



## Premodern Korean Literary Prose: An Anthology

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Seoul, Korean Americans occupy a great diversity of positions in the domestic labor market as professionals in law and finance, for instance, or as small business owners and kitchen staff in the food-and-beverage industry. There is also a lack of cultural and demographic diversity. What of the mixed-race Korean Americans or the Korean American adoptees who are often stigmatized as “illegitimate” offspring, for instance? Or, the lesser known numbers of undocumented Korean Americans with criminal records who settle in South Korea not out of their own will, but because they were deported by the American government? By leaving out these distinct sub-populations, the reader is left with an overwhelming impression that Korean Americans are simply privileged. To discuss in-group differences at length for each of the populations covered in the study may be impractical and unfeasible. But these seemingly inconsequential differences could provide the type of texture and depth that allow students of Korea to look beyond commonsensical stereotypes associated with each group.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Homing* is a pioneering work of ambitious scope that fills a critical gap in understandings of Korean nationhood. Jo masterfully weaves in stories of individual diasporic Koreans within the broader context of their social, economic and institutional integration into South Korea. Notably, her emphasis on the importance of affective experiences and how they are intertwined in labor market dynamics helps pave the way for future theoretical developments in the field. The book is a must read for anyone interested in the intersections of globalization and the Korean peninsula.

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*Premodern Korean Literary Prose: An Anthology*. Edited by Michael J. Pettid, Gregory N. Evon, and Chan E. Park. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 301 pp. (ISBN: 9780231165815)

The promotion of Korean literary works is usually met with enthusiasm, while their demotion—for example, in the form of censorship—arouses dismay. Korean Studies generally supports “whitelists” of literary works, including generous grants for translation and publication, while at the same time harshly criticizing blacklists of artists. Still, both whitelisting and blacklisting of literary works, especially when governmental institutions are involved, belong to the realm of “governing culture” (Kim 2018, 85), because they control what we read. Although the degree of governing may vary, promotion and demotion of literary works can be understood as two sides of the same coin, and both merit a cautious reaction.

The canonization of literary classics is a complex process that is not necessarily based solely on aesthetic excellence, but also on ideological interests. Repeated anthologizing of certain works and writers activates their canonical status. Simultaneously this silences

others by keeping them from being heard. *Premodern Korean Literary Prose* is an anthology, and therefore a selection. Its publication was supported by the Literature Translation Institute of Korea and roughly one third of the translations (based on page numbers) were funded by the Korean government. Yet, the editors are well aware that the pieces included here represent a selection, and they make very clear that “for each selection in this volume, countless others have been excluded” (3). By stressing that “[a]nthologies, no less than canons, are inherently flawed, but... are nonetheless vital to the spread of knowledge” (10), the editors clarify that their selection does not embody any “universal, unchanging, or absolute value” (Shirane 2000, 2). They aim at “greater inclusion of genres and talents” (5) and are mostly successful. This collection includes both texts and authors that have been repeatedly anthologized in textbooks in Korea as well as in English translation, and others that tend to be neglected, such as pseudobiographies (假傳, *kaejŏn*), commentaries (說, *sŏl*), anonymous texts, “unofficial” histories (野談, *yadam*), palace literature, and *p’ansori* narratives. The extremely high quality of the translations in the anthology is a result of the fact that no less than 16 experts of premodern Korean literature collaborated on the volume, and each translated those texts that are actually within their area of expertise-- an excellent example, incidentally, of how collaboration can enhance Korean Studies.

*Premodern Korean Literary Prose* is divided into three parts and eight chapters. While part one focuses on prose from the pre-Chosŏn period for about 20 pages, the 200 pages of part two provide a survey of prose from the Chosŏn period. Part three provides insight into oral tradition in the form of three *p’ansori* narratives for about 50 pages. The 10 page introduction to the whole anthology is reader-friendly without falling into the traps of reductionist essentialism. Each translation is accompanied by an introduction, which discusses the context, writer and the genre of the text. Titles are not only given in English and in Korean transcription, but are fortunately also accompanied by sinographs in most cases, which might be very helpful for interested readers from, for example, Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese Studies.

The first chapter of part one starts with three short stories from the *Tales of the Bizarre* (殊異傳, *Sui-jŏn*), which are considered to be the “oldest surviving fictional works of Korea” (16), possibly dating back as early as the late Silla kingdom (668-935). The second chapter is devoted to prose works from the Koryŏ period (918-1392) and introduces humorous pseudobiographies and commentaries. The second part—prose from the Chosŏn period (1392-1910)—is divided into five chapters, namely chapters three to seven. Chapters three and four range from short to long fiction, while chapters five and seven cover “unofficial” histories and palace literature. Chapter six is a salmagundi of translations that do not easily fit into the other categories.

Of course, at least one of the five novellas of *Kŭmo sinhwa* (金鰲新話, *New Tales of the Golden Turtle*), usually celebrated as “the earliest classical fiction in Korea” had to be included in this anthology. I enjoyed the translation and appreciate the fact that it is not again one of the two ghost stories of *Kŭmo sinhwa*, which often represent this collection in textbooks in Korea, but instead the novella titled “An Account of Drunken Merriment at Floating Jade-

Green Pavilion” (醉遊浮碧亭記, “Ch’wiyu pubyökhöng-gi”). Still, I wonder whether we need yet another translation of this novella, given the fact that Dennis Würthner’s translation of all five novellas of *Kümo sinhwa* as part of the English Translation of 100 Korean Classics program is about to be published. It is quite surprising that two translations of the same text (Würthner’s and this one) were both funded by the Academy of Korean Studies in recent years.

