

7th World Congress of Korean Studies

“Re-thinking Canonicity in Pre-modern Korean Literature”

Gregory N. Evon,
School of Humanities and Languages,
Arts and Social Sciences, UNSW Australia
g.evon@unsw.edu.au

Abstract: The question of “a canon” in pre-modern Korean literary studies is tremendously complex for a variety of interconnected reasons. To begin with, the idea of a canon in its commonplace application is a twentieth-century innovation that reflects the massive intellectual, social, political, and educational restructuring that began in Korea in the late nineteenth century. Prior to that point, there certainly were exemplars of literature that had been compiled and that therefore attested to a vision of what was worth preserving. The most important, famous, and largest of these was *The Literary Selections from the East [i.e., Korea]* (東文選), overseen by Sō Kōjōng [徐居正 1420-1488] in the late fifteenth century. But Sō was not alone. At roughly the same time, Kim Chongjik [金宗直 1431-1492] compiled *Odes of the Green Hills* (靑丘風雅). Both of these works were in Literary Sinitic (漢文), and their dates of compilation were no coincidence. These represented the aspirations of the elite in the newly-established Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), and these collections cannot be properly seen outside of their political implications. To select, compile, and publish these collections represented Chosŏn’s right of succession on the Korean peninsula. A clear contrast can be found in *The Everlasting Sounds [i.e., Sijo] of the Green Hills* (靑丘永言), a collection of vernacular Korean *sijo* compiled by Kim Ch’ōnt’aek (金天澤; exact dates unknown) in the early eighteenth century. It was not published, and instead circulated in manuscript; based on the number of variant manuscripts, it seems to have been recopied numerous times. Another example, drawn from the history of fiction-writing, presents a variation on these questions. When Kim Ch’unt’aek (金春澤 1670-1717) translated Kim Manjung’s (金萬重 1637-1692) vernacular novel, *Lady Sa’s Journey to the South* (謝氏南征記), into Literary Sinitic, he did so on the grounds that the novel was an acceptable piece of literature. What made it acceptable was that it was characterized by an unambiguous Confucian morality and thus had Confucian educational value. Nonetheless, its value was blunted by the fact that it had been written in the vernacular; hence the decision to translate it into Literary Sinitic. The histories of these works as material objects makes plain the difficulty of speaking about “a canon” in Korea prior to the twentieth century. This difficulty is founded on a paradox. There was a clear idea of canonicity, but that idea was connected not to individual works; instead, it encompassed generic and linguistic distinctions. In addition, this idea of canonicity—so evident in Kim Ch’unt’aek’s translation of *Lady Sa* into literary Chinese—became most clearly articulated as it came under pressure from ideas associated with Archaism (擬古主義) and the Gong’an School (公安派), two competing schools of thought that took shape in late Ming China (1368-1644) and which were quickly imported into Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910). The overall effect was an increasing degree of literary conservatism that took shape through the end of the eighteenth century. Yet even then, what was chiefly emphasized was a canonical view of literature in Confucian terms, not “a canon” per se. A variation on this theme can be found in the work of the Japanese nativist scholar Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長 1730-1801) who, over the same period, was laying the foundations for an interpretation of a Japanese canon that rejected Chinese and Confucian influences. Although the effects were different, the assumptions were the same: literature was seen to be an essential component of civilization.

In this paper, I examine the question of canonicity in light of my work for a collaborative anthology of translated pre-modern Korean prose. I focus on crucial aspects in the evolution of the idea of canonicity to argue that notwithstanding the anachronism inherent in speaking of a pre-modern Korean canon, the notion of canonicity was and remains crucial. Above all else, it enables a nuanced and accurate understanding of the tensions over literature experienced by educated Koreans in the pre-modern era.

The Question of Language in Relation to Canonicity

The question of canonicity in the Korean context is extremely problematic for several distinct reasons that encompass literary and linguistic concerns. Much of this is now difficult to grasp precisely because the connection between the nation-state and its vernacular language is deemed to be a natural fact that requires no analysis. To the extent that “vernacular language” refers solely to a spoken medium, the issues at hand can be—but are not necessarily—relatively straightforward. But literature is something that is written, and therefore, there is nothing natural about it.

First, the notion of a canon drawn on national-linguistic lines was an innovation in Korea that began in the late nineteenth century and fully developed in the twentieth century. Prior to that moment, the idea that one’s native, spoken language—as a medium of everyday communication—was also suitable for literature existed, at best, in a tenuous form. In the Korean context, this idea was made fully “thinkable” during the middle of the fifteenth century through the invention of the Korean alphabetic script. But even then, negligible attention was given to theorizing vernacular literature. Indeed, when modern scholars attempt to show that such theorization occurred, they are doomed to having very little with which to work.

One name that commonly comes up in such discussions is that of Kim Manjung (1637-1692), due to comments he made praising the *kasa* poetry of Chŏng Ch’ŏl (1536-1593) (Kim 1990, 388-389). Setting to the side the question of whether *kasa* as a genre can really be considered vernacular—here it is sufficient that it is assumed to be so, and it is clear that Kim was emphasizing the vernacular Korean aspects of the genre—what is striking about Kim’s analysis is his emphasis on the ability of the Korean language to express things that cannot be expressed in Literary Sinitic, using sinographic writing (文字).

This emphasis here, however, is not a matter of content, but rather expressiveness, which is to say, how that content is expressed. Put simply, Kim is here concerned with the “how,” but the question of “what” operates in a fully Confucian literary context. Indeed, even his sharp comment that Koreans’ use of Literary Sinitic was tantamount to a parrot imitating human speech cannot be fully understood unless care is taken over its Confucian literary context. Or put another way, when we read this, we are predisposed to see it solely in national-linguistic terms, as a “national” statement affirming the value of the “national” language. It is that. But it is something more. It is also a statement that expresses unease over the gulf between the Confucian emphasis on the oral/vernacular foundations of poetry and the fact that the Korean elite overwhelmingly composed poetry in Literary Sinitic.

