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**TRADITIONAL KOREAN POETRY CRITICISM**

**Fifty sihwa chosen and translated by Richard Rutt**

**INTRODUCTION**

Western writers have paid little attention to traditional Korean poetic criticism. This is chiefly because they have paid little attention to Korean poetry written in Chinese, and virtually all traditional Korean criticism refers to poetry in Chinese. There is an unhappy impression that what Koreans wrote in Chinese is no more than a pale imitation of Chinese models, not worth the trouble of reading, and that traditional criticism is trivial matter contained in trivial anecdotes.

The aim of this collection is to begin examining how far such a view is justified.

It is often remarked that when Koreans wrote in Chinese they were writing in a foreign language, and that therefore they cannot be expected to have written good poetry. This judgment also needs examination. It is true that Koreans were sometimes excessively eager to gain Chinese approval for their compositions, and Chinese who came on embassies to Seoul were pressed to comment on Korean poetry whether they were capable critics or not. Koreans sometimes basked in the approbation of Chinese whose discrimination is unproven; and some Chinese praised Korean writings more highly than modern critics think was justified On the other hand, some modern writers have asked Chinese scholars for opinions on arbitrarily chosen Korean poems and placed great reliance on the unfavourable judgments they receive. I have not yet seen the opinion of a competent western critic on the Chinese-language poems of any Korean who is traditionally regarded in Korea as a poet of the first rank.

It is only in a limited sense true that Koreans from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries who wrote Chinese poetry were writing a foreign language. The Korean literatus was educated in Chinese, read nothing [page 106] but Chinese, used Chinese for everything he wrote. Moreover, the Chinese he used was not and never had been a colloquial language. It was a conventional and literary language. He was soaked in it, and could, if he wished, converse in it, though with Korean pronunciation. It was very little more foreign to him than it was to his Chinese contemporaries. So far as he was a master of any literary language at all, he was a master of Chinese, and even a brief review of Korean poetry shows that poetry composed in Chinese was much richer and more varied than that written in Korean.

I am not, of course, suggesting that we shall unearth a Korean Tu Fu or Li Po. But we can expect Koreans to be competent in Chinese, hoping we shall find that the literature they produced was distinctively Korean, not to be measured by purely Chinese standards. Some comparison with Chinese writers is necessary, but a proper evaluation of Korean writers requires that they be judged on the basis of their own poetic criticism before we begin to apply our own standards.

This collection does no more than open up the question. It consists of fifty sihwa written between about 1200 and 1750. The period is long enough to merit analysis, but there is enough unity in its poetic theory to justify a preliminary sketch that looks for themes before delving into their historical development.

Sihwa (Chinese shih-hua) are usually referred to in English as ‘poetry talks’. This is a literal translation of the word but gives an unsatisfactory impression of what it means. Sihwa include historical notes, prefaces to anthologies, letters, comments, anecdotes, notes of coversations, even jokes, on the subject of poetry. They were first written in China in the latter days of T’ang, and are part of the voluminous literature of short sketches which go by a wide variety of names in both Korean and Chinese. They are usually classed as literary trivia, and therefore are not often included in the posthumous collected works of famous writers usually known as chip. They are more often grouped together in collections called mallok, yasa, chapki, swaerok, ch’onghwa or a dozen other names which could be translated as ‘miscellanea’ or ‘jottings’. These miscellanea vary widely in content and value; some are the merest gossip, some contain historical material of great interest. Poetry pieces are not always separated from the other matter, but various collections of poetry pieces have been made. Some of the most interesting collections [page 107] exist only in manuscript form; others have been published, but usually in collected editions with other material.

The bulk and intractability of the material is daunting. James Liu, in his *The art of Chinese poetry* (London 1962) remarks of the Chinese shih-hua that no satisfactory attempt has been made to systematize and elucidate them, and points out the formidable obstacles in the way of studying them. Instead of attempting to describe their contents he poses some questions about poetry which he tries to answer on the basis of his reading of Chinese shih-hua and other sources.

The same thing could be done for Korean sihwa, and some widely-read scholar may one day achieve as masterly an exposition of Korean poetic criticism as James Liu has done for Chinese. In the meanwhile, there is value in presenting a modest selection of Korean sihwa in translation. I have selected fifty sihwa from seventeen writers, concentrating on those which illuminate some critical principle. I have tried to illustrate the range of the genre by including some that are little more than anecdotes, as well as some pieces of theoretical criticism; and I have looked for examples that will be intelligible in translation.

All but one of the pieces can be found in *Sihwa wa mallok* edited by Ch’a Chuhwan, and published by Minjung Sogwan, Seoul 1966. This book is a collection of short Chinese pieces of the type I have described, with a predominance of sihwa. Many of the passages I have used are available in other printed editions: most of those by Yi Kyubo are in his collected works, *Yi Tongguk sangguk chip*; Yi Inno’s *P’ahan chip* is available in several editions; and most of the pieces by Yi Chesin, Kwon Ungin, O Sukkwon, Nam Hyo’on, Kim Siyang, Yi Ki, and Cho Sin are contained in the Taedong yasung (Seoul 1909-1916, reprinted 1970). For the remainder Professor Ch’a drew on manuscripts in the library of Seoul National University, especially an important collection called *Sihwa ch’ongnim* made by Hong Manjong in 1652. Although I have made great use of Professor Ch’a’s notes, I have on occasion departed from his interpretation.

The arrangement of the pieces is more aesthetic than scientific. In the first group, Technique, I have included pieces which illuminate the craftsmanship of the poets ; in the second group I have put pieces which emphasize the relation of the content of a poem to the poet’s own experience; in the third section are pieces which concentrate on criticism [page 108] of poetry written by others ; and the last group illustrates the place that poetry held in the life of Korea.

