

Creating a More Inclusive Canon for Premodern Korean Literature
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Introduction

Canon formation has long been a target of criticism for practices that lead to the marginalization of some forms of literature and writer groups. The case of Korea is certainly no different and has resulted in a long-standing hierarchy among literary forms and writer groups. The first canonical work in Korean literary history was the late fifteenth century *Tongmunsŏn* [東文選 Anthology of Eastern Literature] compiled by a team headed by Sŏ Kŏjŏng (徐居正 1420-1488) under royal edict. While this work claims to include all important pieces of literature from the previous ages in Korea, under Sŏ's editorial direction entire genres were ignored in the collection. Such an attitude continued throughout the Chosŏn dynasty and even until the present day in mainstream anthologies. This paper examines the factors behind this situation and my own efforts to reconcile this in the compilation of *An Anthology of Premodern Korean Prose: Literary Selections from the Tenth to the Nineteenth Centuries* (to be published with Columbia University Press).

Among the main issues of concern are the types of literature thought to canonical in Chosŏn and the present day, and the writers who have been thought deserving of canonical treatment. Such a situation has resulted in a dearth of certain genres in the historical canon, particularly narratives that might be classified as *yadam* (野談 unofficial histories) and *ilgi* (日記 diaries). Moreover, in terms of content, traditional and modern canons also ignore narratives that might be labelled as lewd or erotic (*yuktam* 肉談) or those that run counter to prevailing social ideals. Finally, the premodern canon tended to devalue or ignore writings by those outside the upper social status groups such as women and commoners.

The whole process of canon formation is one of culling and giving preference to one work over another. Harold Bloom describes this as "Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration."¹ It is difficult to argue with this and such a conflict is mostly likely unavoidable. Yet one should strive for a balance and a more inclusive canon. The literary aesthetic is fluid and varies from reader to reader. Students certainly demonstrate this as they may shun a piece renowned for its literary excellence—say *Kwandong pyŏlgok* [關東別曲 The wanderings] by Chŏng Ch'ŏl (鄭澈 1537-1594)—and instead flock to a *yadam* narrative that replete with bawdy humor. This, then, is the inherent problem in trying to form a literary canon and one that is not easily solved.

At any rate, this discussion will be one of explanation of how we are attempting to reshape the canon for premodern Korean prose for modern readers in the West to be a more representative collection representing what Koreans in past times really read and how they viewed the world.

Chosŏn Period Literary Ideals

The literary elites of Chosŏn certainly looked to China for some of their motivations for compiling literary collections. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a great deal of activity in terms of compiling or reprinting literary collections and this cumulated in Chosŏn with the publication of the *Tongmunsŏn* (東文選). This work was certainly influenced by the *Wen xuan* [文選 Selections of refined literature] and the *Guwenzhenbao* [古文真寶 Classic of true treasures of literature] of China

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 8-9.

and also by late Koryŏ compilations such as the *Tongguk mun'gam* [東國文鑑 Mirror of the literature of the Eastern Country] and *Tongin chi mun* [東人之文 Writings of the Eastern Country]. It was against such a backdrop that the creation of the *Tongmunsŏn* was spurred on and supported by the Chosŏn government. The chief compiler of this work, Sŏ Kŏ-chŏng, states inasmuch in the preface,

His Royal Majesty by nature is fond of learning and everyday he attends lectures and enjoys examining the Confucian Classics and Chinese histories. He thought that while [our] writings and literary works cannot be compared to the Six Confucian Classics, the rise and decline of literary vitality can be seen [through writings and literary works].²

Clearly the creation of this work was both a source of pride for the Chosŏn literati and also a means to measure the achievements of their country vis-à-vis Chinese states.

However, what needs to be stressed in terms of the government involvement in the creation of a literary canon is the focus and purpose of such a task. While both the main political factions in fifteenth century Korea, the Hungup'a (勳舊派 Faction of the meritorious and conservative) and the Sarimp'a (士林派 Faction of the Confucian moralists) had different ways of viewing literature, they did understand the relationship between literature and cultivating the Confucian way as being indivisible.³ Such a view certainly led to a culling of available literary works that matched the overall goals of the government elites. And in the preface to the *Tongmunsŏn*, Sŏ clearly states what type of literature was included:

I and the other vassals respectful to this grand commission collected various works in genres such as pieces in various categories such as *sa* (辭), epic (賦 *pu*), poetry (詩) and prose (文) from the Three Kingdoms to the current Chosŏn. We selected those in which the expressions and reasons are pure and just, helpful in ruling and educating, arranging these into 133 fascicles. These were bestowed the title of *Tongmunsŏn*.⁴

Such a tradition continued through premodern Korea. Literature deemed helpful or morally correct was promoted by the government and elites. Other literature was shunned and pushed to the side. Thus works such as the novel were the target of much government disdain and hand-wringing, especially in terms of their nefarious effect on the people and their morality.⁵ And other works were simply viewed as throw-away trite. Thus a strong hierarchy of literature was maintained by the governing elites throughout the Chosŏn period and certain genres were either altogether ignored or heavily criticized. It is this situation that continued into the modern era and the canon of Korean literature.

