

Northern and Southern Interpretations of the myth of Hwang Chini.

Simon Kim, PhD, assistant professor at the French Language and Literature Department,
Korea University

montparnasse130@hotmail.com / simonkim@korea.ac.kr

1- Hwang Chini as a literary myth

Hwang Chini is one of the few genuine literary myths of Korea. The concept of literary myth, as opposed to a myth, is not precisely defined and it is often associated with those of theme and motive. To put it in a few words, a literary myth acts as a narrative pattern, with its main episodes fixed by literary tradition, but it also brings along its theme which can be, according to one single author's rendition, bear different meanings. The best example of a literary myth is that of Don Juan. Every body knows the narrative pattern, the story line, and yet from one author to the other, this pattern will bring along different interpretations. In Korean literature, we can find a few of these literary myths among which the most frequently used are the admiral Yi Sun-shin¹ and the Songdo *kisaeng* Hwang Chini.

Hwang Chini has left only a few *sijos* and *hansis* and very little is known about her life. Kevin O'Rourke, in his study on the Songdo *kisaeng*'s poetry², gives us a thorough review of all the ancient records we have on Hwang Chini; but none of these records are historical reliable documents. They all come from *yadam* anthologies – those anecdotal and fictional recollections of ancient times – written mostly after the seventeenth century. Our point here is not to discuss whether Hwang Chini really

¹ In the recent years, it is Kim Hun's *Song of the Blade (k'al-ŭi norae)* especially that gave the story of Admiral Yi Sun-Shin all its mythico-literary scale by giving the historical narrative a whole new interpretation. But we could also mention Kim T'ak-hwan's heroicist (bulmyŏl).

² See Kevin O'Rourke, "Demythologizing Hwang Chin-i", in Kim-Renaud, Young-Key, *Creative Women of Korea* (East gate book, 2004), pp.96-121.

existed or not; our point is to stress the fact that there are no extent account of Hwang Chini's life. All we have are episodes, scattered in a chronology difficult to reassemble. To the historian, this might be the worst study case, but to the writer, it gives an ideal setting for his or her imagination to grow on. By trying to fill in the gap between the different episodes, the writer gets involved in the creation of a new Hwang Chini who will bear part of his/her own fantasies. Chŏn Kyŏng-nim, in the foreword of her own rendering of the myth, shows how very well aware she is of this feature of the Hwang Chini myth:

“It may be so that Hwang Chini is a character of admiration created both by men and women of Korea through a collective unconsciousness of a woman long concealed inside our history. To men, who alone held the power for a very long time, she was an attractive anima with the power of beauty, a mysterious fate and an audacious personality fit to compete with them; and to the women, she was the emblem of a free soul, capable of filling in at once the long blank where women had been missing. And thus Hwang Chini is the name that was longed for and summoned repeatedly over the epochs.”³

It doesn't matter whether the Songdo *kisaeng* is a real historical character or not; what matters is that she has become the mold where the collective unconscious has poured its various fantasies, fascinating dozens of author. Hwang Chini is neither fake

³ Chŏn Kyŏng-nim, “chakka-ŭi mal”, *Hwang Chini*: 어쩌면 황진이는, 여성이 잠적했던 오랜 역사 속에서 집단 무의식을 통해 우리 남성과 여성이 동시에 상상해낸 동경의 인물일지도 모른다. 긴 세월 동안 고독하게 득세해온 남성에게는 그들에게 대적할 만한 담대한 인격과 신비로운 누명과 미적 권력을 가진 매혹적인 아니마로서, 여성에게는 실종된 여성성의 긴 공백을 단번에 메울 수 있는 존재론적 자유혼의 표상으로서, 진은 시대를 넘어서 거듭 불러 나온 그리운 이름인 것이다.

nor real, she is part of Chosŏn's history and yet her story is full of mythical elements⁴.

And the first author to gather the different sources and episodes into one somehow continuous⁵ story is Yi T'ae-jun, who started publishing his novel in June 1936 in the Chosŏn Chung'ang Ilbo⁶. In its final form, the novel holds three different parts. The first part retells the story, first found in Kim T'aegyŏng(1850-1927)⁷'s *Hwangjin chŏn*, that explains how Hwang Chini decided to embark on a *kisaeng* career after a young man died from his love for her.⁸ The second part gathers together several episodes regarding Hwang Chini's deeds as a famous *kisaeng*, such as the Pyŏk Kye-su episode, while the third and last part focuses on Hwang Chini's legendary meetings with Yi Sa-jong, Sŏn Master Chijok and Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏng-dŏk. With this first attempt of a 'novelization' of the various elements of the Hwang Chini myth, Yi T'ae-jun set the matrix for all the other Hwang Chini novels to come, drawing the portrait of a woman, free in her mind and spirit, master in her art, battling the odds to express her individuality in a society that would not permit it..