The pieces on technique can be fully appreciated only if the reader is acquainted with the structure and nature of Chinese poetry, but there seems no need to write yet another essay on that subject. Many sihwa tell of the problems of composing parallel couplets, and they are represented here. Several insist that the meaning of a poem is primary and the diction secondary — an idea which will surprise those who have been led to believe that Korean poets sought only for an imitated elegance of expression.

The insistence of several writers that the material of a poem must come from the poet’s own experience—whether the subject is the real behaviour of dead chrysanthemum petals or the howling of gibbons—indicates a certain ruggedness in the Korean approach to poetry. These critics deplored vapidity. Yi Inno even rejoices at being able to reduce T’ao Ch’ien’s Peach Blossom Spring to the level of a real place and a genuine experience,

When Koreans discuss the writers of the past they are not afraid to hold opinions of their own about the Chinese masters. Their evaluation of the Chinese periods of poetry is much the same as that offered by modern western writers, and they recognize the decadence of the late T’ang poets to the point of applying that criticism to their own revered Ch’oe Ch’iwon. They know the qualities of the best writers and they despise poor imitations. They are on the lookout for plagiarism and quick to note a wrong attribution, but they have the typical oriental penchant for criticism by analogy rather than by analysis.

Some of these points appear again in the pieces I have labelled Poetry and Life. This section shows how important poetry was to the men who wrote it and read it. Poetry was used at great crises, not only on elegant occasions; on the execution ground as well as at the banquet. It could get a lad out of a scrape, it could win a girl, ,it could win what other bribery could not achieve. It was a matter of fierce pride, a subject of occult import, a form of humour, a relaxation and an essential skill, the expression of filial piety and elegiac sadness—not merely for professional poets, but for whole families. Even today there are traces in Korean society of the way in which poetry once permeated daily life as it has never done in the west. [page 109]

Four of the writers of these pieces deserve further introduction. Yi Kyubo is the earliest and the most fascinating. He was an astute statesman who yet could laugh at himself, a devout buddhist yet a tippler, a man of deep sentiment who wrote touching poems about his pet animals and his dead daughter, as well as rollicking ones about thunderstorms and drinking. Kim Manjung was the writer of the Korean novel Kuun-mong, The Nine Cloud Dream’. He and Hong Manjong, together with Hong Manin, are the most recent writers represented here. Under the influence of the k’ao-cheng (empirical research) method of Ch’ing scholars, they were growing increasingly concerned with problems of textual authenticity. Hong Manjong wrote much about plagiarism and false attributions.

The western reader is inclined to ask either too much or too little of Chinese poetry: either nothing more than delicate impressionism or else explicit logicality, neither of which is its true genius. The same may be true of these stories. They are often whimsical, leaving an idea floating in mid-air in a fashion which delights some and irritates others ; but even the reader of translations may begin to savour the taste of the poems and to distinguish which come nearest to fulfilling the ideals of the Korean poets themselves.

In the translations I have referred to people always by their surname and cognomen, even where the original text uses the literary or familiar name (ho or cha). This has meant a small sacrifice of the atmosphere of the originals, but will make the identification of individuals easier. The SHML numbers refer to Professor Ch’a’s *Sihwa wa mallok* mentioned above ; TYSC is *Tongguk Yi Sangguk chip*.

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**I TECHNIQUE**

**1**

On a donkey’s back I drowsed gently in spring,

Passing through the green hills in a dream.

When I came to,I found the rain had stopped

And the brooks were babbling a new song.

I have no idea who wrote this quatrain, but it has often been highly praised. I disapprove, because if the brooks were babbling after the rain, the rain must have been heavy, and not at all the weather for dreaming on a donkey. Meng Hao-jan1 wrote:

I slept in spring and missed the dawn :

Everywhere I heard birds singing.

This is truer to experience and poetically expressed, as verses ought to be. Poets should not offend against technique by concentrating on the thought; but no more should they be so eager to produce technically perfect verses that they write nonsense. Meaning is the form (li) and technique is the substance (chi) of a poem. The form must be the determining factor and the substance must be subservient—this is the basic principle of poetic composition. I wonder if any but the great T’ang poets achieved it. The Sung poets stopped with the form, the Ming poets were stuck at the substance. Of course, some of them were better than others, but they all had faults.

One writer says: ‘The great T’ang poets were good men, worthy of enshrinement; the Sung poets were old-fashioned country scholars timidly sitting with clasped hands; the Ming poets were young gallants showing on their fine horses.’ This describes them well.

Im Kyong (probably 17th century) Hyŏnho swaedam SHML 305

1 T’ang poet 699-740

[page111]

**2**

The most important thing about a poem is its meaning, but the creation of meaning is the most difficult part of writing; the composition of the words is secondary. The principal part of meaning is wit; the merit of a poem depends on wit, and the depth or shallowness of the work flows from the same source. This wit or inspiration comes from an innate gift and cannot be acquired by study. So poets of inferior inspiration may strive hard at their technique and never achieve the first prerequisite of sound sense. They polish their verses and point their phrases to real elegance,but there is no depth of substance in them; although they give a good first impression, they will not bear prolonged rumination.

If one is writing a poem to rhymes chosen in advance and they hamper the sense,then one should change the rhymes ; but of course when one is writing a poem to correspond with the rhymes used in a poem written by someone else, one has to adapt the meaning to the rhymes. If there is great difficulty in finding a parallel verse, even after long mulling over it, it is best to cut one’s losses and give up the attempt.

On the other hand, however, a badly-conceived idea for the meaning of a poem is likely to become involved; it will get twisted and go wrong, and finally will not convey what one first intended.

