

## Being Human : Finding Humanness in Korea's Past

**Michael J. Pettid**, State University of New York (Binghamton University)

Of course the very premise of this topic is laughable: the peoples of Korea's history were undoubtedly much like us today and were as human, or inhuman, as we are today. There are historic personages that we know were likeable and others that seem quite unlikeable, but that also reflects the encounters that dot our very lives today. So what is the point of such a talk? Perhaps to bring to light the importance of examining the humanness in the figures that we study as this is something that often detaches when studying distant figures.

The study of premodern Korea has become increasingly further from the interests of younger scholars in North America and elsewhere. The field is seen by some as uninteresting and overly concerned with minutia that has little, if any, connection with our lives and society of today. While this may seem absurd to those of us who make our careers in premodern Korea, the numbers seem to verify the field is very much experiencing a downturn.

Like other premodernists, my own research delves into the lives, actions and aspirations of those long departed. While it is easy to attach personality traits to those that we have met or even viewed on television or other media, this becomes all the more difficult as we step back further and further into time. Thus our objects of study sometimes lose their humanness and become merely figures who did such-and-such at a particular time in the past. We know that Yi Kyubo (李奎報) lived from 1168-1241 and also that he was a great literary talent. Likewise we can cite that Kwanghae-gun (光海君) reigned from 1608-1623 and was much disliked by some (many?) at the royal palace. But those are simply 'facts' that have been transmitted to us through historical documents. What they are not is accurate descriptions of these individuals as humans. What I would like to do in this brief talk is help bring the humanness of some historical figures to light and also demonstrate the bonds that we continue to share with our predecessors.

### Past Poets, Life, and Us

A good starting point for this talk is found in two writers who lived well before the Chosŏn dynasty. One is the above-mentioned Yi Kyubo, renowned for his talent as a writer and acclaimed as perhaps the finest talent of Koryŏ. The other, an even earlier figure, is Ch'oe Ch'iwŏn (崔致遠) who was born in 857 in the Silla Kingdom. Writers are perhaps a little easier to view in terms of their humanness since this is a major part of their literary expression and perhaps even the very reason they choose to write. But, play along with me in this little exercise.

One aspect of these two men that I find fascinating is the great frustration that they held for their

lives in their contemporary societies. They had no use for the corruption that plagued their societies and sought to find some way to overcome this malady. Perhaps that is one reason that I find it easy to connect with their writings despite the obviously great gap between our world today and the times they lived in many epochs ago. That distance is closed quite easily when we realize that our problems and frustrations are much the same.

Ch'oe was born into turbulent times, but nonetheless managed to go abroad for study and find goodly success. However, upon returning home he found that his native land was in great crisis and the powers in place had no desire for reform. Lamenting his lack of place in society, he wrote a poem entitled “Inscribed at the Study on Mt. Kaya” [題伽倻山讀書堂] which reads as follows:

The water coursing over the hodgepodge of rocks makes the peak cry out,  
Deadening the sounds of human speech to be unintelligible from an inch away.  
The constant dread of human strife reaching the ears,  
Causes the flowing water to encircle the whole of the mountain.<sup>1</sup>

Ch'oe is said to have been so utterly disgusted with the politics of his day, that after composing this poem he vanished into the ether of the mountains and became a sansin (山神), still roaming Mt. Kaya to this very day.

Two things in this poem stand out to me and help bring to light the humanness of Ch'oe. First is the sense of overwhelming frustration with the politics that were destroying his country. His proposals for reform had been completely rejected by the monarch and thus he knew that change was not possible. Second, his love of the wildness of the mountains and the refuge that they offered from the dust of the secular world. Ch'oe was a person not unlike many of us here today, one who had difficulty coming to terms with corruption and immorality in government. But relief was offered in the form of nature—particularly the mountains—where nature, as violent as it might be, offered relief if only one were to embrace it.

Yi Kyubo gives us another take on impossibility of functioning in an immoral world. Yi, whose life ran the gauntlet from utter poverty to riches and back again, gives us a parable for corruption in a short prose piece entitled “Of boats and bribes” [舟賂說]:

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<sup>1</sup> Tongmunsŏn [東文選 Anthology of Eastern literature], 19: 83.