⁴ We mentioned the episode added by Kim T'aegyŏng, the event that led young Hwang Chini to become a *kisaeng*. The scene when the coffin passes in front of Hwang Chini's door and stops, refusing to move until Hwang Chini covers it with her own cloth, is the scene that propels the story into its mythical dimension. After that, other elements come in to strengthen this dimension, such as her beauty and her artistic talents so unnatural that people call her either a fairy or a goblin. Even her name takes a new dimension, "chin" standing for 'truth' or 'authenticity', at the light of her pursuit of genuineness and freedom, while her *ho*, "myŏngwŏl" (bright moon), refer to her nocturnal beauty (as it is especially well demonstrated on Ch'oe Inho's rendition of the myth).

⁵ In fact, Yi T'ae-jun's novel *Hwang Chin-i* does not precisely give a continuous account of the famous *kisaeng*'s biography. It is divided in three parts that isolate three series of episodes. Yi T'ae-jun's achievement lies in the fact that he gave a structure to the whole tale through his attempts to link the different parts together.

⁶ The publication of the novel was interrupted in September of that same year and it is only two years later that Yi T'ae-jun published in a single volume the completed version of his story.

⁷ Kim T'aegyŏng (1850-1927), *Hwangjin chŏn*.

⁸ "When she was 15-16 years old, a young student living next door caught a brief glimpse at her and wished to meet with her in private. But as this turned out not to be possible, the boy fell ill and died soon after. When the funeral procession passed in front of Hwangjin's house the coffin stopped and refused to move forward. When they heard the story of this young student that had died, people from the house went to beg Hwangjin for her *chŏkori*. After the *chŏkori* was laid on the coffin, it started to move again. Hwangjin was deeply moved and thereafter decided to become a *kisaeng*." (Kim T'aegyŏng, *Hwangjin chŏn*).

It is therefore not surprising that Yi T'aejun would choose her to write in the mid-1930, while Korea was under the Japanese colonial yoke, a so-called historical novel. At that time, Yi T'aejun was involved with a group of young Korean intellectuals prone to rehabilitate the classics from ancient Korea. One of its main members was the specialist of Korean classical literature Kalam Yi Pyōnggi who wrote the foreword to Yi T'aejun's *Hwang Chini*. This movement aimed at defying the Japanese cultural policy by bringing back Korean cultural heritage to remind its readers of a so-called koreanhood to be retrieved through this heritage. In this context, the figure of the free-spirited *kisaeng* Hwang Chini seems very well chosen. Yet Yi T'aejun confesses, in the after-words of his novel, that his narrative follows that of the *Songdo Ilgi*⁹, and thus remains close to the *yadam* collections. Her mere evocation seems sufficient to Yi T'aejun to express his will to remain faithful to his koreanhood in a time of strong Japanese imperialism.

2- Recent contribution to the Hwang Chin-i literature in the South's recent years

After Yi T'aejun's inaugural novel, an important number of novels and short-stories were dedicated to the famous *kisaeng*, and most follow the path drawn by Yi T'aejun and stick the figure of Hwang Chini within the boundaries of sensationalized historical novel (see Pak Chonghwa's short story "Hwang Chini-ŭi yōkch'ōn" [1955] and Chōng Hansuk's 1955 novel *Hwang Chini*, for instance).

⁹ Despite what Yi T'aejun confesses, there are elements that are not from any of the *yadam*, and those very elements distinguish the novel from its sources and characterize it as Yi T'aejun's very own work with a thirst for revenge that is not perceivable in the *yadam* but that he adds with previously non-existing episodes such as the encounter with Kim Chihak, the son of Kim Ch'amp'an who had opposed the wedding of his son with Chini once he had learned she was not a legitimate child.

Then, in 1972, Ch'oe Inho wrote two texts entitled *Hwang Chini* while another story written the very same year broaches the 'novelization' of Hwang Chini. This later story, *Musŏun poksu*, is very interesting in the sense that it counterbalances the utterly mystical tone of the two *Hwang Chini* texts. The two short stories take up three of the episodes from the *yadam* tradition: the story of the young boy dying from his love, the story of Yi Sajong's visit to Hwang Chini, and the episode with Chijok sŏnsa, the zen master. What strikes us when we read those two stories is the surreal touch the author used to depict those three encounters. In the first one, the dead boy is depicted as a snake coiled up within Hwang Chini. In the second one, Yi Sajong and Hwang Chini don't even meet, and yet they share a very mystical intercourse, Yi's flute literally undressing Chini. Yi is said to hold the moon in his hands and of course Chini's *ho* means 'bright moon'¹⁰... The third episode with Chijok sŏnsa is just as surreal as the first two. Let us also note that the second story's subtitle is *Mara-ŭi ttal, the Devil's daughter*. The image Ch'oe Inho depicts is that of pure desire, incarnated lust and ambition. He does not describe Hwang Chini as a lustful woman; Hwang Chini *is* desire, lust and ambition.