Only when the thought is free and unhampered will a perfect poem result. Sometimes one can retrieve a fault in the first verse of a couplet by means of the second verse,and sometimes one character will settle the quality of a whole verse.

Yi Kyubo 1168-1241 Paegun sosol SHML 24

TYSC XXII 18

**3**

As a result of prolonged consideration of the subject I have concluded that there are nine faults in poetry:

1 Quoting too many names of historical personages:

the cartload of ghosts.

2 Stealing other writers’ ideas, which is bad even when done well:

clumsy theft for easy effect. [page 112]

3 Unnecessary choice of difficult rhyme:

the bow too stiff to bend.

4 Attempting a rhyme beyond one’s capability:

drinking too much wine.

5 Liking to use obscure characters that mislead people:

leading the blind into a ditch.

6 Straining to use intractable words: forcing men to follow.

7 Using too many colloquialisms: yokels’ parliament. ᅳ

8 Liking to go against Confucius and Mencius:

offending honour.

9 Not pruning exuberant phrases: a field full of weeds.

If one can avoid all these faults, one can start speaking of poetry.

YiKyubo 1168-1241

 Paegun soso I SHML 23

 TYSC XXII 19

**4**

As a general rule one must read a great deal of a classic master’s verse before one can hope to emulate his qualities. Otherwise even imitation is difficult. The process is like burglary: a thief must first spy out a rich man’s house and acquaint himself thoroughly with all the walls and doors before he can enter the place and appropriate the rich man’s belongings without their owner knowing what has happened. If he goes round opening baskets as though looking for eggs, he is sure to be seen and caught.

When I was young I was a gadabout, far from industrious, and not at all devoted to my reading. I read the usual Chinese classics and histories extensively, but never really plumbed their meanings. Much less did I study the poets at all deeply. Not being expert in the texts, how could I imitate their style or borrow their language? So I have been compelled to create a new style.

Yi Kyubo 1168-1241

Paegun sosol SHML 37

[page 113]

**5**

When the Counsellor Hong Kwidal1 was a child, an adult asked him to write a couplet and he wrote:

Birds settle on the blossoming branches ;

Some branches move and others are still.

The word ‘and’ shows the effect of having been trained to write prose.2

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’ onggang shiwa SHML 184

1 1438-1504 A statesman and noted writer.

2 The word criticized is a particle such as was avoided by the Tang poets.

**6**

Sin Kwanghan1 was taking a nap when he was awakened by the sound of raindrops being blown in and hitting the leaves of a potted lotus. A verse came to him:

My dream was refreshed by the rain-sprinkled lotus.

For years after he never succeeded in finding a parallel verse. Nevertheless he wrote an octave including this verse and left a blank line in the draft for the parallel, hoping to fit it in eventually. One day he saw Pak Nan and told him about this. Pak suggested:

My clothes were moistened by mist-bearing stone.

Sin was not satisfied, and to his dying day he never found a suitable line.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583 Ch ‘onggang sihwa SHML 158

1484-1555

**7**

Kim Inhu1 composed the verse:

Pink azaleas glow in the evening sun;

but for a long time he could not devise a parallel verse, until one day Yi Hubaek,2 an under-secretary, came to see him and he told Yi of [page 114] his problem. Yi looked at the foxgloves growing by the steps and said

Purple foxgloves grow in the drizzling rain and Kim was satisfied.

 Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’onggang sihwa SHML 156

The parallel was difficult because the word used for azaleas consisted of three characters meaning, literally, glow-hill-pink. Yi’s word for foxgloves [Rehmannia glutinosa] is literally grow-earth-gold and the parallelism works out like this:

glow hill pink slanting sun within grow earth gold drizzling rain among.

1 1510-1560. One of Korea’s canonized scholars.

2 1520-1578. In later life a distinguished statesman.

**8**

When the recorder Kim Ch’ollyong1 was still a child being fondled on his grandfather’s knee, someone proposed that the grandfather should cap the verse:

The clouds have cleared ;

at the edge of heaven is the lonely disc of the moon,

but the old man could not do it, Kim thumped his grandfather’s shoulder and said, ‘Why don’t you say:

The wind has dropped ;

in the midst of the water is a single slip of a boat?’

They were astonished ; but later Kim came out top in the state examinations and became a famous poet.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’onggang sihwa SHML 157

1 1469-1504

**9**

I dreamt I lost my way deep in the mountains, and came upon a strange and beautiful pavilion standing in a valley. I asked a bystander where I was, and he said it was the Pavilion of the Fairies. Suddenly, six or seven beautiful women came out and invited me in. When I [page 115] entered and sat down, they asked me to compose a poem. So I chanted:

I neared the immortals, bower, the green jade door creaked ;

Fairies peerless as emeralds came out to greet me.

They were dissatisfied with this. I did not understand why; but I tried again:

With shining eyes and gleaming teeth, they greeted me with smiles:

Then first I knew that fairies share our mortal feelings.

This pleased them, and they asked me to compose the second half of the quatrain, but I declined and asked them to finish it. One of them suggested:

It is not that mortal feelings affect us:

Because we love you, we change our normal ways.

But the rhyme character did not match the one I had used, so I said: ‘Can spirits make mistakes in rhyming?’ As I said it, I laughed and clapped my hands, which woke me up. Then I completed the quatrain:

I had done only one couplet and woke from my dream ;

Full dues cannot be rendered till I go there again.

Yi Kyubo 1168-1241

Paegun sosol SHML 16 cf TYSC hujip I 10

**10**

Once upon a time a county magistrate of Mun’gyong said to one of his secretaries: ‘We are not very busy to day; how about composing some verses?’