Indeed, Kim addresses the fact that Chŏng Ch’ŏl’s *kasa* songs “could only be transmitted orally or through using [this] country’s writing [i.e., Han’gŭl]” (口相授受, 或傳以國書而已). In addition, Kim briskly address the question of songs sung by common people, but even this is cannot be seen outside of a Confucian poetic context in which—as a matter of theory—such songs provided clues to the political and social health of the state. Most important of all, however, is the comparison Kim draws between Chŏng Ch’ŏl’s work and the “Encountering Sorrow” (Li Sao 離騷), dating from the Warring States Period (475 BCE-221 BCE) in Chinese history. In effect, Kim makes the crucial point that vernacular Korean can express—in its own way—ideas and feelings that are the same as—and every bit as important as—those expressed in the “Encountering Sorrow.” As a consequence, if we are to use Kim as a guide, we would have to conclude that the pre-modern Korean canon would have to be judged in relation to the larger Confucian canon in Literary Sinitic, which is to say, as something dependent on the larger tradition. Prior to the twentieth century, that was largely true, and this puts a question mark over any discussion of what could constitute a Korean canon prior to full vernacularization, roughly one hundred years ago.

Second, if we simply focus on the question of expressiveness in relation to Kim’s reasonable point that different languages sound different—and that content can be translated, while the way things sound cannot—we are liable to take this as a widely-held, commonsense view. The problem is that

there is very little to indicate that this is true. The mere fact that Kim wrote out this argument on behalf of vernacular Korean suggests that there was nothing commonsensical about this. He was arguing a point. On balance, it seems that the invention of the Korean alphabetic script in the middle of the fifteenth century had forced the question, precisely because vernacular literature raised the prospect of more fully adhering to Confucian literary principles which, at the fundamental level, emphasized oral articulation. In sum, the existence of the Korean alphabetic script shone a bright light on the gap between the way that the elite theorized literature and what they actually did in terms of literary production.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to exercise caution even in this context. The reason is that even when someone such as Hong Taeyong (洪大容 1731-1783) praised the power and simplicity of the Korean script, he did so in such a way that it was subordinated to Literary Sinitic. In this instance, he acknowledged the Korean script's ability to capture sound precisely, but he situated that potentiality in relation to the problem of phonological change in China and the effects of such change in Literary Sinitic poetics (Eggert 2009, 209).

Third, there is the question of timelines. If we take Kim Manjung and Hong Taeyong as proponents of vernacular Korean and the Korean script—and overlook the details of the arguments they made—we could argue that an incipient literary modernity and sense of Korean literature in modern nationalist terms was taking shape during the Chosŏn dynasty. In short, it is possible to argue, as has Ko Misuk in relation to Kim Manjung, that such views indicated that the “medieval ideology” (*chungse ideollogi*) was beginning to collapse (1993, 59). There is much to Ko's larger thesis that is worthy of sustained consideration, but if it is accurate—and I am convinced that it is—then this incipient collapse was clearly not only occurring in Chosŏn.

On the contrary, it is clear that what was helping to instigate this collapse—which is to say, the change in views examined by Ko—was the influence of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Chinese writings. I must emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that what was happening in Chosŏn was wholly the same as or totally derivative of what was occurring in China. That was not the case, and part of this difference is due to the fact that ideas that had developed in China over time could be imported into Chosŏn simultaneously. As a necessary consequence, these ideas could take on a life of their own. And they did. On balance, it would seem that the key figure in this transmission into Chosŏn was Hŏ Kyun (許筠 1569-1618).

The discrepant evaluations about Hŏ Kyun's attitudes towards Ming Archaism (擬古主義) make this point clearly. The reason is that these incompatible evaluations are each correct, and individually, each only presents one aspect of a larger, complex picture. In sum, Hŏ Kyun held views that were internally contradictory from a Chinese literary-historical point of view, but they were not so obviously contradictory when seen in the context of the Chosŏn dynasty (Evon 2014a, esp. 212-214). Equally important is the fact that in importing the works of individual writers, one was liable to encounter discrepant attitudes in their own works, because people's views do not necessarily remain static.

As a result, Hŏ Kyun was the recipient of a mass of contradictions that he in turn embodied. At least to some degree, he must have been aware of this. In 1606 (丙午), he was able to meet the head of an embassy from Ming China and ask if he had ever met the acclaimed Ming poet, Wang Shizhen (王世貞 1526-1590). The official had, and his recollection contained an important clue for understanding a key element in the nature of such discrepancies. According to the official, he had met Wang and after several days of heavy drinking and poetry composition, he inquired about how one ought to study literary composition.

Wang explained that although the young gravitate towards the “novel words of Wang and Lu” (王陸新音), with age one recognizes the essentiality of orthodox Confucian teachings. “Wang”

referred to Wang Yangming (王陽明 1472-1529) and “Lu,” to Lu Xiangshan (陸象山 1139-1192), and the comparison here was with the sober teachings of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) that were prized, above all else, in Chosŏn Korea. Wang Shizhen’s assessment thus points our attention to not only how age might affect people’s views, but also to the connection between literature and moral philosophy (No 2013, 407-408). In modern terms, his response makes no sense, but in the terms that operated in both China and Korea in the pre-modern era, his response made perfect sense. One might disagree with it, but one could have no difficulty in understanding what he was saying or why he was saying it. This is another crucial element to bear in mind when thinking through the implications of canonicity in pre-modern Korea.

Finally, there is another element that is related to timelines and which effectively draws together the three points made above. The essence of the problem is our predisposition to see progress as somehow inevitable and moreover, to see in the past a logic of development on our own terms. A large part of this problem derives from narrative simplicity: scholars have to explain things, and to cast things in terms of a logical progression makes everything easier to explain. In the context of Korean literature, a crucial—albeit implicit—element in this drive for narrative simplicity has been twentieth century nationalism and the role of language within it.