Chapter four offers four impressive translations of Chosŏn long fiction: *The Tale of Lady Pak* (朴氏傳, *Pak-sŏ-jŏn*), *A Tale of Two Sisters, Changhwa and Hongnyŏn* (薔花紅蓮傳, *Changhwa Hongnyŏn-jŏn*), *The Pledge at the Banquet of Moon-Gazing Pavilion* (玩月會盟宴, *Wanwŏrboe maengyŏn*) and *The Tale of Ch’oe Ch’ök* (崔陟傳, *Ch’oe Ch’ök-chŏn*). *A Tale of Two Sisters*, probably the most popular story among these four, was adapted for the screen as a silent film as early as 1924 and maintains its place in popular culture until today—as recently as 2003, a film adaptation titled *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Changhwa Hongnyŏn*, Kim Jee-woon [Kim Chi-un]) became one of the highest-grossing Korean horror films ever. While discussing and comparing the roles of the stepmother and father who are responsible for the death of the two sisters, the translators argue in the introduction that it is the Confucian system that spares and even romanticizes the role of the father, while the stepmother is sentenced to death. Given the striking parallels to the role of the father in fairy tales like the Cinderella narrative, an explanation for the father’s portrayal based on Confucianism seems to be questionable.

While this anthology’s translation of *The Pledge*, a lineage novel, is, to my knowledge, the first translation into English, there are earlier translations of the other two stories: *The Tale of Lady Pak* and *The Tale of Ch’oe Ch’ök*. Both tales are set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the Japanese invasions at the end of the former century but during the Manchu invasions in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. An excerpt of *The Tale of Lady Pak*, translated by Mark Peterson, is part of Peter H. Lee’s new *Anthology of Traditional Korean Literature* published in 2017, which also provides a complete translation of *The Tale of Ch’oe Ch’ök* by Hyunsuk Park. Critical readers might ask whether multiple translations of the same text are a question of competition, poor coordination, or just a lack of sources worthy to be translated.

My favorite chapter in *Premodern Korean Literary Prose* is chapter five, which introduces some of the “largely overlooked” (162) “unofficial” histories. Michael Pettid explains that this genre is “highly important in that it helps provide a fuller picture of life and culture in Chosŏn” (163). The Chosŏn period is often reduced to a Confucian-dominated society, so the “unofficial” histories help us to get an idea of the “syncretic worldviews that guided the lives of the people” (162). The 17 stories in this chapter not only enrich the image of Chosŏn by their diversity, each of them is also extremely entertaining.

Chapter six is another treasure chest, which includes supremely good translations of four texts that do not seem to fit into any of the former categories, which makes them all the more intriguing. While “The Tale of Master Yedök” (穢德先生傳, “Yedök sŏnsaeng-jŏn”) and “On Names” (名論, “Myŏngnon”) by Pak Chiwŏn can be read as social commentary, Yi Tŏngmu’s “The Book of Ears, Eyes, Mouth, and Heart” (耳目口心書, “Imokkusim-sŏ”) discusses the canonicity of literary works. The last piece in this chapter, “The Record of

My Hardships” (苦行錄, “Kohaeng-nok”) by Lady Yi of Hansan, is, as the title suggests, an autobiographical narrative. An excerpt of the *Diary of Kyeche’uk Year* (1608), categorized as palace literature, is the last piece of Chosŏn period prose introduced in this book. It tells the story of King Kwanghae, who ascended to the throne in 1608, and explains, probably from the perspective of a palace woman, the measures he took to eliminate anyone who might pose a threat to him.

One of the highlights of this anthology is part three, which provides excerpts of three of the five extant *p’ansori* pieces translated by Chan E. Park, who himself is a singer of *p’ansori*. While the stories of Hŭngbo, Sim Ch’ŏng, and Ch’unhyang are widely known and have been translated into many languages, Park succeeds in presenting his translations as an oral experience. Readers “assume the role of audience when reading” (p. 242), as Park promises in his introduction.

The editors (and translators), Michael J. Pettid, Gregory N. Evon, and Chan E. Park, and the translators, Kil Cha, Ksenia Chizhova, Sookja Cho, Youngmin Kim, Youngyeon Kim, Charles La Shure, Peter Lee, Chan E. Park, Si Nae Park, Marshall R. Pihl, Jeongsoo Shin, Sem Vermeersch, Hyangsoon Yi, and Jamie Jungmin Yoo, accomplished a tremendous and surely arduous task by bringing this anthology together. While the collection as a whole can be used to learn about the development of Korean prose, single translations could be used in the classroom to widen the discussion of specific topics—for example, *The Tale of Lady Pak*, *The Tale of Ch’oe Ch’ŏk* and also *Diary of the Kyeche’uk Year* could be used in class discussions about the consequences of the Japanese and the Manchu invasions. *The Pledge* and *The Record of My Hardships* lend themselves as sources for the popular topic of the status of women in Chosŏn. By drawing a much more colorful picture of premodern Korean literature than we are generally used to, I hope that this anthology captivates the interest of many students and can contribute to the promotion of premodern Korean Studies.

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