The secretary politely asked his superior to compose the first verse, and the magistrate proposed:

Bears play before Chugol mountain

but he deliberately used alternative characters for ‘bears’ and ‘playing’. Instead of ‘bear, he used the character for ‘ability’, which is the same except that it lacks a row of four dots at the bottom. The secretary promptly replied with: [page 116]

Dogs bark outside Maktong gate,

using alternative characters for ‘dogs’ and ‘barking’. Instead of ‘dog’ he used the character for ‘big’,which is the same except that it lacks a dot on the top right-hand side.

The magistrate said: ‘Why did you say “big” instead of “dog”?’ The secretary replied: ‘If you cut all four legs off your bear, may I not cut one ear off my dog?’

The bystanders were vastly amused.

Kwon Ungin (16th century)

Songgye mallok SHML 140

Poetic witticisms involving Korean puns on Chinese words, macaronic jokes, and alternative characters do not belong to serious poetry, but they were widely enjoyed and even esteemed for their value in practising technique.

**11**

This is On the Diamond Mountains road by Kang Paengnyon: 1

For a hundred li there has been no sound of man;

Deep in these mountains only birds can be heard.

I meet a monk and ask him where the road goes;

The monk departs, and I am lost again.

It is said that when Kang recited this poem to Chong Tugyong,2 Chong praised it, but said: ‘Alter only (tan) to mountain (san) and it will be even better.’

Kang was chagrined. I think that the whole quality of the poem depends on that character tan, and if it were changed to san the spirit of the thing would be completely destroyed. The three characters for ‘only birds are heard, are quoted from a T’ang poem. Why should Chong tinker with gold to produce iron? The story is obviously not to be believed Anyone who understands this point can discuss poetry, but anyone who does not would do better to keep away from poetry conversation.3

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 291

1 1603-1681. Distinguished stateman and poet.

2 1597-1673. Scholar and calligrapher.

3 The proposed alteration was trite.

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**II POETRY AND EXPERIENCE**

**12**

Chiri-san is also called Turyu-san. The range takes its rise from Paektu-san in the extreme north of Korea, and, like a flowering creeper with peaks for petals and valleys for calyxes, stretches south to Namwon county, where it coils in a thousand li of hills encircling ten prefectures. It would take a month to walk all round it. Old folk say that somewhere in the area is a valley called Ch’onghak-tong, ‘the Valley of the Blue Cranes.’ The way in is so narrow that a man can hardly push his way through, but if one struggles on for a few li, one arrives at a broad open space, with rich fertile fields on all sides. This is Ch’onghak-tong, so called because nothing lives there but grey cranes. Long ago people used to live in this secluded place, and the ruined remains of walls and ditches can still be traced in the overgrown fields.

Some time ago former prime minister Ch’oe — who is one of my relatives by marriage — and I thought of retiring from public life and decided to visit Chonghak-tong. We thought that if we stuffed two or three calves into a bamboo basket and took them with us we should be able to live there, isolated from the outside world. Starting off from the temple at Hwaom-sa, we went to Hwagae magistracy and spent the night at Sinhung temple. Everywhere we went was like fairyland: thousands of rocks vied with each other for splendour; countless streams tumbled through the valleys; thatched cottages nestled within bamboo groves under bright canopies of peach and apricot blossom—it was like another world. But we never found Ch’onghak-tong. So I wrote a poem on a rock:

On distant Turyu-san the evening clouds hang low;

The myriad peaks and valleys are glorious as Hui-ch’i.1

Staff in hand I tramp in search of Ch’onghak-tong

But through the woods I hear the monkeys’ mournful howls,

The place of the immortals is far beyond my sight,

The rock inscription all obscured by mossy growth. [page118]

I want to know where is that fairy spring

Whose petals floating on the stream entice a man to stray.

Yesterday in my study I happened to be perusing the writings of T’ao Ch’ien2 and came upon the Tao-yuan chi.3 I read it over again. It tells how in the days of Ch’in men fled from the troubled world of affairs and took their wives and children to live in a secluded valley, surrounded by mountains and hemmed in by streams, unknown even to the woodcutters. Later, in the reign of Hsiao-wu of Chin,4 a fisherman happened to find the place once, but immediately afterwards forgot the way there, and never found it again. Subsequently pictures were painted of it and songs were composed about it, and everybody thought that this ‘Peach-blossom Spring’ was the land of the immortals, where men live for ever, riding in chariots drawn by cranes,with aerial wheels. But they did not read T’ao Ch’ien’s account attentively. The truth is that his Peach-blossom Spring was the same sort of place as Ch’onghak-tong, or how could such a great thinker as Liu Tzu-chi5 have gone in search of it?

Yi Inno 1171-1259

P’ahan chip SHML 31

1 A famous beauty-spot in Chekiang.

2 365-427. A poet of paramount importance as an influence on Korean writers.

3 The Peach-blossom Spring (or Vale)’.

4 376—396.

5 According to the Tao-yiian chi, Liu Tzu-chi intended to search for the valley, but was prevented from doing so.

**13**

It is not easy to create sensitive poetry simply by application of the mind. The precise words needed to evoke objects and scenes are as subtle as the changes in the atmosphere, never quite the same from morning to evening; and if one has not actually experienced things for oneself, one cannot truly understand them. It takes a sage to understand a sage.

Yi Sugwang1 in nis Chibong yusol criticizes a couplet from Chong Saryong’s3 poem

Sitting on the rear terrace by night:

Hills and streams resound together, the wind rises suddenly;

The river sounds loud in complaint, the moon hangs alone-

Yi objects that the phrase ‘the moon hangs alone, does not fit with ‘the [page 119] river sounds loud in complaint’. Ho Kyun,4 however, included this poem in his anthology Kukcho sisan5 and said of it: This couplet is the best thing in this book.’ Ho was famous for his insight. He must have known Yi Sugwang’s adverse opinion about this verse, and I cannot believe that he wrote as he did without considering the matter carefully.

