique is also seen in Hwang's *The Dog Who Dared to Dream*. Hwang has also said that she writes her children's stories with adult readers in mind as well (Y. Kim).

## Cross-Species Companionship

Since the late twentieth century, critics have increasingly drawn attention to animals and other species in literature. The continued interest in non-human subjectivities in literature reflects a broader recognition of an environmental crisis and biodiversity loss. By shifting our attention away from anthropocentric modes of thinking and expanding our understanding of what it means to be human, critics have sought to explore and disclose the patterns of thought that have brought us to this ecological juncture. Animal studies have thrived alongside posthumanism and the environmental humanities, with other critics pointing to plant subjectivities and modes of existence in literary texts as well. Donna Haraway has explored the idea of "companion species," which has been picked up by critics in other fields (see Podberscek et al.). Importantly, however, Haraway's idea of "companion species" extends to animals that may be considered non-human "domestic partners" (*Companion* 14).[13] As Haraway writes, "generally speaking, one does not eat one's companion animals (nor get eaten by them)," implying that her idea of companion species may not be applicable to barnyard animals that have conventionally served economic functions (14). Stacy Alaimo has called for "trans-corporeal" thinking (2), while Rosi Braidotti has gestured to "cross-species transversality" (46). Others have called for "multi-species" ethnography, which take up the perceived need for thinking across species boundaries (Kirksey and Helmreich 545).[14] When it comes to children's literature, the association between children and animals has long been fraught with complications. While some see "physical and psychological resemblances" between children and animals (Dobrin and Kidd 5), others criticize the association between children and animals as inherently inferior to rational adults (see Straley; see also Sax, *Frog King* 2-3). Indeed, the recapitulation theory posited that children and animals traced a similar evolutionary path from primitive irrationality to rational independence. As Tess Cosslett writes, this theory projected children as "more primitive and more poetic, literally closer to animals, than adults" (480).[15]

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[13] Haraway also has a section on chickens in her book *When Species Meet* (265-74).

[14] See also (Mwangi) for a postcolonial study of animals in African literature.

[15] Cosslett also explains that the recapitulation theory posited that "the development of each individual parallels and is causally connected to, the development of the race as a whole" (479).

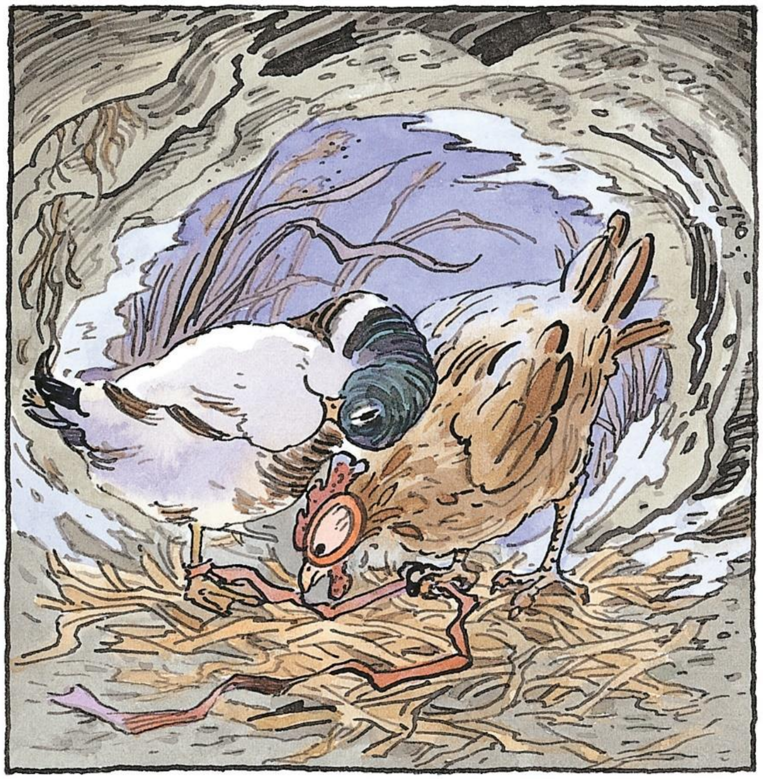

Fig. 3: A moment of cross-species affection.[16] Reproduced with permission. © Sakyejul Publishing / Hwan-Young Kim

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Such discussions of animals in literature often encounters an obstacle, particularly in children's literature, since such animal characters are usually rendered through a human perspective. Literature has tended to be anthropocentric and anthropomorphic, with the rise of the novel tied to the perceived tension between the individual and their society. Despite this, Caroline Hovanec is correct to note that "in some circumstances anthropomorphism offers a way of re-seeing and respecting animals within our necessarily human framework" (29). Jane Bennett also observes in *Vibrant Matter* that "a touch of anthropomorphism … can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being … but with variously composed materialities that form confederations" (99). Despite the tendency to allegorize animals in literature, Hwang's story does include moments of cross-species companionship and friendship. Indeed, the central relationship in the story is between a hen and her adopted duckling. The duckling's father, Straggler, confesses to the hen before his death that though they "look different" and "don't understand each other's inner thoughts … we cherish each other in our own way. I respect you" (Hwang, *Hen* 56). The reason for his respect is partly due to a recognition of social virtue, or, as Straggler continues, "because I know you're a wonderful mother" (Hwang, *Hen* 56). As Sprout later reflects, "Just because you're the same kind doesn't mean you're all one happy family. the important thing is to understand each other. That's love" (106).