As a consequence, we are predisposed to see Korean literary development in teleological terms, as if it were inevitably moving towards the full vernacularization that occurred in the twentieth century. Furthermore, as discussed above, it is possible to look back and find evidence to support the case in the writings of Kim Manjung and Hong Taeyong. In addition, Kim’s grandnephew, Kim Ch’unt’aek (金春澤 1670-1717), wrote what can be considered a robust defense of the potential value of the vernacular novel, and in that respect, he was going against ingrained views regarding both literary genre and literary language (Yi 2002, 78-82). Seen thus, it is possible to make the case that changes were occurring, which is the point made by Ko Misuk as discussed above.

We certainly see this as an underlying assumption in the interest in what is now typically referred to as “the proclamation of Chosŏn poetry” (*Chosŏn si sŏnŏn* 朝鮮詩宣言) by Chŏng Yagyong (丁若鏞 1762-1836). Chŏng’s poem does focus on national difference, but as I have shown elsewhere, any attempt to wring a modern nationalistic reading out of the poem requires two things: first, one must ignore the content of the poem itself—and it is quite a long poem—and instead focus solely on the couplet “I am a man from Chosŏn/Happily, I write Chosŏn poems;” second, one must ignore the style and structure of the poem (Evon 2006/2007). The reason is simple. What Chŏng expresses and how he expresses it cannot be fit into a ready-made nationalist paradigm. On the contrary, what Chŏng expresses—and moreover, how he expresses it—is disruptive to that paradigm.

But perhaps the single most disruptive example to the nationalist paradigm is to be found in the writings of Pak Chega (朴齊家 1750-1805). In many respects, Pak stands out as a figure who broadly fits the nationalist framework due to the progressive characteristics of his thought. Moreover, he was tenacious, a point given much emphasis in a 2010 article by Yi Saesam discussing the translation of his collected works into Korean. Here we read of Pak’s self-confidence and how he would not bend to the will of his superiors (자존심이 강했고 벼슬살이를 하면서도 윗사람에게 굽히지 않았던 박제가), and in a remarkable demonstration of how certain ideas remain culturally relevant, Yi even noted that “it is possible to read Pak’s character” (*sŏngp’umdo ikŭl su itta* 성품도 읽을 수 있다) through his writings.

That ancient Confucian idea which draws a direct link between one as a person and what one writes is probably more clearly applicable to Pak Chega than any of his contemporaries, whose names are often cited in connection with his own, including Hong Taeyong and Chŏng Yagyong. This is a complicated question that is beyond the scope of this paper to address in any detail, but it is necessary to emphasize that Pak’s self-confidence and courage seem to have resulted in a degree of consistency in thought and action—and moreover, consistency between thought and action—that is less evident in most of his peers, and in the case of his close friend, Yi Tŏngmu (李德懋 1741-1793), all but

impossible to find. Pak is thus a compelling figure in many ways. In his *Treatise on Northern Learning* (Pukhak ūi 北學議), he broaches the question of the deleterious effects of the Chosŏn elites' preoccupation with orthodox Neo-Confucianism, invoking the names of two figures already mentioned above: Lu Xiangshan (陸象山 1139-1192) and Wang Yangming (王陽明 1472-1529) (An 2008, 190-192).

In sum, Pak Chega's views look very much like something that one could use as the basis to discuss evolving views regarding canonicity in Chosŏn, and in fact, any such discussion would have to take these views into account. They are crucial, and I will turn to this question below. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that they remain thoroughly impossible to fit into a modern nationalist framework for one fundamental reason: that of language.

Far from showing scant regard for vernacular Korean or for the use of the Korean script for literary production, Pak Chega went so far as to propose that Koreans adopt vernacular Chinese (漢語) as the spoken national language (An 2008, 107-109; Itō 2013, 84). However strange this appears, it is necessary to recognize that Pak's proposal aimed at fostering national strength. It is simply that the way he defined such strength was radically different than the way it would come to be defined a little over a century later, and while he may be fairly seen as a "progressive scholar" (*chinbojōgin hakcha*) (An 2008, 284), we must be careful to avoid allowing our assumptions about "progressiveness" to blind us to things that do not look progressive from a modern point of view.

However, if we exclude the question of language and focus on the question of content, his progressiveness as a scholar, as a reader, as a writer, and above all else, as a thinker, becomes uncontested even in modern terms. This quality of his thought can be seen most clearly in the fact that at roughly the same time that he was proposing the adoption of vernacular Chinese and criticizing his fellow countrymen for ignoring Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, his monarch, King Chŏngjo (正祖 1752-1800; r. 1776-1800), was lamenting the poisonous effects of the teachings of Lu and Wang and proposing a cure: to "esteem Zhu Xi" (尊朱子) (Evon 2014a).

The paradox here is beautiful. These two men were strong-willed, proud, intelligent, and well-read students of history and literature—and for them, history and literature were not two distinct elements of culture. They were also almost exact contemporaries—Pak was two years older than Chŏngjo—who shared an identical concern: both were eager to define Chosŏn in relation to China both as an idealized cultural construct and as an existing cultural-political reality. Both also were anxious over Chosŏn's cultural standing, and in that vein, both recognized the importance of Zhu Xi, though for drastically different reasons. Pak saw the overwhelming influence of Zhu Xi's teachings as a source of weakness in Chosŏn. On the same evidence, Chŏngjo drew the opposite conclusion: for him, the problem was that Zhu Xi's influence was on the wane. What Pak diagnosed as toxic, Chŏngjo saw as a cure.