Once I was passing through Ch’ongp’ung, and stayed at Hwang-gang post-station. During the night I was woken by the sound of the stream and opened the door to look outside: there hung the shining moon, suspended alone in the sky. I was reminded of Chong Saryong’s verse:

The river sounds loud in complaint, the moon hangs alone.

I chanted it over and was deeply moved. The old poets’ truthfulness to life struck me for the first time,and I realized the high quality of this poem as a record of experience.

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 287

1 1573-1628, a polymath.

2 An encyclopaedic compendium, finished in 1614, published some years later.

3 1471-1570. Statesman and writer.

4 1569-1618.

5 The printed edition dates from 1675.

**14**

In the Hsi-ch,ing shih-hua1 there is a poem by Wang An-shih2 con-taining the verses:

The garden grows gloomy in wind and rain at dusk,

Lingering chrysanthemum petals fall and gild the ground.

Ou-yang Hsiu3 saw this and said: ‘Most flowers drop and fall, but chrysanthemums wither on their stems. Why do you speak of them falling?’ Wang was very angry and replied: ‘You obviously do not know what it says in the Ch’u tz’u.4

At evening I eat the fallen flowers of autumn chrysanthemums.

Your objection springs from ignorance.’

In my opinion poetry springs from experience, and I have seen chrysanthemum petals torn off by a rainstorm. Wang had said: The [page 120] garden grows gloomy in wind and rain at dusk, and he should have told Ou-yang that he had written about what he had seen. Though he was quoting the Ch’u tzu he ought to have asked Ou-yang if he had not seen the same thing. That would have been enough. It was petty to impugn Ou-yang’s scholarship. Even if Wang had not been a deeply learned man, it was not such an obscure phrase from the Ch’u tz’u that he could not have been expected to know it. I have no very high opinion of Wang’s manners.

 Yi Kyubo 1168-1241

Paegun sosdl SHML 12

TYSC hujip XI 12

1 By Ts’ai Tao, a Sung writer.

2 1021-1086 Sung statesman and poet.

3 1007-1072 Sung statesman and poet.

4 An early Chinese anthology, dating from the 3rd century BC

**15**

There are no gibbons in Korea, and Korean poets, ancient or modern, who mention the howling of gibbons, are wrong to do so.

In 1546, however, the Chinese envoy Wang Ho went to the Han River and wrote this couplet:

Quiet ripples on the green water are scummed like wine in spring;

The low moan of the piping wind howls like gibbons at evening.

The state secretary,Sin Kwanghan,1 capped it with:

Just now by the waters of Han I met the splendid phoenix;

But where in the clouds of Ch’u can I hear the shrieking gibbons?

He was recalling how during the previous summer he had escorted the envoy Chang Ch’eng-hsien on the Han when Chang had brought the imperial patents. Now an envoy from Ch’u had come and Sin could refer to the howling of gibbons without spoiling his poem. Indeed, it was very skilfully turned.

O Sukkwon (16th century)

P’aegwan chapki 2

(no SHML no.)

1 1484-1555

[page 121]

**16**

Learned men have always achieved their learning by diligent reading. All great Korean writers were avid readers. It is worth considering them.

Kim Suon1 shut himself up to read and when he eventually came out he saw the fallen leaves and realized that autumn had come.

Song Hyon2 read by day and recited by night. He was never without a book in his hand, and even forgot where he was when he went to the privy, staying there an inordinately long time.

Kim Ilson3 read Han Yii a thousand times; Yun Kyol4 read Mencius a thousand times; No Susin5 read the Analects two thousand times; Im Che6 read the Doctrine of the Mean eight hundred times ; Ch,oe Rip7 read the Han shu five thousand times, actually reading the Hsiang-ti-chuan ten thousand times; Ch’a Ullo9 read the Book of Changes five hundred times ; Yi Annul10 read the poems of Tu Fu several thousand times; Yu Mongin11 read Chuang tzu and Liu Tsung-yiian12 a thousand times ; Chong Tugyong13 read the Shih chi several thousand times. I am rather stupid and have to read a book twice as much as anyone else, so I copied out the Shih chi, Han shu, Han Yii and Liu Tsung-yiian and read them at least ten thousand times. The piece I enjoy most of all is the story of Po-i,14 which I have read 113,000 times. So my room is called ‘The hundred and ten thousand study’—Ongman-jae5 and I have written a quatrain:

I searched for books of Ch’in, Han, T’ang and Sung,

Mouthing them over ten thousand times.

Best of all I love the strange tale of Po-i

That wafts my spirit gently beyond the clouds.

In 1670 there was a drought and famine throughout the country, and the following year the towns and villages were piled with innumerable corpses of people who died of starvation and disease. Someone said to me, ‘Do you think more people have died than the number of times you have read your books?’ He was teasing me about the amount of reading I do.

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 275

[page 122]

1 1409-1481.

2 1437-1504.

3 1464-1498.

4 1517-1548.

5 1515-1590.

6 1549-1587.

7 1539-1612.

8 The story of Hsiang Yu in the Han shu.

9 b. 1559.

10 1571-1637.

11 1559-1623.

12 773 - 819. T’ang writer of prose and verse.

13 1597-1673.

14 In the Shih chi.

**17**

Literary style is regarded as a minor skill, but it is a most delicate matter. It cannot easily be achieved by coarse or clumsy minds. Admirers of T’ang poetry dismiss the Sung poets as unpolished and not worth studying, while students of Sung poetry consider T’ang poets too effete to bother about. Such criticism is unbalanced: was T’ang not vulgar when it was in decline, and Sung not elegant when it reached its peak?