I was crossing over a river to the south and there happened to be another boat crossing at that time. The boats were of the same size, had the same number of crewmen, and even the number of passengers and horses aboard was about the same. Then when I looked over again after a bit, the other boat, which was speeding as if in flight, had already reached the other side. The boat I was riding in was irresolute and did not advance. When I realized this I asked the reason; another passenger replied,

“In that boat, they treated the boatman with liquor and thus they are rowing with all their might.”

I could not but help to feel ashamed and lamented to myself, “If the pace and operation of this small craft depends upon the presence or absence of a bribe, then what of the competition for an official post? Given how little money I have in hand, then no wonder I have been unable to obtain even a lowly post.”

I record this as a reference for a future date.<sup>2</sup>

Yi’s dislike of corruption and the consequences that it bore for society are clear in this piece. Even the trivial was subject to fraud. But Yi wrote of many other things too. In particular we find a lofty place in his writing for the love of drink. Where Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn sought out the mountains for his refuge, Yi seemed to have latched on to drink as a means to counter the baleful influences of a corrupt world.

These poets are but two men of many who contributed to the growth of literature in the formative years of the tenth through thirteenth centuries. Their literary talent is indeed great, but so too is their humanness and what it reveals about their worldviews. An abhorrence for corruption is clear in their writings, but so too is a need for solace. Thus we can note the fragility of their hearts and the need for comfort.

### A Woman, Her Words and Us

Moving forward some seven centuries, I would next like to look at a woman writer of the early nineteenth century as a means to further the theme of this paper. Lady Yi (P’inghŏgak Yi-ssi 憑虛閣 李氏) was born in 1759 and died in 1824. She is known for her encyclopedic compilation entitled *Kyuhap ch’ongsŏ* [閨閣叢書 Encyclopedia of women’s daily lives]. This is a work that I am painfully familiar with as I have spent the better part of the last five years working through my translation of this difficult piece. The work itself—to sidetrack for a moment—is a complex volume that covers diverse topics such as food preparation, childcare, medicine, medical emergencies and so on. Lady Yi compiled all this varied knowledge in the han’gŭl script and passed it on to the ages. My task as a translator is to make sense of all these many remedies and somehow translate this into a foreign language. More than a one-to-one linguistic translation, it requires an understanding of Lady Yi’s world. This is how I managed to come to know her quite well in the past few years.

History has not been particularly kind to Lady Yi. Perhaps due to being a woman, perhaps due to

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<sup>2</sup> Tongmunsŏn, 96: 194. English translation: Michael J. Pettid, Gregory N. Evon, and Chan E. Park, *Premodern Korean Literary Prose: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 29.

being of a famous family, or perhaps due to living at the end of a decaying dynasty, we simply do not have much historical ‘evidence’ on which to build her life. What we do have though is her creation. Her creation, however, is not easy to approach as she wrote like she spoke (as was the case in the day), identified plants and medicines by local names, and had her own particular way of describing actions such as cooking or treating illnesses. The translator’s task is to render such eccentricities into flawless English, or in my case, a close approximation of said. Thus the years spent working through draft after draft of the work.

Yet, despite this obvious mundaneness and difficulty, in the past couple of years I have finally come to know and appreciate the intelligence, wit and humanness of Lady Yi. At the onset of the project she was a murky historical personage, and only a flat and not even inspiring one. Today, she has become quite a different figure to me as I have finally begun to hear her voice quite strongly and clearly. In her preface to the work she shares her thoughts on compiling this work:

For the most part what womenfolk do does not leave the inner rooms. Even if one has more talent than others and intelligence to understand the things of old and new, it is not righteous for a woman to embrace this and not keep her beauty inside. Even more, with my stupid foolishness, how could I dare to write my thoughts down? However, the main gist of this book—although it has much information—is to attend to one's health. Also, it has important methods for managing a household which will be truly useful and is something women should study. Therefore, with this preface, I give this book to the daughters and daughters-in-law of the house.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly evident is her sense of humility and perhaps also her understanding of how women and their writings were viewed in her day. But we also see a sense of righteousness and purpose. Her writings will allow her descendants to prosper, to be healthy and to have better lives. Her purpose outweighs any associated negativity. She is completely justified in this endeavor by her desire to help those who live after her.

