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.

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 abridgment), but in his numerous books also has devoted a great deal of atten- tion and literary and historical, which may be labeled

A Virtuous Woman protects her husband against Japanese soldiers. Taken from the Fifth Togon drama, Ssanggong hayeokus (Korean Example of the Display of Confucian Virtue: New, illustrated edition), which for each entry gives the text in Chi- nese as well as Korea, with a picture for the illiterates.

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 intellec- tual developments in general.

To avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that, in its Korean version, this book does not only offer a modern literature in the Korean language. Koreans have from the very early in their history made ample use of Chinese charac- ters and the Chinese language to express themselves in writing, and to write in Korean was difficult before the Kore- an 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 Japan- an colonialism in 1945, to face literature only the vernacular. Consequently discussion of writings in Chi- nese takes up at least as much space as that of literature in Korean, and probably more. One of the most prominent early modern writers was the remarkable polymath Cho Yong (Cho Yong, Cho Dông-Il). His work is 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 language of the official state and the language of the school, in a complex. One of the two languages had a certain affinity with a specific social and political context, (for example women and com- munities were largely excluded from literature in Chinese), whereas the other was the language of the populace, but was also an important tool for the state.

This veracular lyrics called sijo often were translated into Chinese, while some sijo were originally Koreanized versions of lines of Chinese poetry. Many late Choson sijo authors expressed it in Korean and Chinese written. A representative case is Kuosung (A Nine Cloud Dream) by Kim Man-jung, who continued to write in Chinese until the twentieth century. The original poem was written in Chinese, but 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 Chinese, then translated into Korean, 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 represent native traditions and Korean self-esteem and it could the vehicle for trenchant social criticism, as the cutting irony of the short stories of Pak Chi-won (1771–1805) 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

National identity and tradition

One of the most interesting parts of the book is the last chapter, dealing with the years 1868–1919, which is seen as the final transition to the age of modern literature. This is a period in which the Korean alphabet and the Kore- an language finally gain the upper hand, although even then Cho Dong-il maintains one of the languages of Korean literature. The patriot An Chang-giin, who in 1909 killed the Japanese Resident-General Itô 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 introduction to the History of English for the non-francophone world).

Professor Boudewijn Walraven

House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia

House of Glass evokes the condition of the prison: the policing and surveillance of inmates, and visibility and transparency versus hidden power struggles, secrets and whispers. Where Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s House of Glass, written in prison, was an act of resistance against the colonial state of the Dutch East Indies, the contributors to this volume wish to reveal what is hidden behind the discursive practices and representational realms of the contemporary state in different Southeast Asian countries.

By Heidi Dahles

This book examines the relationship between discursive prac- tices, modernity, and state power in Southeast Asia. Moving away from political economy, the authors — representing diverse academic disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, and literature — analyze state narratives in the public media from a postmodern and post-structuralist perspective. The eloquence and obsessiveness with which Southeast Asian states plead their cause is the common con- cern of the authors. ‘If cultural mean- ing is, in the final analysis, political’ (p.1), and they argue that the field of text becomes highly significant, argues the editor (p.4). The contributions are arranged into five sections, as follows: (1) “Towards national identity”; (2) dealing with heterogeneity; and (4) coming to terms with the state’s effectiveness. Southeast Asian states are strength- ened, not weakened, by rapid capital- istic development. As both Ken Ang and Yao Souchou argue, this entanglement with the West also generates attempts to contain colonialist and capitalist practices. One of the challenges of the state in Southeast Asia is its permeation of popular culture. Anti-Western dis- sentiment and partly conflicting processes of cultural identity. The ‘Occidentalism’ paradigm that reverses the Orientalist idiom. In this context, the nationalist identification of the state by Southeast Asian societies focuses on cultural purity and pollution in a attempt to renegotiate national identity in a globalized world. "McNation" is an Occidentalist paradigm that reverses the Orientalist idiom. In this context, the nationalist identification of the state by Southeast Asian societies focuses on cultural purity and pollution in a attempt to renegotiate national identity in a globalized world. "McNation" is an Occidentalist paradigm that reverses the Orientalist idiom.
Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales in Oral Tradition

India represents a special conundrum for scholars working with folktales. Such early tale collections as the Panchatantra, the Buddhist jatakas, and the fables of the Jain elders point to the existence of a long-standing and diverse body of tale-telling traditions, giving the folklorist a feel for historical continuity and change that is often absent among traditions of tale-telling in non-literate environments. Yet, at the same time, the literate nature of such collections presents problems of its own. The same is true for Indian folktales collected by British folklorists.

The relatively widespread presence of European in nineteenth-century India resulted in the publication of a number of collections of folktales from different parts of India, including the famous collections of William Crooke from across northern India, Richard Carnac Temple and Flora Steele from Punjab, and Mary Freer from the Deccan. However, with the increasing sophistication of folklore studies in the second half of the twentieth century, the use of such collections as primary material has become increasingly difficult. Contemporary perceptions often lead us to problematize the colonial context no less than the methodological lack of sophistication with which they were sometimes collected.