This all affects the quality of our own work. Today’s caterwaulers claim that they surpass both T’ang and Sung,that their poems are better than those in the Book of Songs or the Wen hsuan1, their prose superior to that of the golden ages of Chinese writing; yet when one comes to examine their productions,one finds neither felicity of sound nor depth of meaning. They are laughable beyond words. In the Chibong yusol2 Yi Sugwang says: ‘Some men spend their whole time in the lecture-room, restricting their horizons, talking for ever about the superior qualities of ancient writers ,and forming their opinions by what they hear from others. Such men never apprehend truth nor experience things for themselves. When we come to read their compositions,in prose or verse,we find they not only fall short of the classic writings, they are more like children’s lessons or the chatter of academics. A discriminating reader is filled with pity and amusement.’

Yi Sugwang must have been feeling indignant when he wrote this. I repeat it here as a warning to pedants.

Hong Manjong (17th century)

Sihwa ch ‘ongnim chungjong SHML 340

1 A classic Chinese anthology of pre-T’ang writings.

2 See No 13 nn 1 and 2.

**18**

Yi Ch’ong1 was a genius: he never read much but his verses were wonderful. One day when there was a leave-taking at the Poje-won and the guests were all singing and dancing, he wrote a verse on my fan: [page 123]

In the eight years I have known you,

We were rarely together and often apart.

Now again a thousand li will part us:

I stifle my tears to the sound of bright songs.

The others sitting with us gaped and threw down their writing- brushes.

When Yi Chongjun3 saw this verse he was amazed and said: ‘It beggars praise.’

Nam Hyo’on 1454-1492

Ch’ugang naenghwa SHML 40

1 d. 1504.

2 The government hospice outside the East Gate of Seoul.

3 d. 1499

**19**

The under-secretary Yi Hubaek1 and the supreme Court Justice Pak Sun2 were renowned for poetic skill from their student days. Pak wrote On spending the night in a monk’s quarters:

I got drunk in the monk’s house, but now my mind clears ;

Is this not a valley of white mists deep in a moonlit night?

Alone I walk out beyond the sparse trees

And the sound of my stick on the stone path wakes the sleeping birds.

Yi’s poem on the same occasion was:

The little cell clings high up, close to the sky itself,

The monk’s shadow in the moonlight flies away over the riven

My friend from Ch’ungch’ong spends the night here with me,

And white mists from the eastern mountains soak our ramie clothes.

Both compositions have been highly praised.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’dnggang sihwa SHML 175

1 1520-1578.

2 1523-1589

**20**

Here is a quatrain by Yu Ungbu:1 [page 124]

The general’s goodness subdues the barbarians,

The dust settles beyond the pale, the soldiers sleep ;

Five thousand fine chargers whinny under the willows,

Three hundred autumn falcons perch before the pavilion.

Nam Hyo’on2 said that the last two verses show the spirit of the poet, but because the whole quatrain is rarely seen, I have recorded it entire.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’onggang sihwa SHML 155

1 d 1446. A military official and one of the ‘Six Loyal Martyrs’ executed for attempting to restore the deposed boy-king, Tanjong, to the throne.

2 1454 - 1472.

**21**

They say that Chon Uch’i1 became an immortal. His poems were certainly transcendentally limpid. Once, when he was visiting Samilp’o, he wrote:

Autumn evening at Jewelled Pool; and the frosty air is clear,

Heaven’s winds come wailing down with sounds of purple flutes.

The blue bird does not come through the wastes of sky and sea,

But autumn moonlight bathes these six and thirty peaks.

Just reading it produces a chill.

Ho Kyun (1569-1618)

Songsu sihwa SHML 284

1 A 16th-century eccentric and occultist.

**22**

When the twelve-year-old Crown Prince Sunhoe1 died, Pak Sun,2 one of his tutors, wrote an elegy:

The prince’s rooms are now a place of heartbreak,

The water clock still bids my dawn and evening greetings.

These are deeply moving words.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583 Ch’dnggang sihwa SHML 164

1 Son of Myongjong, died 1573,

2 1523-1598, See also No 19,

[page125]

**III CRITICISM**

**23**

When I first read Mei Yao-ch’en’s1 poems I thought very little of them and could not understand why he was so highly esteemed, but on rereading them I found that,though pretty and frail,they have an interior strength, and really are far above the ordinary run. I would even say that until you have understood Mei Yao-ch’en, you have not understood what poetry is.

Earlier writers have pointed to Szu Ling-yun’s2 verse

Spring grasses burgeon by the pool

as a model creation, but I cannot see what is so good about it. On the other hand I think that Hsu Ning’s3 verse, in his waterfall poem:

A single line divides the green face of the mountain,

is beautiful, though Su Tung-p’o4 thought the poem a poor one.

All this makes it clear that our appreciation of poetry is far from being like that of earlier generations. T’ao Chi’en’s5 poetry is gentle and peaceful as solemn lute music in the quiet of an ancestral shrine,resounding in the ear long after the music stops. I tried to imitate it, but could never come anywhere near it—indeed the results were comic.

