

THREE

POPULAR READERS: VERNACULAR AND ORAL CULTURE

Introduction

In chapters one and two, I have highlighted how Korean literary culture, especially those portions of it that were based on classical education, hierarchically stratified by the system of civil service examinations. New books were continuously imported from the outside world during this era. Koreans who received classical education also created new books for themselves in the nineteenth century. Therefore, when the new technology of the printing press was introduced in Korea after the 1880s, elite kinship organizations and literati associations became unexpected sources of new literary culture. However, the books created by these elite groups, written as they were in the classical Chinese and the mixed style of the vernacular alphabet combined with Chinese characters, were still difficult for popular audiences to read.

In this chapter, I will further investigate one additional player in the arena of native Korean print culture in the nineteenth century. The main focus of this chapter is upon popular writers who lived outside the influence of the civil service examinations. Even before the abolition of the examinations in 1894, not everyone read the Confucian canons. Under the official system, males of inferior status and all females were forbidden to take the civil examinations under any circumstance. These people had no motivation to read the officially-sanctioned textbooks at all. There was a significant number of such “outsiders” to the civil examination system in pre-1894 Korean society. The kingdom often labeled them as “illiterate” and “uneducated” folks. Nonetheless, such labels

Seeded Content – Korean Language Facts and History – Today Translations
<https://www.todaytranslations.com/language-history/korean>

Korean is spoken by more than 72 million people living on the Korean peninsula. Although it differs slightly in spelling, alphabet, and vocabulary between the two regions, Korean is the official language of both South Korea and North Korea. Outside of the Korean peninsula, there are about two million people in China who speak Korean as their first language, another two million in the United States, 700,000 in Japan, and 500,000 in the Russian regions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The Korean language has five major dialects in South Korea and one in North Korea. Despite the geographical and socio-political dialect differences, Korean is relatively homogeneous, being mutually understandable among speakers from different areas

Originally written using “Hanja” (Chinese characters), Korean is now mainly spelled in “Hangul”, the Korean alphabet. “Hangul” consists of 24 letters – 14 consonants and 10 vowels – that are written in blocks of 2 to 5 characters. Unlike the Chinese writing system (including Japanese “Kanji”), “Hangul” is not an ideographic system. The shapes of the individual “Hangul” letters were designed to model the physical morphology of the tongue, palate and teeth. Up to five letters join to form a syllabic unit.

Like in other Asian languages, the relationship between a speaker or writer and his or her subject and audience is paramount in Korean, and the grammar reflects this. The relationship between the speaker/writer and subject is reflected in honorifics, while that between speaker/writer and audience is reflected in speech level. If one is unsure as to how to use the language appropriately it is advisable to refer to professional Korean language services.

When talking about someone superior in status, a speaker or writer has to use special nouns or verb endings to indicate the subject’s superiority. Generally, someone is superior in status if he/she is an older distant relative (grandparent’s sibling, older sibling’s spouse, etc.), a stranger of roughly equal or greater age, an employer, teacher or a customer.

Someone is equal or inferior in status if he/she is a close relative (grandparent, parent, spouse, or sibling), student, employee, etc. On rare occasions (like when someone wants to pick a fight), a speaker might talk

to a superior or stranger in a way normally only used for, say, animals. But no one would do this without seriously considering the consequences to their physical safety first...

There is a consensus among linguists that Korean is a member of the Altaic family of languages, which originated in northern Asia and includes the Mongol, Turkic, Finnish, Hungarian, and Tungusic (Manchu) languages. Despite the fact that Korean and Japanese have some similar grammatical structures, a historical relationship between the two languages has not been established so far.

The Korean language may be written using a mixture of Chinese ideograms (“Hanja”) and a native Korean alphabet known as “Hangul”, or in “Hangul” alone, much as in a more limited way Indo-European languages sometimes write numbers using Arabic symbols and at other times spell numbers out in their own alphabets or in some combination of the two forms.

Because of its greater variety of sounds, Korean does not have the problem of the Japanese written language, which some experts have argued needs to retain a sizable inventory of Chinese characters to distinguish a large number of potentially ambiguous sounds.

Although the Korean and Chinese languages are not related in terms of grammatical structure, more than 50 percent of all Korean vocabulary is derived from Chinese loanwords, a reflection of the cultural dominance of China over 2 millennia.

Large numbers of Chinese character compounds coined in Japan in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries to translate modern Western scientific, technical, and political vocabulary came into use in Korea during the colonial period. Post-1945 United States influence has been reflected in a number of English words that have been absorbed into Korean. Unlike Chinese, Korean does not encompass dialects that are mutually unintelligible. There are, however, regional variations both in vocabulary and pronunciation.