The Question of Content in Relation to Canonicity

At the heart of the disagreement between Pak and Chŏngjo was a profound tension over the meaning and function of literature that had been developing since the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty. The origins of this tension can be found in the writings of Chŏng Tojŏn (鄭道傳 1342-1398) and his concern over the proper function of literature. As can be gleaned from Min Ch'an's thoughtful study of this question, it would be difficult to claim any uniqueness on behalf of Chŏng Tojŏn's literary thought in and of itself (Min 1999, esp. 107-110). It was, in fact, thoroughly derivative, but this does not mean that it was unimportant. On the contrary, what was most significant about it was its ordinariness, its back-to-basics approach in how literature was to be conceptualized in Confucian terms and practiced for Confucian purposes. To this specific literary concern, one must add another: his views on literature—however derivative—must be seen in the larger context of his efforts for social, cultural, and political reform that took shape with the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty.

Chŏng Tojŏn was not alone in this, however. Concerns over learning and writing were very real, and while they originated in negative attitudes towards literary production in the preceding Koryŏ dynasty (935-1392), they were also understood and interpreted against similar concerns that had been expressed by Chinese thinkers of the past. The essence of the matter was the relationship between writing (文) and the Confucian Way (道). As with the situation as discussed above in relation to Hŏ Kyun, one also finds incompatible elements within conservative evaluations of literature in Chosŏn that can be traced back to how they were appropriated from Chinese sources (Evon 2014a, 203). This question of sources is far too complex to be treated here, and the question itself—to put the matter bluntly—was ultimately transformed from something important into something absurd. On balance, Chosŏn Korean thinkers seem to have wisely sidestepped these absurdities.

What must be stressed here is that in the early stages of the formation of the Chosŏn dynasty, a radical approach was taken to fix the “literature” problem, which is to say, to get the focus of study on the Confucian Way. And it failed—spectacularly. Kalton’s assessment of this is worth quoting at some length:

At the founding of the dynasty enthusiastic Neo-Confucians had systematically suppressed the traditional literary orientation [of the educational system]; one of their most important measures had been to remove all composition from the first stage of the civil-service examination, making it instead an oral exam on the classics. Kwŏn [i.e., Kwŏn Kŭn (權近 1352-1409)] sympathized with this concern to stress character formation in learning... But a decade of close experience with the new system showed him that it was not producing the desired results: its product was not a profound understanding and personal appropriation of the classics, but merely the rote memorization of texts and commentaries. Further, skills in poetic and literary composition were in serious decline. In his view, these were not a matter of empty artifice, but practical skills imperative for diplomatic relations with China. Thus in 1407 he presented a memorial to the king which in effect reintroduced the strong literary component. Essay examinations on the classics replaced the oral exam, and a system in which the abilities of junior officials in literary and poetic composition were promoted by periodic reviews and mandatory competitions was put into effect (Kalton 1985, 92-93).

In effect, the early Chosŏn Neo-Confucians had sought—and quickly failed—to make the new dynasty more thoroughly feudal, or put in Woodside’s terms, they had fallen victim to “the temptations of social and political refeudalization” (Woodside 2006, 27). Indeed, it is astonishing that Woodside’s thesis about the allure of refeudalization over the duration of the Chosŏn dynasty played out as a kind of historical synecdoche in the dynasty’s first decade.

Equally important—but in no way surprising—is the fact that literary ability was a flashpoint of concern. The reason is that one’s demonstration of such literary ability was in no way foolproof; examinees—like students today—could prepare for an examination with the result that what was actually tested was simply their ability to prepare for the exam. But that same problem worked the other way, too. That is, students who took an oral exam could simply aim for success by “rote memorization.” However, there was a major difference between the two approaches: at the very least, the use of writing in the exam guaranteed that the students could write. Similar concerns over Buddhist examinations in the coming decades demonstrate that Kwŏn Kŭn made the right decision. Put in practical terms, it was far better to have students “faking it” in a literate fashion than “faking it” without being able to write very well.

Anxieties over this problem of “faking it” were evident into the nineteenth century and encompassed two main areas of concern: feigning understanding of the Confucian classics and imitating famous examples of poetry by Chinese writers. To these two, another can be added: the ability to pretend to know how to do something because one had prepared by memorizing answers to the same or similar questions. The equivalent would be on the order of an examinee pilot describing what to do in case of an onboard fire by recycling answers to the same question that others had given. Put thus, it is easy

enough to see the practical dangers involved, and these went far beyond the real-world problem of the difference between actually knowing what to do and actually being able to do it. As things stood, the problem was the difference between pretending to know what to do and actually being able to do it.

Each of these concerns, however, can be located within Confucian literary theory and derived from the same idea: that notwithstanding differing formulations on the relationship between writing and the Confucian Way, literary production was not something to be done for fun or simple pleasure. It might be fun and it might be pleasurable, but in theoretical terms, writing was also an expression of one's character and one's place in history. "Faking it" thus had profound implications that were exacerbated by the practical and theoretical necessity of learning from the past. Because I have dealt with that problem in another context recently (Evon 2014a), here I would like to focus instead on two manifestations of it that are connected to canonicity in the Chosŏn dynasty.

First, the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty led to a massive increase in the amount of literary-theoretical writings, and it is necessary to emphasize that such writings either explicitly or implicitly encompassed questions of morality, politics, history, and historiography. The work done by Cho Namgwŏn and others (2001[1998]-2002) makes this point very clearly in the massive imbalance between the materials dating from the centuries prior to the founding of the Chosŏn dynasty and those produced after. The ratio of the pre-1392 and post-1392 materials is roughly one to ten. At first glance, this seems strange in light of the unease over literature demonstrated by "enthusiastic Neo-Confucians"—to use Kalton's phrase—in the early years of the new dynasty. Wouldn't we expect to see more writings from the pre-1392 years and in particular, for the nearly five centuries of the Koryŏ dynasty? After all, it was the literary preoccupations of the Koryŏ dynasty that early Chosŏn Neo-Confucians found so odious and against which they took vigorous action in the years leading up to 1407.