Yi Kyubo 1168-1241

Paegun sosdl SHML13

TYSC XXI 5

1 Sung poet 1002-1060.

2 AD 385-433. A landscape poet.

3 A poet of the middle T’ang period.

4 Otherwise Su Shih, most highly regarded of Sung poets (1036-1101) See 12 n2.

**24**

Yi Kyubo did not care for Mei Yao-ch’en’s poetry. This was because Mei’s gentle introspectiveness was the very opposite of Yi’s own extravert hedonism. But he had high praise for Hsu Ning’s waterfall poem, saying that Su Tung-p’o was mistaken in his criticism of Hsu. This was because Hsu’s poem was more concerned with fresh ideas than with elegance of [page 126] expression, just as his own poetry was. If Su Tung-p’o could have seen Yi Kyubo’s poems, he would undoubtedly have thought them bad

Kim Manjung (17th century)

Sopo manpil SHML 343

1 A comment on the previous passage.

**25**

Kim Songnip’s1 wife was Ho Pong’s2 sister.3 She was an able poet, but she died young. Her brother Kyun4 collected her manuscripts together, persuaded some Chinese to write a postface to them, and published them under the title of Nansol chip,6 the Orchid Snow Collection. Some said it contained a great deal of plagiarizing, but I refused to believe such stories till I was exiled to Chongsong and first had the chance to read her poems in a book I borrowed. Among them I found an octave begining:

Jewelled robes shake off the snow, spring clouds are warm,

Girdle pendants sound in the wind,the night moon is cold

This is the work of Wu Shih-chung,7 a Ming poet. It made me begin to believe what I had heard. Using a composition by a Chinese to deceive the Chinese is as bad as stealing someone’s belongings and then selling them back to him!8

Kim Siyang 1581-1643

Pugye kimun SHML 199

1 1562-1592. Well-known as poet, but killed in the Hideyoshi invasion.

2 1551-1588. Mentioned here because he was elder brother of Kyun, who is now more famous.

3 1563-1589. Still among Korea’s most famous woman writers.

4 1569-1618. Said to have written the old picaresque romance Hong Kiltong Chon.

5 The envoys Chu Chih-fan and Liang Yao-nien, who visited Seoul in 1606.

6 In 1608.

7 A minor poet.

8 It has recently been suggsted than Kyun wrote most of the poems himself.

**26**

The sound of silkworms chewing mulberry leaves

Is the spattering of autumn rain in the shade of green trees;

The sound of the bow ginning cotton

Is spring thunder moving behind a bank of white couds.

These words are said to come from a tz’u by O Mujok. It is no longer possible to be sure whether this is true or not, but unquestionably the verses are a living picture of sound.

Yi Ki(1522-1600)

 Songwa chapsol SHML 74

Little is known of O Mujok. The tzu (Korean say an irregular verse from little used in (orea) is not otherwise known.

**27**

The verses of Yi Sanhae1 are too soft and pretty.

Yang Kuei-fei2 lay dead beneath the flowers

is ridiculous. But his couplets are sometimes wonderfully done:

White rain fills the boat,the oars thresh homewards, Village doors are shut; autumn bean-fields blossom.

Truly this is painting with words.

Nam Yongik (1628-1692)

Hogok sihwa SHML 296

1 1538-1609. Statesman well-known for his landscape painting.

2 The notorious concubine of Hsuan Tsung of T’ang, assassinated in 756 and more frequently mentioned in Chinese and Korean poetry than any other woman.

**28**

The poetry of Ch’oe Ch’iwon1 belongs to the tradition of Cheng Ku and Han Wo of late T’ang times. Most of it is frivolous and light. However, he did write one superb quatrain:

We strive to sing in the autumn wind

Though few know the tunes for the road of life;

Rain falls in the night outside the window,

My heart is far away beyond the lamplight.

And one couplet:

Distant trees huddle by the road at the riverside,

Cold clouds descend on the peaks before my horse.

H5 Kyun 1569-1618

Songsu sihwa SHML 271

[page 128]

1 857-?910. The earliest Korean whose collected writings are extant. He lived for many years at the T’ang court.

**29**

Ho Kyun1 said of Kwon P’il:2 ‘His poetry is like a beautiful woman, entirely without cosmetics, making the clouds stop in their courses by singing minor mode melodies in the candlelight, but rising to go before the song is finished.’ He meant that Kwon’s verses were natural and lovely and lingered in the memory.

Ch’a Ullo3 said of Yi Annul:4 ‘His poetry is like the sacred peak of Heng-shan5 on a cloudless day, or Lake Tung-t’ing6 without ripples.’ He meant that the verses are boldly constructed and beautiful, but somewhat artificial.

Kwon’s

Lovely mountains, fallen trees,softly falling rain

and yi’ s

Beside the river, singing a song of a pretty girl

were both written for Chong Ch’ol,7 and are both so good it is hard to say which is the better of the two. Kwon’s first lines are like the lute-playing of Chou8 of Yungmen, which made the hearer weep, whoever he was; Yi’s closing verses are like the flute-playing that Su Tung-p’o9 described on the Ch’ih-pi river10, trailing after-tones like a gossamer thread, choking with endless feeling. In spite of the difficulty of comparing them,however,I think Kwon is superior in technique.

Nam Hyo’on 1628-1692

Hogok sihwa SHML 298

1 See No

2 6n 4.21569-1612.

3 b. 1559. Younger brother of Ch’a Ch’o11o.

4 1571-1637.

5 outhernmost of the five sacred mountains of China.

6 The great lake, in the same region as Heng-shan, repeatedly used by poets as an ideal landscape.

7 1536-1593. A distinguished poet, now more famous for his poems in the Korean vernacular, which are probably the finest ever written.

8 Of the Warring States period.

9 See No 23 n 4. 10Su Tung-po’s Ch’ih-pi-fu was among the best known Chinese poems in Korea.

**30**

The Koryo monk Sinjun wrote a quatrain about hearing golden orioles: [page129]

The farmer’s mulberries ripen, the barley begins to grow thick,

You do well to sing to the pink wall among the green trees.

But why in this deserted village,this desolate place,

Do you sing through the woods such short snatches of song?