It is unclear to what extent the honorific language and its grammatical forms have been retained in the north. The North Korean regime has a policy that has attempted to eliminate as many foreign loanwords as possible, as well as older terms of Chinese origin. Western loanwords are also being dropped.

Pyongyang regards “Hanja”, or Chinese characters, as symbols of “flunkeyism” and has systematically eliminated them from all publications. An attempt has also been made to create new words of exclusively Korean origin. Parents are encouraged to give their children Korean rather than Chinese-type names.

Nonetheless, approximately 300 Chinese characters are still taught in North Korean schools.

represented more an expression of the belief of the regime than it was a description of the social and cultural reality of the time.

In the nineteenth century, a striking observation is that the size of both the readership and number of authors using the Korean vernacular language gradually increased. Popular genres attracted vernacular-language users who did not read books for the purpose of passing the civil service examinations. In the literary genres of religious texts and vernacular fiction, authors wished to express their emotions and anxieties more freely, and using the vernacular language allowed them to do so in a richer context than if they used the classical Chinese. Nevertheless, such cultural changes emerged primarily as a result of the complex interaction with the classical education system. This was because popular authors also received a literary education. After they abandoned the dream of becoming taegwa graduates, many people looked for an alternative career in the society. There was a spectrum of alternative careers available to the unsuccessful candidates. The most unfortunate ones remained at the bottom strata of society, usually working as wondering beggars, pilgrims, or quasi-religious masters of healing and divination.

Such quasi-literate males operated completely outside the civil service examination system. To some degree, many of these outsiders were similar to Chŏng Yag-yong, who wished to break his isolation by circulating the words that expressed his mind (心書 *simsŏ*). However, most such low-class writers did not believe that taegwa graduates would listen to anything they had to say. Instead, they appealed to a sub-culture of popular readers. In particular, the new popular religious network of Eastern Learning 東學 (*Tonghak*) illustrates the uncanny, but vibrant growth of popular vernacular books in the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I will examine such cases of “low-brow” literary works and analyze how these popular authors and readers shared the same passion for expressing

themselves in written words, and for communicating with public audiences through the printing presses.

1. Outsiders of the Examination Regime

On March 10, 1864, a public executioner in Taegu beheaded a 40-year-old man named Ch'oe Che-u 崔濟愚 (also known as Ch'oe Pok-sul 崔福述, which literally means “Ch'oe, a fortune teller”). This man lived without a regular job, claiming that he possessed a supernatural power which could protect his followers from disease and all types of ill fortune. He had many exceptional talents, but he was also one of the many people in Korean society who struggled with poverty and isolation. He chose a career of practicing divination and fortune telling, as folk religions survived under the Confucian orthodoxy of the time. Unlike ordinary shamans and fortune tellers, however, Ch'oe Che-u seems to have touched a nerve of the regime, and provoked an unusually strong reaction from the government against himself. He was a good vernacular-language writer. He had gathered his followers and organized them under one coherent dogma, to which he assigned the name “Eastern Learning.” Furthermore, he ordered his followers to memorize certain texts which he had written. By punishing him, the government expected that, without his charismatic leadership, the Eastern Learning group would dissolve. However, although Ch'oe Che-u did perish, his popular texts still remained safe within the religious network. At first they did so only as handwritten texts and oral transmissions, but later became transformed into woodblock printings. The net result of his

execution was the beginning of long and dramatic struggle between the Chosŏn regime and the religious dissenters, which lasted until 1910.¹¹⁴

Ch'oe Che-u was one example of those who lived at the margins of the civil examination system and classical education. He was the illegitimate son of a yangban man who had conceived him with a mistress. Because he had a mother of an inferior status, he was what was referred to as a sŏl 庶孽 – a person having the mixed-blood of a noble man and a humble woman. Although the sŏl were not outcasts, members of this group were officially prohibited from taking the civil service examinations. Therefore, although he received basic education in the classical language, he had no motivation to invest his energy in mastering the standard Confucian textbooks. Despite his inferior status, his father endowed some property to him, but it seems that he had a difficult life. Perhaps because of crop failure or his heavy burden of taxes, Ch'oe Che-u eventually became penniless. Since he was a sŏl, an unqualified member of the kinship organization, it seems that his kinship group was not concerned with his suffering. Once he had lost his lands, there was no reason for him to remain in the village. Soon, he began an aimless journey, wandering alone as a vagabond.¹¹⁵

Ch'oe Che-u's life as a traveling beggar highlights the diversity of Korean society in the nineteenth century, contrasting the social reality against the conventional stereotype that it was a typical and benevolent “Neo-Confucian” society. After his family abandoned him, he often received basic care from Buddhist temples. Religious institutions, especially Buddhist temples and monasteries, were willing to feed such wanderers as part of their philanthropic policies. Even until the 1900s, in popular fiction, Buddhist monks and nuns appeared to take on the public function of

¹¹⁴ As a result, the Tonghaks demanded amnesty for Ch'oe Che-u. Yi Hyŏn-hŭi, “19segi Hanguk sahoe wa kyojo sinwŏn undong” 19世紀韓國社會와敎祖伸冤運動, [The Amnesty Campaign of Eastern Learning and Nineteenth century Korean Society] *Tonghak haebo* 8 (2004).