I am not aware of any attempt to address that enigma, nor do I think that it can be solved conclusively. There are too many uncertainties surrounding the preservation of written materials. But it is possible to hazard an educated guess that, moreover, is supported by the "Preface to the *Tongmunsŏn* [Anthology of Korean Writings]" (東文選序). Written by Sŏ Kŏjŏng (徐居正 1420-1488) and dated a decade before he died, the "Preface" provides us with clues that suggest that the problem from the Chosŏn point of view was that literary production in Koryŏ focused too much on production and too little on the Confucian significance of such production. As Sŏ put it in his preface, literary production, properly conceived and properly executed, had to be "rooted in the [Confucian] classics" (本乎經) (Evon 2014a, 203-204).

The entirety of what Sŏ discusses and how he discusses it is a fascinating topic in its own right, but the point of interest here is that we encounter in his assessment what amounts to the earliest formulation of a "Korean canon." The canon is not a given work or set of works beyond the Confucian classics themselves. Or put another way, what matters is not the works in and of themselves but rather the degree to which they conform to that definition of canonicity. Concern over justifying one's and others' writings seems to be what drove the massive upswing in literary-theoretical writings during the Chosŏn dynasty. Put in terms of what was discussed above, such writings conveyed that one was not "faking it."

Sŏ's definition was functional and simple; it was also elastic. Its elasticity is also demonstrated through how it was challenged: not on definitional terms, but in terms of its application. This challenge came to a head during the late eighteenth century, and one element of that challenge has already been briefly discussed above: the tension between Pak Chega and King Chŏngjo. In the conclusion, I will turn to another example that is the best among many in relation to the question of canonicity as it had evolved from the fifteenth century through the eighteenth century. But first, it is necessary to address the intellectual transition in which Sŏ was a critical figure.

This brings me to the second manifestation of the problem of “faking it.” Put bluntly, during the fifteenth century it seems, at first glance, that “faking it” was not altogether uncommon. Sō Kōjōng may have been a rigorous Confucian moralist when theorizing about literature, but he was also an outstanding and prolific writer whose theory of literature and actual output seem discordant, to put it mildly. To cite just one among a countless number of such examples, we can look to one of the stories he recounted in his *A Record of Pleasant Chats and Humorous Anecdotes in a Time of Great Peace* (T’aep’yōng hanhwa kolgye chōn 太平閑話滑稽傳). Here we find a conversation that leads to a quotation of a line from the *Classic of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經) on the repayment of virtue, and this, in turn, resolves with a comment by one of the two speakers about how mice shit was repaid with dog shit (Sō 1998 [vol. 1], 414).

The anecdote is funny, and lest there be any confusion, we are promptly told that the two speakers burst into laughter. But what are we to make of this? On balance, it seems difficult to reconcile this with the profound Confucian moral import he attached to literary production in his “Preface to the *Tongmunson*.” On the other hand, this piece is certainly “rooted in the [Confucian] classics” (本乎經), just not in the way that we might expect. There are, to be sure, other ways of explaining this apparent anomaly, and two are conspicuous: first, the presentation suggests widespread knowledge of the classics; second, the very idea of the collection—that is, “Great Peace”—speaks to a sense of calm and good governance in Confucian terms. Even so, however, it seems difficult to reconcile much of what Sō wrote against his clearly stated ideals as to the purposes of literary production.

The Problem of Canonicity as Exemplified in Kim Sisūp (1435-1493)

But this problem was not Sō’s alone. We find echoes of it in the work of his contemporary, Kim Sisūp (金時習 1435-1493). Kim’s writings first raised for me the pointedness of the question of canonicity in pre-modern Korean literature when I read *The Collected Writings of Maewōldang [Kim Sisūp]* (Maewōldang chip 梅月堂集) in preparation for a paper on his life and work (Evon 2004). That question came to appear even more pressing as I recently finished work on “An Account of Drunken Merriment at Pubyōk Pavilion” (Ch’wi yu Pubyōk-chōng ki 醉遊浮碧亭記) from his *New Tales of the Golden Turtle [Mountain]* (Kūmo sinhwa 金鰲新話) for a forthcoming volume on pre-modern Korean literature. In essence, Kim’s work forms the basis for the assessment of canonicity here, and yet, Kim and his work cannot be placed front and center in any such examination.

The reason is that Kim’s work—much like Sō’s, though in a different way—represents a moment of transition. Kim’s importance is not in doubt. His name will almost inevitably come up in any discussion of Korean history, literature, religion, or thought, broadly construed. It is not a matter of personal fetish or idiosyncratic taste that Sim Kyōnggho—one of the most prolific and outstanding scholars of pre-modern Korean literature and thought—would write a 707 page book on Kim simply titled *Kim Sisūp: A Critical Biography* (Kim Sisūp p’yōngjōn) (Sim 2003). The title of Sim’s work is misleading, and as much as anything else, it is a “biography” of mid-to-late fifteenth century Chosōn Korea. At issue here is the fact that Kim’s importance as a writer fundamentally derives from his political importance at a time of great tumultuousness: his renunciation of his ambition to serve as an official after King Sejo (世祖 r. 1455-1468) seized the throne. Kim’s reputation represents the Confucian ideal of literary production as outlined by Sō taken to its logical conclusion in affirming the direct connection between one’s moral quality and the quality of one’s writing. Moreover, it is clear that Kim Sisūp’s work was animated by his acute awareness of this idea and his place in history.

It is in relation to Kim’s self-awareness that the problem of canonicity can be seen most accurately—and not because it is easy to define. On the contrary, when we examine this problem in the middle of the fifteenth century, it appears blurry and confusing. To see it as such is not a mistake, but is rather to see it accurately. The central issue is the massive gaps between what Kim wrote, what was preserved, and how it was evaluated. His *New Tales of the Golden Turtle [Mountain]* (Kūmo sinhwa 金鰲新話) is crucial in allowing us to see the problem.

