

A Korean View of Korean Literature

Due to political circumstances, Korean Studies has had a late start compared with the study of Japan and China and, consequently, in many fields there still is a scarcity of authoritative standard works and handbooks in Western languages. For the study of Korean literature the publication of *Histoire de la littérature coréenne* is a milestone, similar to that of the *Sourcebooks of Korean Civilization* for the study of Korean culture some years ago. It is the fruit of a collaborative effort by Cho Dong-il and Daniel Bouchez, both scholars who, in their own way, have played an important role in their field.

Review >
Korea

By Boudewijn Walraven

Cho Dong-il, who belongs to the generation of students which toppled the regime of Syngman Rhee in 1960, has not only published studies of various aspects of Korean literature and a comprehensive five-volume history of the subject (of which this book is an abridgement), but in his numerous books also has devoted a great deal of attention to comparative and theoretical issues. Originally a student of French language and literature, from the outset and with unrivalled energy he has attempted to develop a perspective that could overcome the limitations of the Eurocentric views that also dominated Korean academia. Daniel Bouchez first went to Korea to teach philosophy to Korean Catholic priests (in Latin!), but turned out to be one of the most prominent European scholars of classical Korean literature. Through his ground-breaking work on the seventeenth-century author Kim Man-jung he became one of the central figures in a fierce debate in Korea concerning the language in which Kim wrote his novels. Bouchez has not only translated and abridged the first four volumes of Cho's history (leaving the truly modern literature of the twentieth century for a future publication), but also adapted the text for non-Korean readers, thus becoming the co-author of this volume. The result is excellent. Cho's original work is so long that most readers will only consult it piecemeal, whenever they need information on

a specific topic. The French version, too, may be used in this way (it contains a 34-page index and a detailed table of contents), but also is a pleasure to read from beginning to end. In fact, it provides one of the most attractive and most stimulating introductions to Korean cultural history I know, not least because of the attention paid to intellectual developments in general.

To avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that in this book 'Korean literature' does not only stand for literature in the Korean language. Koreans have from very early in their history made ample use of Chinese characters and the Chinese language to express themselves in writing, and to write in Korean was difficult before the Korean alphabet was invented in 1443. Cho Dong-il has firmly broken with the tendency of some narrowly nationalistic historians of Korean literature, after liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945, to focus exclusively on writings in the vernacular. Consequently discussion of writings in Chinese takes up at least as much space as that of literature in Korean, and probably more. One of the most prominent and most fascinating themes in the book is the situation of bilingualism (diglossia) in which the Koreans (some of whom continued to write in Chinese until the twentieth century) found themselves during most of their history. The relationship between the two languages was extremely complex. One of the two languages had a certain affinity with a specific gender and class (for example women and commoners were largely excluded from literature in Chinese), but this was not exclusive. Frequently there was interaction. Thus the vernacular lyrics called *sijo* often were translated into Chinese, while some *sijo* were originally Koreanized versions of lines of Chinese poetry. Many late Chosŏn novels exist in Korean and Chinese versions. A representative case is *Kuunmong* (A Nine Cloud Dream) by Kim Man-jung (1637–1692), widely regarded as the best specimen of its kind. There has been disagreement about the language in which it was originally written and the last word has not been spoken, but it is not unlikely that it was first written in Korean, then translated into Chinese, and subsequently retranslated into Korean. Chinese was used for all kinds of purposes and not, as one might be tempted to think, always associated with conservatism and a lack of respect for Korea's own culture. In many cases Chinese served to record native traditions and Korean self-esteem and it could be the vehicle for trenchant social criticism, as the cutting irony of the short stories of Pak Chi-wŏn (1737–1805) attests.

National identity and tradition

Two other prominent themes reflect basic concerns of intellectuals of the generation to which Cho Dong-il belongs. Using the Korean terminology these may be summarized as *minjok* and *minjung*: the nation and (the masses of) the

people. In other words, much attention is paid to the relationship of literature with national identity, national consciousness, and national destiny, and with the fate of the ordinary people, those who were dominated and exploited. The preoccupation with the nation, a natural consequence of Korea's confrontation with colonization and modernization, does not, however, imply a mindless essentialism. National consciousness is not assumed from the outset, but its emergence is carefully traced. In a different context, writing about the oral literature of Cheju Island, which he regards as that of a minority people, Cho has demonstrated that he is not blind to the dangers and limitations of the nationalistic perspective and has even issued a call to transcend it. The interest in literature that directly, or more often indirectly, represents the views of the lower strata of society may be seen as a reflection of the drive for democratization that has characterized contemporary South-Korean history while one repressive government after another assumed power.

The admiration Cho expresses for an author like Yi Kyubo (1168–1241) is typical of his views and values. Although Yi exclusively wrote in Chinese, he exhibited a clear consciousness of Korean tradition, recording, for instance, an orally transmitted story about the founder of the ancient Korean state of Koguryŏ in a long narrative poem, *The Lay of King Tongmyŏng*. He also was of the opinion that a Korean writer should write about Korean conditions, putting this into practice himself by composing poems in which he expressed indignation about the terrible plight of the peasants, who were caught between the exactions of their own government and the Mongol armies that invaded Korea in the thirteenth century.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the last chapter, dealing with the years 1860–1919, which is seen as the final transition to the age of modern literature. This is a period which, so far, has been somewhat neglected in the West, being neither truly 'classical' nor fully modern. It is the period in which the Korean alphabet and the Korean language finally gain the upper hand, although even then Chinese remained one of the languages of Korean literature. Thus the patriot An Chung-gŭn, who in 1909 killed the Japanese Resident-General Itō Hirobumi, expressed his nationalistic emotions in Chinese verse.

This adaptation of Cho Dong-il's *General History of Korean Literature* proves the added value of cooperation between Korean and Western scholars. I look forward to a companion volume on modern Korean literature (and a similar adaptation of the *History* in English for the non-francophone world). <

- Cho, Dong-il, and Daniel Bouchez, *Histoire de la littérature coréenne, des origines à 1919*, Paris: Fayard, (2002), pp. 424, ISBN 2-213-61235-8

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A Virtuous Woman protects her husband against Japanese soldiers. Taken from the 1617 *Tonghae shinsok Samgang haengsilto* (Korean Examples of the Display of Confucian Virtues: New, illustrated edition), which for each entry gives the text in Chinese as well as Korean, with a picture for the illiterate.



From the 1617 *Tonghae shinsok Samgang haengsilto* (Korean Examples of the Display of Confucian Virtues: New, illustrated edition)