
Book Reviews

Sinae Park. *The Korean Vernacular Story: Telling Tales of Contemporary Chosŏn in Sinographic Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 328 pp. (ISBN: 9780231195423). doi:10.18399/acta.2023.26.2.009

The multifaceted nature of the *yadam* genre—which spans a range of unofficially circulating stories, records of the marvellous, and jokes and anecdotes from Chosŏn Korea—has long been a source of delight to readers, as well as a conundrum to scholars. Since the beginning of modern scholarship on Korean literature, *yadam* have rarely fit the preconceived categories of the national literary canon, and in spite of their huge popularity among both pre-modern and modern readerships, they have not received the attention they deserve. Si Nae Park’s book, *The Korean Vernacular Story*, not only rectifies this but also opens a completely new avenue for further studies of the landscape of Chosŏn language and literature. The book is a detailed study of only one example of this genre, *Tongp’ae naksong* 東稗洛誦 (*Repeatedly Recited Stories of the East*) written by No Myŏnghŭm 盧命欽 (1713–75), but the conclusions drawn by Park are relevant for *yadam* literature and pre-modern Korea textual practices as a whole.

The title of the book employs multiple play and allusion, similar to the *yadam* style itself. Inspired by Patrick Hanan’s book *The Chinese Vernacular Story*,¹ it challenges the dominant theory that Korean vernacular literature is defined by texts written in *hangŭl*. The recent *An Anthology of Traditional Korean Literature* by Peter H. Lee (2017) presents, in the category of “Vernacular Fiction”, only works written in this script, under the longstanding assumption that Literary Sinitic cannot, by definition, be a part of the vernacular.² Park shows that, much as in China, Korean authors engaged in a process of vernacularization and developed “a new sinographic writing that could reflect linguistic realities and evoke, inflect, and imitate oral forms” (p. 223). This understanding enables us to redefine vernacularization strategies in Korea and more widely in East Asia, but more importantly, it allows us to fully grasp the charm of *yadam* texts, which blur the borders between high literature and oral narration and brought joy, thrills, moral lessons, and humour to Chosŏn audiences.

Park traces the story of *Tongp’ae naksong* in four chapters, beginning with a description of the compiler of the book. No Myŏnghŭm was a poor scholar who, thanks to his literary

¹ Patrick Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

² Peter H. Lee, *An Anthology of Traditional Korean Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2017).

talent, rose to the role of private tutor in an elite Seoul *yangban* family. Little evidence remains of his life and work, and apart from the present collection, he has no known extant works. This chapter analyses his social and family networks and motivations, offering a picture of a literary talent who spent his life as a respected but extremely poor scholar dependent on the patronage of a rich family. It was perhaps this failure which brought him to loathe the examination style for its rigid boundaries and limited room for improvisation (p. 227). At the same time, No Myŏnghŭm's poverty was balanced by his privileged position. The patronage of the Hong family allowed him to reside in the capital, the very centre of the Chosŏn intellectual scene, and granted him access to both famous literati and Ming and Qing literary works imported via embassies to China.

The Seoul environment provided No Myŏnghŭm with much of the material that he collected in his stories. The chapter "Narrative World" introduces the times, places, and protagonists of his stories and describes the motifs that most fascinated him, his informants, and above all his readers. Strictly speaking, *Tongp'ae naksong* is not exclusively a contemporary work, since it occasionally introduces stories from the distant past, such as the tragic events connected to the murdered King Tanjong (r. 1452–55) or the Japanese and Manchu invasions. Nevertheless, these stories still resonated and circulated in No Myŏnghŭm's times and were well worth recording. In terms of its topics, the collection is rather conservative, and compared to other *yadam* compilations, there are very few supernatural or sexual motifs. Instead, it contains stories of poor scholars, the plight of secondary sons, clever slave wives, and topics clearly of interest to all readers: family relations, fluctuating fortunes, and social mobility.

Chapter 3 turns its focus to the collection's language. Park describes how No Myŏnghŭm used Literary Sinitic to "articulate the language of here and now" (p. 112). His exceptional command of this written medium enabled him to create "a new literary vernacular in sinographic writing," (p. 165) which reflected the linguistic and inscriptional realities of contemporary Chosŏn society. The stories of *Tongp'ae naksong* were written using idioms, proverbs, common expressions, and narrative strategies which made them familiar to their Korean audience. Park devotes considerable attention to oral circulation and authorial retelling of older stories that transformed them into "action-driven storytelling" (p. 156).

Although many readers may consider the book's most important contribution to lie in the chapter discussing language, I would suggest that Park's skills are best demonstrated in the fourth chapter, which deals with the circulation of *Tongp'ae naksong* manuscripts and the role of *yadam* in the context of Chosŏn manuscript culture. Although *Tongp'ae naksong* is a relatively small collection of only a few dozen stories which circulated in limited numbers, documenting the material life of *Tongp'ae naksong* and tracing all the textual variants, editions, calligraphic features, and connections with other manuscripts was a formidable task. However, it helps the reader to understand how the collection was transformed, copied, and circulated in the literary world of late Chosŏn. Of particular note are the renditions written exclusively in vernacular script. The Sunggok manuscript held by Kookmin University, which contains eight stories from *Tongp'ae naksong* bound together with instructions for the calculation of auspicious dates for hair-washing, and the vernacular poem "Song of the Loom" is fascinating

proof that a female audience read this bundle of texts roughly between the years 1854 and 1865 by.