But there is more to Lady Yi than purpose. There is also humor. Perhaps this was the last thing I expected of this work at the outset. That is probably due to me and not her. As a scholar of premodern Korea I expect writings to be straightforward (save fictional works). Descriptions of animals and medicines need not be humorous, but they do need to be accurate. After all, when we need information we expect just that. But Lady Yi did not see her world so limited. Her voice is clear and strong in the manuscript and she tells things how she see them. Following is an excerpt of an entry for the slender shad (siö, Ilisha elongate):

It is commonly said that there are five types of han (恨) and one of those is that the slender shad

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<sup>3</sup> Kyuhap ch'ongsö [閩閩叢書 Encyclopedia of women's daily lives], 20.

has too many bones.<sup>4</sup>

Reading this I was really surprised. First with the offhandedness of the remark about han—surely the Koreanest of Korean emotions—and secondly on the deftness in which she dropped this phrase. It is a line that I wish I had thought up first to describe a boney but tasty fish. Lady Yi was clearly comfortable with writing as she saw things and with being herself. These sort of lines and comments brought her to life for me and demonstrated that humans are indeed humans, regardless of when we live.

### Concluding Thoughts

Mark Twain is given credit for the oft-cited adage that historians love: “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes.” Well to that end, the humanness that we see in ourselves was also present in the personages of yore that we now study. Like us, they can be cynical, insightful or humorous. Conversely, they can be immoral, corrupt and downright boring. They are us and we are them. The human condition—for good or bad—is little changed over the flow of time.

As one who spends much time immersed in the past, I often wonder how it would have been to meet, speak with and even drink with some of my subjects. I am sure that I could find common grounds with some—I could marvel at and climb up mountains with Ch’oe Ch’iwŏn, share cups of makkŏlli with Yi Kyubo, and perhaps ask Lady Yi about the other four types of han in the world. Despite the obvious differences in the epochs in which we live, we could share elements of being human the same way I can do today with my contemporaries.

However, if we forget the humanness of our subjects of study we leave a good deal of human history untended. Humanness adds life to our subjects of study and also creates very real links with our own lives and the lives of our students. The study of the past is today seen by many as boring and highlighted by memorization of dates and major events. So today’s university student or even the young scholars looking to a career in the Academy shy away from the pursuit of premodern studies. This is all the more evident in Korean studies where a premodernist must master Literary Chinese on top of all the other requirements for a degree. Flat personages and few links with their own lives make study in such a field far from attractive for most.

Yet if we bring humanness to the fore students will see that these people are quite the same as them if only in different times. Consider the following poem:

The single ribbon of pure water  
Is the same color as the vast heavens.  
In the thin white threads of the net  
Cast into the shallows,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 76.

Silver-scaled jade measuring sticks  
 Are caught here and there.  
 I gather them all  
 Big and little,  
 The little ones I boil  
 And the big ones I slice [and eat] raw.  
 Wine from an earthenware pot  
 I pour into an unadorned cup,  
 Drinking and persuading others to do the same,  
 I drink until after I am drunk.  
 When the sun sinks into the waters  
 And the moon rises over the eastern hill,  
 Stumbling and weaving  
 I return to my brushwood gate.  
 My son helps me in my drunkenness  
 And my slender wife welcomes me.  
 I then dare to think that I alone am  
 The master of the rivers and mountains.<sup>5</sup>

Who can we imagine as the author of this beautiful poem? Surely a person with a great appreciation of the beauty of simple things such as fishing with friends, eating their catch and drinking away the day. A day as such capped by a return home to a loving family and a sense of some sort of perfection in such a day. Surely the love of this poet for his life of leisure is something that we can all understand, and even envy. The author was none other than the greatest Confucian scholar of Chosŏn, T'oegyŏ Yi Hwang (李滉 1501-1570). It is not Yi's philosophical understandings of the formative elements of *i* (理) as the existential force that determines *ki* (氣) that brings him to life, but rather qualities of humanness that we can all see in our own lives: love of friends and family. The humanness of yesterday is precisely the humanness that we should seek today.

<sup>5</sup> Taedong yasŭng [大東野乘 Tales of the Eastern country], 172-173.