¹¹⁵ Ch'oe Chae-u, “Potŏkmun” 布德文, *Tonggyŏng taejŏn* 東經大全 in *Tonghak sasang charyojip* 東學思想資料集, vol. 1 (Seoul: Sŏul asea munhwasa) 20-21.

caring for orphans and beggars. Since these wandering people could at least earn some food and shelter at temples, their journey tended to take on at least the superficial appearance of a kind of religious pilgrimage as they travelled from one temple to another. Ch'oe Che-u took up this same path and spent many days at Buddhist temples.

Buddhism was officially tolerated by the Chosŏn kingdom as minor heresy, but it was a popular religion with a long history and numerous cultural assets, which included books, sutras, and visual images. Anyone who possessed a moderate level of literacy could read Buddhist sutras or many other non-Confucian texts which were safely preserved in these temples. According to a record of one sect of Eastern Learning, Ch'oe Che-u educated himself throughout his journey with religious ceremonies, jargons and esoteric languages. When he studied alone as a mountain hermit, the record claims, a Buddhist monk once paid a visit to his place. This monk had one roll of mysterious scripts which the monk could not understand, so the Buddhist monk asked Ch'oe Che-u to interpret it. When Ch'oe decoded these scripts, the monk was impressed by his knowledge and handed the roll to him. This meeting was commemorated by Choe's followers, which they considered to be one of many miracles which he experienced along his path toward becoming a supernatural being.¹¹⁶

Contrary to the religious sect's claim, however, Ch'oe Che-u was, in fact, one of many people who devoted their life to the reading of non-classical learning. It is not difficult to discover similar cases of autodidacts in a nineteenth century book of biographical stories entitled *Observations of People in the City and the Countryside* 里鄉見聞錄 (*Yihyang kyŏnmunrok*). Its author, Yu Ch'ae-gŏn

¹¹⁶ “Ch'öndogyohoesa ch'ogo pu Ch'öndogyo ch'ongsö” 天道教會史 初稿 附 天道教叢書, *Tonghak sasang charyojip* 東學思想資料集, vol. 1 (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1979) 392. “Ch'öndogyohoesa” 天道教會史 is a handwritten manuscript recording the history of the sect and its leaders. Its author is unknown. It is generally known that this manuscript was used as education for youth groups in 1920. Sin Il-ch'öl, “Tonghak sasang charyojip haecjae” 東學思想資料集解題, *Tonghak sasang charyojip*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Asea munhwasa, 1979) xii-xiii.

劉在建, who was also a literate man of a minor kinship group without a degree, compiled this collection of biographic episodes of ordinary people in classical Chinese. According to this book, books were familiar items in everyday life even to people who did not receive high-level educations or who could not afford to buy books. Regardless of their level of literacy and wealth, individual readers continued to read books which had nothing to do with preparation for the civil service examinations. Like Ch'oe Che-u, the poor outsiders at the bottom of society depended upon religious organizations such as Buddhist temples when they needed alternative book collections to enrich their cultural life. According to Volume ten of Yu Chae-gŏn's book, many different kinds of books were actually circulating in Korean society through the religious networks:

<Table 3.1: Book titles which appeared in Volume 10 of *Observations of People in the City and the Countryside*>

	Title
Twelve books of popular religions	The <i>Todŏkgyŏng</i> 道德經 (the <i>Dao de jing</i> [C]), the <i>Ch'amdonggye</i> 參同契 (<i>Can tong ji</i> [C]), the <i>Kŭmbyŏkgyŏng</i> 金碧經 (<i>Jin bi jing</i> [C]), the <i>Hwangjŏnggyŏng</i> 黃庭經 (<i>Huang ting jing</i> [C]), the <i>Sŏngmyŏng kyuiji</i> 性命主旨 (<i>Xing ming gui zhi</i> [C]), the <i>Naeoe kŭmdangyŏl</i> 內外金丹訣 (<i>Nei wai jin dan jue</i> [C]), the <i>Literary Collection of Ch'ŏnghŏdang</i> 淸虛堂集 (<i>Ch'ŏnghŏdangjip</i>), the <i>Lotus Sutra</i> 蓮華經 (<i>Yŏnhwagyŏng</i>), the <i>Literary Collection of P'yŏnyangdang</i> 鞭羊堂集 (<i>P'yŏnyangdangjip</i>), the <i>Diamond Sutra</i> 金鋼經 (<i>Kŭmganggyŏng</i>), the <i>Pukdugyŏng</i> 北斗經 (<i>Bei dou jing</i> [C]), and the <i>Naejŏn</i> 內典 (<i>Nei dian</i> [C])