Although many of the stories in *Tongp'ae naksong* are quoted, compared, or retold in *The Korean Vernacular Story*, Park translates “The Story of a Slave Girl from Chirye” in full and reprints the original text in Appendix B. (p. 229–35). Similarly, Appendix A contains Hong Yonghan 洪龍漢 (1734–?)’s biography of No Myŏnghŭm. The book is well organised and contains numerous tables containing lists of the stories’ protagonists, No Myŏnghŭm’s comments on the stories’ oral provenance, and comparisons of text versions or different manuscript editions. Images include a traditional map of Seoul (perhaps not entirely necessary) and four facsimiles of the *Tongp'ae naksong* (of which I would have included even more). The book is well written and, moreover, exceptionally informative. Park carefully elucidates many issues not commonly known outside of the field of Korean studies. She clearly explains complex topics such as Chosŏn linguistic and inscriptional ecologies and introduces the reader to the basic principles of *idu* writing and the social contexts of pre-modern Korean society.

Si Nae Park’s book sets the standard and serves as a model for future studies of the vernacularity of the late Chosŏn era in general and features of the *yadam* genre in particular. Connecting the conclusions of this study with the long line of *yadam* and *p'aesŏl* works going back to early Chosŏn and Koryŏ will allow us to fully grasp the strategies the Chosŏn literati used in telling tales of their world in their writings. No less important are the changes the book brings to our understanding of modern scholarship on vernacular texts. As Park shows in her introduction, modern views on the *yadam* genre have gone through several phases marked by script nationalism (conflating language and script) as well as nation-centred methods of examining the relationship between language and literature. Though these insightful observations match the latest understanding, they remain valid only for scholarship in the Republic of Korea and do not answer the question of the treatment of *yadam* literature in the DPRK. The existence of a two-volume anthology of *yadam* texts, *P'aesŏl chakp'um sŏnjip* from 1958–1960,³ the 1956 translation of *Yorowŏn yabwagi* 要路院夜話記 (*Record of a Nighttime Chat at the Main Road Post Station*),⁴ *Chosŏn yadam chip* 1 from 1995⁵ or recent editions of *Kyesŏ yadam* 溪西野談 (2018),⁶ *Ch'ŏnggu yadam* 青邱野談 (2019)⁷ or *Tongya hwijip* 東野彙輯 (*Compendium of Yadam Stories of the East*, 2019)⁸ shows that the *yadam* genre plays an important role in the building of the national literature of the northern part of the peninsula as well.

The Korean Vernacular Story is indispensable for all scholars dealing with questions of Korean language, literature, or pre-modern societal structures. Furthermore, this book about the telling of stories is itself a wonderful story and, in fact, a delightful read.

³ *P'aesŏl chakp'um sŏnjip* 1–2 (Pyongyang: Kungnip munhak yesul sŏjŏk ch'ulp'ansa, 1958–1960).

⁴ Kim Hamyŏng (trans.), *Yorowŏn yabwagi* (Pyongyang: Kungnip ch'ulp'ansa, 1956).

⁵ Chu Pyŏngdo et al., *Chosŏn yadam chip* 1 (Pyongyang: Sahoe kwahak ch'ulp'ansa, 1995).

⁶ O Hŭibok (trans.), *Kyesŏ yadam* (Pyongyang: Munhak yesul ch'ulp'ansa, 2018).

⁷ Kim Hŭiok (trans.), *Ch'ŏnggu yadam* (Pyongyang: Munhak yesul ch'ulp'ansa, 2019).

⁸ O Hŭibok, Kim Hŭiok (trans.), *Tongya hwijip* (Pyongyang: Munhak yesul ch'ulp'ansa, 2019).

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Kyunghee Pyun and Jung-Ah Woo, ed. *Interpreting Modernism in Korean Art: Fluidity and Fragmentation*. New York: Routledge, 2022. 236 pp. (ISBN: 9780367367435). doi:10.18399/acta.2023.26.2.010

In the last thirty years, scholars in Korean art history have paid increasing attention to the so-called dark era under Japanese colonialism (1910–45) and the Korean War (1950–53). Their work has shed critical light on the period, reinterpreting colonial time and space as the most creative incubator in the formulation of modern Korean art. Research on modern Korean art is no longer based solely on a national trauma of suppression, censorship, conformity, and failed institutionalization. Instead, the narrative has become more colorful, powerful, and unpredictable, with exciting stories of daily individual survival and artistic transformation in colonial modernity.

Korean modernism is not equivalent to Westernization or Japanese colonialism. In Korea, modernization, Westernization, and colonization are conceptually and historically intertwined. In this complex triangle, simplistic dichotomies cannot fully explain the holistic narrative of microphenomena in modern Korea. Binary oppositions are often found in perspectives of Korean modernism: in colonial exploitation and beneficial modernization, in classifications of pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese activities, in distinctions between propagandistic and aesthetic purposes, in the conflict between tradition and avant-gardism, and in tensions between imitation and creation. Likewise, for Korean artists, their work is not just about adopting Western trends under Occidentalism or defending their cultural identity and independence through self-Orientalism.

Interpreting Modernism in Korean Art: Fluidity and Fragmentation tries to overcome such