Kim T'akhwan's rendition of the Songdo *kisaeng*'s myth, published in 2002 and then turned into a popular television drama, is utterly different. Here, all lust is obliterated; the physical and therefore sexual elements of the myth are purposely repudiated. We are left with the more intellectual and/or ideological aspects of the myth.

¹⁰ Ch'oi Inho, *Hwang Chini 1*, p.23-25 : "He held out his hand but felt no resistance, and the moonlight, just as the lines drawn in his palm weighed nothing no matter how hard he could clench his fist. However the moonlight, tightly held within the clenched fist, drops rays of blue light scattering in every directions. The man closed his fist tighter. The moonlight ran down dribbling. Holding his flute in one hand, he flung open the window. The light glowed even brighter. You, moonlight! (...) Hwang Chini was being undressed. Under some sort of tall tree. Her clothes were being taken off one by one. She was thinking: this is wrong, this is wrong. But her body was not responding to her will. A mysterious wind was blowing from somewhere undressing her as if it was licking her. Within this wind a transparent hand was undoing every knots of her clothes".

Written as a testimony by Hwang Chini herself, the novel *I, Hwang Chini*, describes the struggle to overcome the limits set by society upon an individual. Over the *Bright moon* image with all its nocturnal mystery that was so present in Ch'oe Inho's short-stories, Kim T'akhwan chooses to focus on the *chin*, the truth aspect. Hwang Chini, the truthful one, strives to live up to her spiritual ideals, the ideals of her friends and respected masters such as Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngtŏk¹¹. But when truth and authenticity are not accepted as such, they are distorted, tarnished by evil minds. This is what conveys Kim T'akhwan's myth. Here, Hwang Chini's encounter with zen master Chijok sŏnsa is pure and innocent. But people looked at it scornfully and spread the rumor afterward. Truth is pure and innocent, it moves in the most intelligent circles, but in the end, Truth is not accepted as pure and innocent, so she has to struggle to free herself from the distortions of others.

In that sense, Kim T'akhwan's Hwang Chini and Chŏn Kyŏngnin's one share a lot in common. They both fight to overcome the barriers set by society. But when Kim T'akhwan's Hwang Chini was all engaged in the pursuit of spirituality, cultivating her moral sense to become a better person, a better 'Truth', Chŏn Kyŏngnin does not try to deprive Hwang Chini from her reality as a woman and as a *kisaeng*. Therefore, she experiences love and physical attractions, and it is as a woman that she struggles against a male-dominated society¹². There is undeniably a feminist stand in Chŏn Kyŏngnin's approach. All the other female characters of the novel are unhappy women, whatever

¹¹ Kim T'akhwan's novel begins after the death of Hwadam Sŏ Kyŏngtŏk. His disciple Hŏ T'aehwi urges Hwang Chini to write something in memory of her master and friend. She then takes this opportunity to justify herself and re-establish the truth about her life, unjustly distorted and tarnished.

¹² Chŏn Kyŏngnin's Hwang Chini explains why she wants to become a *kisaeng*, saying: "I have to get out of here because if I don't they're gonna want to marry me off as a concubine or as a second wife" (vol.1, p.190) and later on she adds: "I may dip myself in dirty waters and live a low life but may it be long or short I intend to live a life of freedom, relieved from the questions of what is low and what is noble" (vol.1, p.192).

their social status might be¹³. Hwang Chini only is described as a free, almost superior being, trying to be as unaffected as possible by the constraints of her reality to protect her freedom.

In Chŏn Kyŏngnin's novel just as in most of the other Hwang Chini novels, the character of Hwang Chini is almost superheroic compared to the other characters. She is never described as a 'normal' woman; she always bears something transcendental, something surreal or mystical in her being.

3- North Korean Hong Sŏkchung's *Hwang Chini*: A Story Without a Myth

In opposition with this tradition of mythologization of Hwang Chini in South Korea's contemporary literature, North Korea has come up with a totally different Hwang Chini.

North Korea too acknowledges Hwang Chini's historical and literary status. The *Chosŏn ryŏksa inmyŏng sajŏn* published in the North in 2002 introduces her as "a female musician from the early Chosŏn dynasty; a famous *kisaeng* from Kaesŏng during King Chungjong's reign and a famous singer." It also gives a brief review of the most famous episodes from the *yadam* collections. Therefore we can conclude that the Hwang Chini myth existed in North Korea, though may be not to the same extent as in the South, before Hong Sŏkchung, the grandson of a famous Korean writer, Hong Myŏnghŭi, published his novel *Hwang Chini*.

The very same year that Chŏn Kyŏngnin published her novel *Hwang Chini*, Hong Sŏkchung obtained the Manhae Literary Prize and became the very first North

¹³ Her mother, the step mother and her step sister are all described as unhappy characters: her mother because of her social status, her step mother and her step sister because of their condition as wives.