Canon Compilation in the Contemporary Era

It is not accidental that the modern canon reflects that of Chosŏn and the same sort of works are exalted today as they were in the past. It is a given in any Korean anthology that men such as Ch'oe Ch'i-wŏn (崔致遠 b. 857), Yi Kyu-bo (李奎報 1168-1241) and Yun Sŏndo (尹善道 1587-1671) are included. And they should be as they all represent a literary brilliance that should not go unnoticed by modern readers. Yet, one does find the canon lacking as certain genres are given prominence over others and certain groups are over-represented when

² *Tongmunsŏn*, 2b.

³ Pak Hyŏnsuk, *Chosŏn kŏn'gukki ūi munhak-ron* [Literary ideology in the age of the formation of Chosŏn] (Seoul: Iho munhwasa, 2002), 12-13.

⁴ *Tongmunsŏn*, 2b.

⁵ For more on this, see Michael J. Pettid, *Ungyŏng-jŏn: A Love Affair at the Royal Palace of Chosŏn Korea*, translation by Kil Cha and Michael J. Pettid (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2009), 55-61.

compared to other groups. Perhaps this is simply an extension of the human condition and borne of a desire to create hierarchies and rankings of a myriad things.

One of the main distinctions, especially in terms of what has been published in English, is that between poetry and prose. Poetry was absolutely the preferred and more highly valued genre in premodern Korea by ruling elites. Such a condition has extended to the English publications, but perhaps to a slightly lesser degree. Verse is copious and deserves proper presentation.⁶ But so too does prose, and this is where the chief problem is found in available materials in English. One would also raise a question about an attempt to more accurately represent the *writer* of premodern Korea. Obviously we cannot represent what has not been saved historically. But we can attempt to include the extant writings of women, commoners and others who have rarely been given voice in past compilations. One could extend this exclusionary tendency to genre as well, where the edifying work is given priority over the entertaining piece and the written supremacy over the oral. While no anthology can achieve a perfected balance, it is the belief of this writer that we need to at least try.

The most prominent anthology of premodern Korean literature in English is that compiled by Peter H. Lee, *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*.⁷ This has been the gold standard for premodern Korean literature for over thirty years now. As the preface informs, Lee wanted to provide a representative selection of premodern verse and prose, something that heretofore had not been available. Lee writes,

The purpose of this anthology is to make available to the general reader a representative selection of Korean literature from A.D. 600 to the end of the nineteenth century. The aim has been to present poetry and prose written in Chinese and Korean, ordered chronologically—with a few exception such as “foundation myths” and “biographies”—and to present them in accurate and readable translation. The contents were selected for their literary merit in consultation with leading scholars in Korea, who have also been helpful in other ways throughout the preparation.⁸

And the work has done much of what Lee hoped and gave the field a cornerstone for many years, now serving its third generation of students.

Yet despite the groundbreaking nature of the work, it has its shortcomings. First, is the whole idea of this work containing a “representative selection of Korean literature.” This is especially true concerning the prose in the volume. While it does contain several foundation myths and a few short pieces of prose from the Koryŏ dynasty, it passes over the more interesting forerunners of the novel (*sosŏl*) that comes to the fore by the mid-Chosŏn period. These writings include the pseudo-biographies (假傳 *kajŏn*) and the commentary (說 *sŏl*) that demonstrate the development of fictional writings in premodern Korea.

Second, in terms of Chosŏn period fiction we are largely limited to known writers of a high degree of fame. Kim Sisŭp (金時習 1453-1493), Hŏ Kyun (許筠 1569-1618)⁹ and Kim

⁶ There are several collections that deserve mention including the following: Peter H. Lee, *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Korean Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and Kevin O'Rourke, *The Book of Korean Poetry: Songs of Shilla and Koryŏ* (Ames, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006).

⁷ Peter H. Lee, *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981).

⁸ Peter H. Lee, *Anthology of Korean Literature: From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981).

⁹ Lee gives Hŏ as being the writer of *Hong Kiltong-jŏn* [洪吉童傳 The tale of Hong Kiltong] although most scholarship now agree that the presently extant version of this novel is probably not written by Hŏ.