The implications of such cross-species commitment and companionship are particularly interesting in a rather ethnically homogeneous society like Korea. The barnyard animals repeatedly remind the hen that her "baby" looks different from her and belongs to another species. Greentop does, indeed, leave Sprout in the end to leave with his "ethnic" family, the wild ducks. Another duck tells Sprout in the wild, "Even though a hen hatched him, a duck is a duck! Our kind never forgets how to swim or dive. … It's not something a chicken, who is confident in the yard but afraid of the fields, can do" (Hwang, *Hen* 81). The same duck says, "You can't keep thinking of him as a chick. Even though a hen hatched him, a duck is a duck" (83). The implication here is that the hen cannot have the duckling's best interests at heart, since a duck must be raised by their own kind. The entire narrative centers on the absurdity of their companionship, where a hen protects a duckling in the wild before sending him away to live with the wild ducks. She does take credit, however, for having taken him outside the barnyard and protecting him from the predators in the reservoir. Greentop confesses towards the end of the story that though "you [the hen] and I look different … I love you regardless" (121).

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[16] In their final moments together, Sprout tells her adopted child, Greentop (a mallard duck), to fly away with the other wild ducks. Sprout tells him to "follow [his] kind and see other worlds," reassuring him that she has many good memories to keep her company (Hwang, *Hen* 120). Illustration from the original Korean storybook (Hwang, *Madang* 171).

Such cross-species relationships emphasize the moral qualities of being a mother and child, rather than outward appearances or species categorization. The shift away from physical ties or biological lineage highlights the importance of moral virtues. It also potentially fosters an understanding of multi-racial families and cross-cultural friendships, where an escape to the natural order appropriately parallels a return to intrinsic moral values. Having cultivated and achieved this maternal virtue, Sprout resigns herself to be caught by the weasel, which she sees as analogous to flying away like Greentop. The hen's perspective shifts beyond her physical body to a spiritual presence, "gliding through the air with her large, beautiful wings," as she looks down at "the weasel limping away, a scrawny hen dangling from her jaws" (Hwang, *Hen* 134). This culmination of moral virtue connects with a wider sense of interconnection across species and the natural environment. The Korean illustrator Kim captures this winter scene through a sprawling aerial view of the barnyard and the reservoir, with the hen's body hanging from the weasel's jaws (Hwang, *Madang* 192-3).[17]

## Conclusion

It would seem odd to a Western reader that the hen, after a prolonged period of hardship and bullying, would meet her demise in this unheroic manner. In spite of her devotion in raising the duckling, she is not celebrated or recognized as a virtuous character. She does not reap the rewards of her sacrifice in the same way as, for instance, the titular character in "The Little Red Hen." The hen does not emerge triumphant over her nemesis the weasel, nor do her actions reform the human society in the barnyard. The somber endings of Hwang's animal stories seem to resonate with the minimalist illustrations by Nomoco in the English translation. A Western reader might find this story to be overly bleak and disheartening to a child audience. As noted earlier, this perception is a result of the differences in the evolving market for children's literature between the East and the West. Whereas Western societies witnessed a burgeoning market for children's stories that transformed the didactic and moralistic tales prior to the late eighteenth century into stories of delight, entertainment, and amusement, Korea saw an accelerated modernization that has abridged the gap between folk tales and modern children's literature. Folk tales, as earlier mentioned, impart wisdom and observations rooted in a culture's memory and traditional beliefs. Hence, one of the most common Korean tales for children is also one of the most depressing. "The Green Frog" tells the story of a frog who disobeys his mother throughout her lifetime. Based on this experience, his mother instructs him to bury her body in the river, not the mountain. Upon her death, the frog belatedly repents and obeys her wishes, mourning each time it rains in fear that her body will be washed away.[18] Such stories were intended to express wry humor and also to provide a folk explanation for croaking frogs near the riverside. It has become, however, one of the most widely-told tales for children in Korea, legitimating its status as a children's story.

The variations between Eastern and Western children's literature have yet to be mapped in great detail. The capitalist transformation of children's literature has also to be compared across cultures. Hwang's *The Hen Who Dreamed She Could Fly* borrows from Korea's cultural memory and folk tales, weaving a story that evokes traditional associations between a natural order and moral virtues. One of the more interesting additions in this story is the inclusion of a cross-species companionship that nonetheless becomes a memorable ethical bond. The hen is cast as a hero, inhabiting a hostile and inhospitable world, by virtue of her commitment, devotion, and maternal feeling. These, in turn, seem to offer child readers some assurance and comfort that social bonds and ethical commitments would allow them to flourish in a competitive and harsh world.

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[17] This idea of a return to nature and a more idyllic state is also seen in Hwang's *The Dog Who Dared to Dream*, where a lifetime of hardship is followed by the dog's reunion with her owner, her siblings, and her firstborn puppy, all of whom had died (see Hwang, *Dog* 166-67).

[18] A version of this well-known folk tale can be read in (*Long Long Time Ago* 108-10).

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