The publication of Thompson and Baby’s index of Indian tale-types in the late 1930s represented a watershed in such studies. In its wake, a number of important studies of folklore tradition in India have been methodologically circumspect enough to satisfy the specialist and include the important contributions of British scholars. However, as in so many other academic fields, a paradox remains between a richness of primary source material and its frequently relegated position in publications. Given the tenacities and rewards of the analysis of folktales, Stuart Blackburn is therefore to be applauded for his efforts in the painstaking and time-consuming work of translating a large number of tales from a single regional tradition.

Moral Fictions brings together translations of one hundred folktales that Blackburn collected in different regions of Tamil Nadu during the mid-1990s. Treading carefully the path between the too widespread and the too specific that can easily characterize such enterprises, the collection is significant in the context of Indian folklore studies in providing a broad selection of tale-types told by no fewer than forty-one tellers that allow an overview of one particular cultural/linguistic folkloristic tradition at a given point in space and time. As a methodological exercise in the writing of folktale, the volume is also of interest in attempting to make the construction of the text as close and simple as possible a mirror of the ethnographic experience, while not allowing details of recording to interfere with the tales themselves. The volume is organized by story-telling ‘sessions’, keeping tales together by author, time, and location of their telling. As well as the clarity this allows into the contexts of the tales, as Blackburn himself notes, this approach also reveals something of the ‘narrative logic’ through which different tales relate to one another within a given session.

There is a minimum of authoritative comment on the tales outside of the ‘Introduction’ and ‘Afterword’. However, in these two short pieces that frame the collection, Blackburn is careful to draw our attention to the moral dimensions of the tales. He comments that the weight of opinion among Indian folklorists is to view fantasy as the main characteristic of the folktale and the topic of morality as only a peripheral theme. Yet, for Blackburn, the most striking characteristic of the Tamil folktale is its emphasis on crime and punishment. Citting Maria Tata’s argument that violence and sex represent the ‘hard facts of folklore’, Blackburn offers what he sees as the unifying characteristic of the folktale tradition he is presenting in the claim that ‘[T]hese Tamil folktales are moral fictions.’ Thus in one story from Panayjakottai, a female practitioner of ‘country medicine’ steals fingers from corpses for her cures and so becomes involved with a group of thieves who try to bungle her house and kidnap her. In the denouement, we find the woman suitably admonished through a short jail term and the thieves who molested her condemned to death. Another tale from Tanjavur, a cruel mother-in-law is tricked by a young bride’s faked return from the dead into arranging her own death and funeral. With its mixture of helplessness and the catharsis of revenge, the story of the young bride is one with resonance for any patrilocal society based around the extended household. Such recurring societal references suggest that Blackburn is right to take issue with aesthetic arguments that see the intrinsic narrative freedom of the folktale, such as a particular takes shape only by comparison to (and so very much in the presence of) writing. Like the genesis of folklore studies itself, however useful such aesthetic approaches are, they are very often the product of a literate sensibility and can do much to ignore more societal and even functional dimensions of given folktales.

The tales are translated into a highly readable style and present much that will be enjoyable to specialists and non-specialists alike. The tales present insights into the religious and social structure of their tellers’ communities no less than the particular modalities of folklore tradition. The tales themselves and in doing so communicate something of the peculiar narrative magic that sustains successful story-telling traditions, wherever they are found. The volume of Blackburn, Stuart, Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales in Oral Tradition, FF Communications No. 238, Helsinki Academy Sci- entia Fennica (2001), pp. 358, ISBN 951-41886-1-1.

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Notes

1 See: Crooke, W., Religion and Folklore of Northern India, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1925); Freer, M., Old Deccan Days; or, Malabari Legends Current in Southern India. London: J. Murray (1820); Steel, F.A., Tales of the Punjab Told by the People, with notes by R.C. Temple, London: Macmillan (1894).


A third issue addressed in the relationship between integrative forces of colonial heritage versus cultural heterogeneity of the region. While most of the national states in Southeast Asia inherited from colonialism, the systems that are conducive to national unity based on equal rights for all citizens, few governments are able or willing to carry this principle to the end. Governance in almost all states is characterized by strategies of ‘ethnicization’, discriminating more or less explicitly among their ethnically diverse populations. Malaysia makes revisions to its colonial past and negotiates a position between the East and the West in a global society. In a similar vein, the strength and weakness of the New Economic Policy has been its pursuit of economic development enforced by a patrimonial state and legitimized by discourses of national unity and harmony, glossing over major ethnic and religious cleavages, as Mark T. Berger shows (p.193). The political use of communication technologies and mass media has been a factor in the pursuit of economic development enforced by a patrimonial state and legitimized by discourses of national unity and harmony, glossing over major ethnic and religious cleavages, as Mark T. Berger shows (p.193). The political use of communication technologies and mass media has been a factor in the pursuit of economic development enforced by a patrimonial state and legitimized by discourses of national unity and harmony, glossing over major ethnic and religious cleavages, as Mark T. Berger shows (p.193).