Manjung (金萬重 1637-1692). Missing are the anonymous novels that dominated the literary world of mid- to late-Chosŏn.

Third concerns the types of writings excluded in Lee's anthology. While there is one excerpt from the literary miscellany *P'aegwan chapki* [稗官雜記 The storyteller's miscellany], the anthology lacks any inclusions in the much larger genre of *yadam/ yasa*. These narratives circulated among both elites and commoners for much of the Chosŏn period and provide excellent glimpse of life.

Finally, Lee's anthology has but four prose pieces written by women. While there are certainly less writings by women available to us today, we should strive to provide a more inclusive collection of literary selections for today's readers.

The above is not meant to be overly critical of Lee's valuable contribution to the field of Korean literature. Lee's work served as a pillar for Korean literary studies, and for many Western readers our first introduction to the field. But time does move on and our field has developed greatly over the past twenty years. Thus it is time for a new vision of Korea's literary history.

Contents of the *Columbia Anthology*

With an eye to expanding the types and variety of readings available in English on premodern the editors of the *Anthology* sought out works that would better represent both the diversity and development of premodern prose. Also, we saw a need to include short introductions on all of the contributions to give our readers the context of the piece, who the writer was (if known) and a discussion of the genre in general. The contents are as follows:

Pre-Koryŏ period fictional prose (Introduction)

Anonymous *Sui-jŏn* [Tales of the bizarre]:

“Simhwa yo t'ap” [Passion surrounding the pagoda], Michael Pettid

“Ch'ukt'ong minyŏ” [The beauty in the bamboo pipe], Michael Pettid

“Noong hwa ku” [The old man who became a dog], Michael Pettid

Koryŏ period prose works (Introduction)

Im Ch'un (d. 1170) “Kongbang-jŏn” [The tale of master coin], Sem Vermeersch

Yi Kyubo (1168-1241) “Kuk Sŏnsaeng-jŏn” [The tale of master malt], Michael Pettid

Ch'oe Cha (1188-1260) “Kim Kaein [Kim Kaein], Michael Pettid

Ch'oe Hae (1287-1340) “Yesan Ŭnja-jŏn” [The tale of the hermit of Yesan], Michael Pettid

Yi Saek (1328-1396) “Pak ssi-jŏn” [The tale of Mr. Pak], Michael Pettid

Creation of the literary canon in Chosŏn

Sŏ Kŏjŏng, et. al. *Tongmunsŏn* [Anthology of Eastern literature, 1478] Preface, Grace Koh

Early Chosŏn short fiction

Kim Sisŭp (1435-1493) “Ch’wi yu Pubyŏkchŏng-gi” [An Account of Drunken Merriment at Pubyŏk Pavilion, Gregory N. Evon

Chosŏn long fiction

Anonymous *Pak ssi-jŏn* [The tale of Lady Pak], Jeongsoo Shin and Peter Lee

Anonymous *Changhwa Hongnyŏn-jŏn* [A tale of Two Sisters, Changhwa and Hongnyŏn], Jeongsoo Shin and Peter Lee

Anonymous, *Wanwŏlhoe maengyŏn* [excerpt], Ksenia Chizhova

Cho Wihan (趙緯韓, 1567-1649) *Ch’oe Chŏk-jŏn* [崔陟傳 The tale of Ch’oe Chŏk], Sookja Cho

Total: 40000 words (approx.)

Chosŏn period ‘unofficial’ histories

Sŏ Kŏjŏng (1420-1488) *T’aep’yŏng hanhwa kolgye-jŏn* [Idle talk in a peaceful era]

Five pieces (these are untitled, so that will be added at translation), Michael Pettid

Yu Mongin (1559-1623) *Ŏu yadam* [Unofficial histories by Ŏu], Michael Pettid

“Sŏnggyun’gwan kwisin” [The ghost of the National Confucian Academy]

“Yŏu kogae” [Female fox pass]

“Kkoe rŭl naeo sat’onghan Pak Yŏp” [Pak Yŏp who had illicit sex through a clever scheme]

“Sim Sugyŏng ũi kŏmun’go wa kungnyŏ” [Sim Sugyŏng’s zither and the palace woman]

“Kumjurin tojŏk” [The starving thief]

Anonymous *Kogŭm soch’ong* [Collection of humor from past and present], Michael Pettid

“Ch’ŏnnyŏ sŏnsŭp” [The maiden who practiced beforehand]

“Samnyŏ kŏma” [Three women who inspected the deaf-mute]