Korean author to win a prize in South Korea¹⁴.

Now the tour de force of Hong Sökchung's novel is that when we read it, it is just as if we were reading Hwang Chini's story for the very first time. All the episodes from the *yadam* are here, following the same narrative composition as Yi T'aejun's inaugural novel, and yet they are presented in such a way that they appear almost trivial. The episode of the young man's coffin stopping while passing by Chini's house is told as a side issue and explained in a very logical and realistic way¹⁵. Each time, the myth is defused. Hwang Chini is not a superheroic woman fighting for her freedom; she is a young woman trying to get by with her fate as realistically as possible. Every detail is brought down to this principle of reality and realism.

But what strikes the most the western or South-Korean reader is the presence of characters unknown from any classical records. Those are lower class people, secondary characters that would surely have been obliterated by any South Korean author wishing to draw a magnifying portrait of Hwang Chini. But in Hong Sökchung's novel, those characters bind the character of Hwang Chini to a reality even more humble because more concrete than that of the novels from the South where reality is that of the *yangban* class, that of the scholars or even a more abstract reality designed upon the opposition between men and women.

What makes the character of Hwang Chini even less mythical and more human

¹⁴ Published in North Korea in 2002, Hong Sökchung's novel was first proposed to the South Korean readers in 2004 in an edition published in partnership with the Munhak yesul ch'ulp'ansa from P'yöngyang, it was later on published by in a two volumes edition by Taehun.

¹⁵ Hong Sökchung explains the turmoil caused by the coffin procession and Hwang Chini's "gift of her cloth" to the dead by a costum called "*chisal padki*": "*First the funeral cortège will stop in front of a house, and then, from the moment the "swing" (küne ttwigì) starts, the non-sensical babbling of the leader of the procession comes to look like the talk of a dead soul in a shaman's mouth. A house that is hit by the "swing" must gag as quickly as possible the man's mouth otherwise, hiding behind the name of the dead soul, he might slander in all sorts of way or reveal all kinds of secrets, ruining all at once the house's entire reputation.*" (pp.153-154)

is her peculiar and yet intimate relationship with one of those characters, the man called Nomi, who actually appears as if he was the real main character of the novel. This is why all the famous episodes from the *yadam* are being told so trivially; they come in the narration as if on the side of the main story which would then be that of Hwang Chini's unfortunate love story with Nomi.

It would be nonetheless unfair to summarize Hong Sökchung's rendition of Hwang Chini's story as a mere love story between two outcasts, Chini being a *kisaeng* and Nomi ending up as a bandit; there is a strong meditation on the class division system, along with a well illustrated denunciation of hypocrisy and feigned virtue. But Hwang Chini no longer stands as the icon for genuineness against falsehood, she is herself part of that reality where genuineness and falsehood often are mixed. Chini and Nomi's love, for instance, is doomed from the very beginning because of the conscience of a class difference between the two that isn't even real after Chini becomes a *kisaeng*¹⁶.

And yet, one cannot but wonder why Hong Sökjung had to distort so much the original myth, adding these new fictional characters to the story. There are, of course, ideological and political issues at stake; but then why choose the Hwang Chini myth in the first place? Distorted so, it may even appear subversive in its original form in the light of the *Chuch'e* literary guidelines. For if Hwang Chini is revolutionary in her attempt to challenge the *yangban* class' hypocrisy and falsehood, she also holds the flag of freedom in her hands, as South Korean authors have well understood. And her thirst for personal freedom might have pass as a threat according to the North Korean literary

¹⁶ Despite the formal originality of the novel, all the elements of the *juch'e* literature are present in Hong Sökchung's novel: the criticism of the *yangban* class, the hero of the people. There is a very salient contrast between the "love" Hwang Chini shares with her hypocritical *yangban* "customer" and the "true" love she nurtures for Nomi. Nevertheless, it is true that the liberty with which certain scenes – and especially the sex scenes, but also the tragic end of Nomi and the triumph of hypocrisy – are described makes it quite unique in North Korea contemporary literature.

writing's agenda. Other elements in this novel, that, in many ways, is so unlike other North Korean literary works, question the South Korean or foreign reader, such as the description of intimate sex scenes. It is so that Park T'aesang evokes the possibility that may be a Hwang Chini novel was not meant for a North Korean public but for a South Korean public. He recalls that at the time the novel was published and distributed in the South, it was a time when North Korea, in need of economical openings, was actively promoting the partnership with South Korea on the Kaesŏng Industrial Complex project. In such a context, the use of the songdo/Kaesŏng *kisaeng* Hwang Chini might have represented a cultural way to reach the South Korean people in its heart and lead it to be more lenient and favorable to the development of the economical project.

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