To begin with, the mere fact that he wrote a collection of fiction seems highly improbable in light of his Confucian rigor. That he did so provides a reason to think that what came to be taken for granted in the subsequent tradition was not altogether clear in the middle of the fifteenth century. That issue is all the more vexing given that he was inspired by the *New Tales [Written] while Trimming the Wick* (Jiandeng xinhua 剪燈新話), a collection of stories by the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) writer Qu You (瞿佑 1347-1433). That too provides a valuable clue, because Qu You's work had led to an uproar in 1404 when a high-ranking official successfully petitioned the emperor to ban Qu's work.

Elements of this question in relation to Qu You and Kim Sisŭp have recently been dealt with very well by others (Wuerthner 2012; Chang 2010; Chang n.d.). Here therefore I would like to focus on two elements in Brook's analysis of the petition regarding Qu You's work that have a striking connection with Kim's *Kŭmo sinhwa*: first, the prospect that such writings would lead to "confusion in people's minds," as the petition put it; and second, the possibility that such writings could be interpreted as representing opposition to the state, as Brook explains one aspect of the logic of justifying such a ban (Brook 2005, 119-120; see also, Brook 1988).

In the case of Kim's *Kŭmo sinhwa* in general—and "An Account of Drunken Merriment at Pubyŏk Pavilion" (Ch'wi yu Pubyŏk-chŏng ki 醉遊浮碧亭記), in particular—the charge of challenging monarchical authority was incontestably true, and furthermore, that challenge was carried out through a blurring of history and the supernatural, something that could easily be seen as "exciting confusion in people's minds" (Brook 2005, 119). In essence, Kim's "Account" is a lacerating critique of Sejo's seizure of the throne told through a young Confucian scholar's chance encounter with a sexy female Daoist immortal.

Brook's analysis of the implications of the ban on Qu You thus reads as if he could have been writing about Kim Sisŭp, and given that Kim's work was inspired by Qu You, this is perhaps not altogether surprising. However, Kim's book was not banned, nor, in fact, is there any indication that he or anyone else knew about the ban placed on Qu You's work. Furthermore, one of the earliest references to Qu You's *Jiandeng Xinhua* occurred in a remarkably strange context. A full-length article could be devoted to that matter alone. The crucial point here is that Kim's writings in their totality lead to two conclusions.

First, the apparent contradiction between Sŏ Kŏjŏng's literary-theoretical pronouncements and his actual literary output finds a parallel in Kim Sisŭp, and therefore it is difficult to think that Sŏ was "faking it." The fact that Sŏ's real-life—and amply documented—political actions look so bad in Confucian terms, in general, and in relation to Kim Sisŭp, in particular, paradoxically underscores this very point. That is to say, Sŏ served King Sejo, usurper of the throne, whereas Kim famously did not. But that critical real-life distinction between the two finds no counterpart in their literary output. If Sŏ was "faking it," we would have to conclude that Kim Sisŭp was "faking it," too. But everything that we know about Kim—and there is a lot to know—suggests that his Confucian idealism was real. It is also true that rumor and innuendo attached to Kim's name, but even if allegations of sexual impropriety on his part were true, his Confucian bona fides were incontestable. Indeed, envy over his Confucian bona fides seems to have driven such innuendo.

Second, the idea of what constituted proper writing as articulated by Sŏ Kŏjŏng can easily be seen as a compromise between two things discussed above: the failed Neo-Confucian ambitions for downgrading emphasis on literary skill at the start of the Chosŏn dynasty and the practical necessities identified by Kwŏn Kŭn. This conclusion is strongly supported by the fact that Kwŏn Kŭn was So's maternal grandfather. Put tersely, it seems that Sŏ Kŏjŏng was giving expression to already existing ideas, the full implications of which would be revealed over the following centuries in anxieties discussed above, specifically those relating to genre and literary language. The messiness that surrounds attempts to place Sŏ's and Kim's writings in a canon as defined by Sŏ reflects this. But those anxieties would come to be seen in relation to Chinese influence in a way that was conspicuously missing in the middle of the fifteenth century. Sŏ's and Kim's literary output took

shape at a moment of transition, and the result is that one can see the origins of many—but not all—subsequent developments through their work. Sō's vision of canonicity belonged to the future.

There was, however, one crucial exception that is evident in relation to both his and Kim's writings: the established linguistic and generic format for the preservation of a writer's works. This exception was thoroughgoing, and although it therefore applies not only to Sō and Kim, it can be best seen through them. The reason has three components: first, they both wrote much; second, a "collected writings" (i.e., *chip* 集) was prepared for each; third, much of what they wrote was excluded from their collected writings.

In terms of quantity, this exclusion is far more noticeable in relation to Sō, but in terms of the writings themselves, the exclusion of Kim's *Kūmo sinhwa* is more significant because it draws attention to something that applies to Sō as well: the possibility that the conservative vision of canonicity as expressed by Sō was coming under pressure. The question as to the role of the already existing approach to organizing "collected writings" is certainly significant, but on balance, it seems that tradition served as a brake that prevented the emergence of an alternative in which writings such as Kim's *Kūmo sinhwa*—and indeed, so much of what Sō wrote—might be seen as important.

This issue can be seen through Kim's "Two Poems [Composed] after Writing *Kūmo sinhwa*" (書金鰲新話後二首). These two poems were included in Sō's *Anthology of Korean Writings*, and they are also found—though with a slightly different title—in Kim's collected writings, *The Collected Writings of Maewōldang [Kim Sisūp]*. Poems about *Kūmo sinhwa* were preserved, whereas there is little to indicate that the *Kūmo sinhwa* itself was an object of concern. That paradox was canonicity.