As can be seen in this table, the distinction between canons and non-canons was not clearly drawn among the literate people of the lower level of Korean society. Even after they gave up preparing for the civil service examinations, they used their literary skills to read books for personal reasons. Religious books were one of the popular genres for those who sought religious salvation through reading. The Confucian texts also encouraged such a wide range of readings, because the *Book of Change* 易經 (*Yŏkgyŏng* [K] and *Yi jing* [C]) remained popular as source books for fortune telling. The skill of divination obtained from reading the *Book of Change*, in particular, remained in an

ambivalent position part way between the orthodoxy and the heterodoxy. Therefore, many scholars studied it along with the *Ch'amdonggye* 參同契 (*Can tong ji* [C]), one of the books in Table 3.1, and wrote their own commentaries.¹¹⁷

One particular episode in *Observations of People in the City and the Countryside* illustrates the cultural variation in popular print culture. This episode depicts how a yangban man, who used to be loyal to Confucian doctrine, became a cultural renegade in the end. This man, named Mun Yu-ch'ae, spent three years, living right next to the tomb of his parents to follow the Confucian ritual. He apparently did so because he believed in the Confucian morality which he learned from reading the Four Books and Five Classics. However, after he experienced a series of mishaps, he suddenly realized that Confucian orthodoxy did not completely control Korean society. When he returned to his house after finishing the ritual, he found out that his wife had run away with her secret lover. Moreover, his wife's family falsely accused Mun Yu-ch'ae as having murdered her because they were afraid of her being severely punished for her adultery, which would have disgraced the entire family. Helplessly, he was arrested and put in jail for the next seven years until his wife was finally found alive. Thus Mun Yu-ch'ae discovered there was a gap between idealized morality and real life. It must have disenchanted him greatly to realize that no one except himself was committed to moral perfection in everyday life. His loyalty to Confucian doctrine earned him nothing except dishonor and banishment for ten years.¹¹⁸

After this, he decided to devote his remaining life to a different kind of culture and learning. Living in a remote hut in the mountains, he practiced the techniques of Inner Alchemy 內丹 (naedan) which glamorized voluntary starvation and the endurance of hardship. After enduring the

¹¹⁷ Pak Chi-hyŏn, "Chuyŏk ch'amdonggye koi sogo" 周易參同契攷異小考, *Changsŏgak* 6 (2001), 138-140.

¹¹⁸ "Mun Yu-ch'ae," *Yihyang kyŏnmunrok* 里鄉見聞錄 (Seoul: Asea Munhwasa, 1974) 466-468.

- Kim, Pu-ja. *Shokuminchi Chōsen no kyoiku to jenda: shūgaku fushūgaku o meguru kenryoku kankei* 植民地朝鮮とジェンダー就学・不就学をめぐる権力関係 (Yokohama: Seori shobō, 2005).
- Kim, Sun Joo. *Marginality and Subversion in Korea: the Hong Kyōngnae Rebellion of 1812* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).
- Kim, Yun-sik. *Yi Kwang-su wa kŭ ūi sidae* 李光洙와 그의 時代 vol.1-3 (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1986).
- Kinmonth, Earl H. *The Self-Made Man in Meiji Japanese Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
- Kong, Im-sun. “Yōksa sosōl ūi yangsik kwa Yi Sun-sin hyōngsōng munbōb” 歴史小説의 様式과 李舜臣의 形成文法, *Han'guk kŭndae munhak yōn'gu* [Journal of Korean Modern Literature], 4:1 (2003).
- Kūm, Chang-t'ae. *Chōng Yag-yong, Han'guk silhak ūi chibdaesōng* 丁若鏞: 韓國實學의 集大成 (Seoul: Sōnggyungwan taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu, 2002).
- Kwōn, Tu-yōn. “Sinmungwan ūi munhwa undong yōn'gu” 新文館의 文化運動研究, Yōnsei University Ph.D. Dissertation, 2010.
- Leung, Angela Ki Che. “Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtze Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900*, edited by Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- Lin, Mingde. *Yuan Shikai yu Chaoxian* 袁世凱與朝鮮 (Taipei: Zhong yang yan jiu yuan jin dais hi yan jiu suo, 1970).