“Sŏjo puung” [The son-in-law who ridiculed his father-in-law]

“Kamo ch’obu” [The mother-in-law who scolded her daughter-in-law]

“Omyo tongsim” [Profundity that shook the heart]

Late Chosŏn Period: Autobiography, Social Commentary, and Philosophical Humor

Pak Chiwŏn (1737-1805) “Yedŏk sŏnsaeng-jŏn” [穢德先生傳], Charles La Shure

Pak Chiwŏn “*Myŏngron* [名論 On names], Kim Youngmin and Kim Youngyeon

Yi Tŏngmu (李德懋, 1741–1793) *Immokkusim-sŏ* [耳目口心書 The book of ears, eyes, mouth and heart], Jamie Jungmin Yoo

Hansan Yi-ssi, *Hansan Yi-ssi kohaengnok* [The record of my hardships, 1718], Si Nae Park

Palace Literature

Anonymous *Kyech’uk ilgi* [Diary of the year Kyech’uk] (excerpt), Kil Cha & Michael Pettid

Oral Narratives:

P’ansori obat’ang (“five p’ansori narratives”), Introduction, translation, and commentary by Chan E. Park

Anonymous Shim Ch’ŏng-ga [Song of Shim Ch’ŏng] (excerpt)

Anonymous Ch’unhyang-ga [Song of Ch’unhyang] (excerpt)

Anonymous Sugung-ga [Song of Underwater Palace] (excerpt)

Anonymous Hŭngbo-ga [Song of Hŭngbo] (excerpt)

Anonymous Chŏkpyŏk-ka [Song of the Red Cliff], adaptation from Sanguozhi, “Records of the Three Kingdoms,” by Chen Shou (excerpt)

Naturally we are limited by length restraints set by the Press, so meeting all of our goals was difficult. One of the first objectives was to demonstrate the development of Korean prose writings and to that end we wanted to include early prose pieces. We started with pieces from the *Sui-jŏn* [殊異傳 Tales of the bizarre] a work that dates to the late Silla or early Koryŏ period. While the pieces are short, they do demonstrate that fiction was alive and well in 10th century Korea. They also display the eclectic worldview of Koreans during this time before the ascendancy of Confucianism as a dominant social system.

Second, we wanted to include the aforementioned pseudo-biographies (假傳 *kajŏn*) and the commentary (說 *sŏl*). These clearly show how fiction developed from Koryŏ to Chosŏn and led to the early novel. These are followed by an early Chosŏn piece written by Kim Sisŭp before we move to four longer pieces of mid- to late-Chosŏn fiction. Three of these works are anonymous, one of which is written by a woman. This adds variety of writer group to our collection and moves us away from the old standbys such as Kim Manjung who has deservedly been the focus of a number of works in English.

Third to broaden the types of genres represented, we included three groups of *yadam*—one from the early, one from the mid- and one from the late-Chosŏn. Here we can see how this genre developed from collections by known writers to the unknown, and how the topics covered ranged from ghost stories to erotic tales. This better represents what Koreans read for enjoyment in past times and helps us understand that the people of centuries past were not that much different than we are today.

Subsequent to this, we wanted to add to our anthology some different types of prose writings that are sometimes overlooked when discussing literature. Thus we added a section on Autobiography, Social Commentary, and Philosophical Humor. Writings from Pak Chiwŏn and Yi Tŏngmu are of upper status elites, while that by Lady Yi gives voice to a woman in her autobiographical piece. This followed by an excerpt from *Kyech'uk ilgi* [癸丑日記 Diary of the year *kyech'uk*], presumably written by a palace woman and a representative sample of palace literature.

Finally, we end the collection with excerpts from each of the five extant *p'ansori*. This expands our anthology to the realm of oral literary works and the literature of the common person of the late Chosŏn.

Conclusion

Nothing is perfect and that applies to our selections for the *Anthology*. We tried to build upon and improve on what had been done to this point. But we are bound by the same rules as all compilers of such a collection: we are limited by space, time, and our own interests. Sir Frank Kermode wrote, Canons, which negate the distinction between knowledge and opinion, which are instruments of survival built to be time-proof, not reason-proof, are of course deconstructable; if people think there should not be such things, they may very well find the means to destroy them. Their defense cannot any longer be undertaken by central institutional power....¹⁰

We wholeheartedly agree with such a view. Canons are inherently flawed, but vital to the spread of knowledge. This is especially true to literary studies of premodern Korea where the number of specialists is extremely limited. To create interest among students we need to acknowledge diversity in genre, writing style, writer, social class and gender.

¹⁰ Sir Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention*, quoted in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 4.