Conclusion: Canonicity under Examination

Sō Kōjōng's articulation of canonicity finally came under sustained examination over the final quarter of the eighteenth century. What fuelled this examination was an increasing sense among writers and thinkers that Chosōn was falling behind Qing China. Precursors to that idea can be traced back to the middle of the sixteenth century, when the source of anxiety was Ming China. To be sure, this was not a widespread idea, and it is not an exaggeration to say that it was a "heretical" idea—and I mean that both figuratively and literally. Pak Chega was a key figure in this examination, for reasons discussed above.

Another figure, Pak Chiwōn (朴趾源 1737-1805), also played a crucial role, and in that immediate historical context, Pak Chiwōn was probably the more important of the two. His works—including what is contained in his collected writings—make it very clear that by the end of the eighteenth century, the idea of canonicity was cannibalizing itself. On the one hand, the inherent conservatism in the idea generated a paradox over how writers ought to orient themselves to the past. On the other hand, those who were questioning canonicity, such as Pak Chega and Pak Chiwōn, were themselves Confucians. Those who were reexamining the formation of canonicity in the Chosōn dynasty did so from within the ranks of Confucianism, and their reexamination was a consequence of the emphasis placed on literature for Confucian historiographical and moral purposes.

We know that this was the case not simply through reading between the lines, so to speak, which is easy enough. More importantly, we also know this because significant intellectual figures addressed the problem in anguished terms, even if they came to divergent conclusions about how to solve it. Chōng Yagyong's evaluation of the problem—discussed partly above in relation to his "proclamation of Korean poetry"—was in some ways the most significant due to the breadth of his assessment. But it was far from unique. Pak Chiwōn also wrote of the problem, and he did so in terms that were clearer than Chōng's (Evon 2014a, 218-219; also, Kim 2003, 34). At root, however, their diagnoses were similar: literary production in Chosōn Korea was not meeting the historiographical ideals central to the Confucian conception of literature. By the end of the eighteenth century, an existential crisis had developed over the relationship, both practical and theoretical, among literary production,

Confucian historiography, and the place of the Chosŏn dynasty within the sphere of “Chinese” or Literary Sinitic culture.

In any discussion of canonicity, it is necessary to remember that Literary Sinitic culture set the context of thought through the end of the nineteenth century. To place emphasis on what was Korean—and in particular, linguistically Korean—prior to the twentieth century is anachronistic. To be sure, Pak Chega, Pak Chiwŏn, and Chŏng Yagyong were intensely concerned over the historicity of the Korean experience, but that experience was seen from a Confucian viewpoint in which Literary Sinitic was central. Or put in relation to the title of Kim Kichung’s interesting survey of pre-modern Korean literature—*An Introduction to Classical Korean Literature: From Hyangga to P’ansori* (1996)—it is very difficult to find many pre-modern figures who would have theorized Korean literature with such an exclusive focus on vernacular Korean as the basis of literary production.

We can see here the fuller implication of Ko Misuk’s contention, discussed above, that concern over the vernacular signaled a weakening of the “medieval ideology.” This is an attractive proposition for the purposes of narrative thrust because, also as discussed above, it points to logical change and historical development. There are, however, at least three serious problems, and canonicity was central to each. First, the logic of concern over the vernacular in literary production was fundamentally connected to “medieval ideology,” because it was a central component in Confucian poetics. That was the crucial point made by Kim Manjung, who in that respect—however counterintuitive it seems—was actually expressing a very conservative viewpoint. Second, the anxieties surrounding literary production that exploded in the late eighteenth century remind us that any discussion of pre-modern Korean literature must be wary of anachronism and attuned to the likelihood that what looks like “progress” from a modern point of view might have been something entirely different.

Finally, there is the question of the malleability of how one could understand the Confucian literary tradition within the terms of the tradition itself. This point is directly related to the other two. The reason is that, as Min Ch’an reminds us, it is necessary to be mindful of the fact that literature or writing in the pre-modern context encompassed far more than what we are accustomed to think (1999, 108). The case of Yi Ok (李鈺 1760-1815) illustrates this breadth of meaning better than any other, as I have recently argued at length (Evon 2014b). Here I would like to conclude by emphasizing one overarching point in relation to the question of canonicity, specifically as it took shape during the Chosŏn dynasty and became reflected in Yi Ok’s work and King Chŏngjo’s reaction to it. It seems that the problems that occurred largely (but not entirely) in relation to what we would think of as literature—what was written and how it was written—derived from an intense engagement with canonicity in Confucian terms. Thus even in the late eighteenth century (and into the nineteenth, too, in fact), “medieval ideology” was far from being rejected. Instead, it was being thought through with great tenacity precisely because canonicity was an idea about the role of literary production in a transnational cultural sphere

Works Cited

- An Taehoe, trans. 2008. *Treatise on Northern Learning* [Pukhak ũi 北學議], by Pak Chega [1750-1805]. P’aju: Tolbegae.
- Brook, Timothy. 2005. “State Censorship and the Book Trade,” chapter 6, in Timothy Brook, *The Chinese State in Ming Society*, pp. 118-136. London and New York: Routledge Curzon.
- Brook, Timothy. 1988. “Censorship in Eighteenth-Century China: A View from the Book Trade.” *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d’histoire* 23(2): 177-196.

- Chang, Kang-I Sun. 2010. "Literature of the Early Ming to Mid-Ming (1375–1572)." In Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (eds.) *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*. pp. 1-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available from: Cambridge Histories Online <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521855594.003>> [Accessed 23 September 2014].
- Chang, Kang-I Sun. n.d. "The Circulation of Literary Knowledge Between Ming China And Other Countries in East Asia: The Case of Qu You's *Jiandeng Xinhua*." Available from: http://www.nacsorg.com/stockholmconf/Stockholm_Qu_You_071.htm [Accessed 23 September 2014].
- Cho Namgwŏn [趙南權], et. al., trans. 2001 [1998]-2002. *Collected Materials of Korean Classical Criticism* [한국고전비평론 자료집], in 3 vols. Seoul: T'aehaksa.
- Eggert, Marion. 2009. "Hong Taeyong's Letter to Deng Shimin (no date)." In Jahyun Kim Haboush ed., *Epistolary Korea: Letters in the Communicative Space of the Chosŏn, 1392-1910*, pp. 207-209. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Evon, Gregory N. 2014a. "Ming Archaism (擬古主義) in Eighteenth-Century Chosŏn Korea: A Sketch of the Intellectual Foundations of a Literary Question." *Journal of Literary Sinitic* [Hanmun hakpo 漢文學報] 30: 198-224.
- Evon, Gregory N. 2014b. "Tobacco, God, and Books: The Perils of Barbarism in Eighteenth-Century Korea." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73(3): 641-659.
- Evon, Gregory N. 2006/2007. "Chinese Contexts, Korean Realities: the Politics of Literary Genre in Late-Chosŏn Korea (1725-1863)." *East Asian History* 32/33: 57-82.
- Evon, Gregory N. 2004. "Remembering the Past, Condemned to the Present: The Imaginative Retreat of Kim Sisŭp (1435-1493)." *International Review of Korean Studies* 1(1): 49-81.
- Itō Hideto 伊藤 英人. 2013. "Linguistic contacts in relation to the Korean peninsula: Oppositional Sinitification for Dealing with Chinese Pressure" [Chōsen hantō ni okeru gen'gosetsushōku: Chūgoku atsu e no taisho toshite no taikō Chūgokuka 朝鮮半島における言語接触: 中国圧への対処としての対抗中国化]. *Collected Papers of the Linguistics Research Institute* [Gogaku kenkyūsho ronshū 語学研究所論集] 18 (March): 55-93.
- Kalton, Michael C. 1985. "The Writings of Kwŏn Kūn: The Context and Shape of Early Yi Dynasty Neo-Confucianism," in Wm. Theodore de Bary and JaHyun Kim Haboush, ed., *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kim Kichung. 1996. *An Introduction to Classical Korean Literature: From Hyangga to P'ansori*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Kim Kyŏngmi [김경미] (2003) *The Enchantment of Fiction* (소설의 매혹). Seoul: Wŏrin.
- Kim Manjung. 1990. *The Random Jottings of Sŏp'o* (i.e. Kim Manjung) [Sŏp'o manp'il 西浦漫筆], translated and annotated by Hong In'yo 洪寅杓. Seoul: Ilchisa.
- Ko Misuk. 1993. "Aspects in the Unfolding of Theories of Vernacular Literature in the Late Chosŏn" [Chosŏn hugi minjogŏmunhangnon ūi chŏn'gaeyangsang: Kim Manjung-esŏ Pak Hyogwan-kkaji 조선 후기 민중어문학론의 전개양상]. In Chŏng Kyubok 丁奎福, ed. *Research on the*

Literature of Kim Manjung [Kim Manjung munhak yŏn'gu 金萬重文學研究], pp. 51-74. Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn.

Min Ch'an. 1999. "Chŏng Tojŏn's tendency in thought and view of literature" [Chŏng Tojŏn-ŭi sasang-jŏk kyŏnghyang-gwa munhag-e taehan ipchang 鄭道傳의 思想的 傾向과 文學에 대한 立場]. *Collected Papers in the Humanities* [Inmun'gwahak nonmun-jip 人文科學論文集] 27: 85-109.

No Kyŏnghŭi [노경희] (2013) "The Accommodation of the Poetic Theories of the Earlier and Later Seven Masters of the Ming Dynasty in the Literary Worlds of Early Seventeenth-Century Chosŏn [Korea] and Eighteenth-Century Edo [Japan]" (17 세기 전반 조선과 18 세기 에도 문단의 明代 前後七子 詩論 수용). *Research on Classical Literature* (古典文學研究) 43: 401-445.

Pak Hyŏn'gyu [朴現圭] (2005) "The Writings of Li Zhi Introduced [into Chosŏn] by Hŏ Kyun" (許筠이 도입한 李贄 저서). *Chinese Language and Literature* (中國語文學) 46: 303-322.

Sim Kyŏngho [沈慶昊]. 2003. *Kim Sisŭp: A Critical Biography* [Kim Sisŭp p'yŏngjŏn 김시습 평전]. Seoul: Tolbegae.

Sŏ Kŏjŏng [徐居正]. 1998. *A Record of Pleasant Chats and Humorous Anecdotes in a Time of Great Peace* [T'aep'yŏng hanhwa kolgye chŏn 太平閑話滑稽傳], in 2 volumes. Translated and annotated by Pak Kyŏngsin 朴敬伸; includes original texts. Seoul: Kukhak charyowŏn.

Woodside, Alexander. 2006. *Lost Modernities: China, Korea, Vietnam, and the Hazards of World History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wuerthner, Dennis. 2012. "The Kŭmo sinhwa – Product of a Cross-Border Diffusion of Knowledge between Ming China and Chosŏn Korea during the Fifteenth Century." *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 12(2): 165-185.

Yi Mun'gyu. 2002. *A Theory of the History of Criticism of Classical Fiction* [Kojŏnsosŏl pip'yŏngsaron 고전소설 비평사론]. Seoul: Saemunsa.

Yi Saesam. 2010. "Ch'ojŏng [i.e., Pak Chega], Eminent Writer and True Cosmopolitan Person" (Ch'ojŏng, ppaeŏnan munjanggaija chinjŏngha kukchein 초정, 빼어난 문장가이자 진정한 국제인). Available at: <http://news.donga.com/View?gid=26398298&date=20100224>. Accessed 22 September 2014.