Im Ch’un,1 a scholar,wrote:

The farmer’s mulberries ripen,the barley begins to grow thick,

Now first I hear the golden birds singing among the green trees,

Like travellers returning from the pleasures of the capital,

Earnestly they sing away,and never seem to pause.

Yi Inno2 remarked: ‘Although the two poems have very little in common, they are both melancholy and might have come from the lips of the same man.’ I do not agree. Sinjun’s verses speak only of things and are exaggeratedly delicate; Im’s verses speak of his feelings, and the technique is sturdy. The atmosphere of the two poems is so different that I cannot see how they could both have been written by the same man. Im’s poem is modelled on a stanza by Ou-yang Hsiu:3

In May the farmers’ barley begins to grow thick,

The mulberry branches are fruiting and birds are crying there.

I do not know how many green trees are in Feng-ch’eng,

Nor whence they come,these fluttering golden birds.

He did not simply copy the idea; he borrowed many of the words too.

Cho Sin (15th Century)

Surnun swaerok SHML 123

l A twelfth century writer.

21 142-1220. The criticism is quoted from the third book of his P’ahan-nok, where the text of the poems is notably different

3 See No 14 n 3. He wrote a century or so before Im.

**31**

Hong Chuse1 and Sin Ch’oe2 were both famous poets. Hong wrote:

Grass in the court, flowers on the steps, shine bright ;

My heart is free, my house is quiet.

All day long no one has ridden to my door;

Occasionally a single unseen bird is heard.

Sin wrote: [page 130]

The ground is covered with a fragrant snow of pearblossoms,

The eastern breeze, unceasing, bears the subtle scent.

Spring sadness is unbounded, and deep as the sea;

The pavilion swallows fly in pairs about the painted pillars.

The two men were close friends and their talents were equal. I asked Yi Sik3 which of the two he considered the better poet, and he said: ‘Hong’s poems are like real plum blossom and chrysanthemums; Sin’s poems are like paintings of peonies.’

He meant that real plum blossom and chrysanthemum are unaffected, but painted peonies are carefully contrived.

Unfortunately these two men were not properly appreciated in their day and were never widely known. Does this go to prove the saying that literary ability despises good fortune?

 Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 292.

1 1612-1661.

2 1619-1658.

3 1584-1647, considerably senior to Hong and Sin, and reckoned one of the four great scholar-poets of the Yi dynasty.

**32**

Those who really understand poetry judge a poet by his compositions; others judge a poem by its author’s reputation. When I was young and not yet heard of, even if I wrote a good poem nobody thought anything of it; but as soon as I made my reputation even my poorer efforts were sedulously praised and recited. It was ridiculous.

At the time of the Manchu invasion of Korea in 1637 I wrote:

During the day I hear the wailing land,

And in my dreams I flee from barbarian armies.

Yi Sik1 admired this and told me: ‘Your poems are similar in style to those of Tu Fu : how much of his work have you read? You have ability ; you must work hard at it.’

Now it was just at that time that I was reading Tu Fu. Yi was a discerning man.

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

 Chongnam ch’ongji SHML294

1 See No 32 note 3.

[page 131]

**33**

Yi Sanhae1 was very arrogant. Once he was lolling at ease with a group who were listening to some poems written by Wolsa2 during his embassy to Peking. Sanhae did not praise a single verse until he heard the couplet:

Spring came to life in the trees beyond the frontier,

Day died in the hills before my horse.

Then he sat up and said: ‘Wolsa could be a good poet. He should work at it. He should work at it.’

That is how complacent he was.

Nam Yongik 1628-1692 Hogok shiwa SHML 297

1 See No 27 note1.

2 Wo1sa (Yi Chonggu, 1564-1635) was one of the most highly-regarded poets of the seventeenth century.

**34**

When Hon1 was young he was famous for his precocious talents. Later, when he went to take up an official post as a teacher at Anju, in P’yongan province, his mother admonished him against the enticements of women, and his wife joined in the warning. He laughed and wrote a quatrain:

You say I go west where silk skirts are many,

Mother says be careful,my wife says the same.

Mother is worried about my health,which is right and proper:

My wife is jealous of beauty, which may not be so virtuous.

This stanza was widely repeated and highly praised, yet in the last verse the phrase ‘My wife is jealous of beauty’ is altogether too blunt. If it were changed to:

Can I be sure that my wife’s reasons are as virtuous?

it would be much more interesting, the reader. leaving more to the discernment of

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 273

1 1624-1656

[page132]

**35**

Not long ago a group of scholars were composing verses together at Pagyon Waterfall when a traveller — no one knew where he came from — arrived, shabbily dressed and carrying a staff. The scholars, to tease him,said: ‘Can you write verse?’

He replied: ‘Yes,’ and began to write the couplet:

The column flies straight down three thousand feet,

As though the Milky Way had fallen from the sky.

The scholars chuckled ironically together and said: ‘How do you write such marvellous stuff?’ because they recognized that he had written a couplet from Li Po’s poem about the waterfall at Lu-shan. He replied: ‘Don’t laugh! See the rest of the verse.’ and went on to write:

Now we prove this poem of Li Po,

For Pagyon is not second to Lu-shan.

The others exclaimed: ‘A perfect description of Pagyon! There is nothing left for us to write;’ and they threw down their writing-brushes. Some say the stranger was Chong Minsu.2

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684) Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 288

1 A famous beauty-spot near Kaesong.

2 d 1627. The critics admired the neatly-turned superlative.

[page 133]

**IV POETRY AND LIFE**

**36**

When Chong Kyongse1 was still a lad he went out with three or four other literati into the hills, and they picnicked by a stream, where they sat composing verses. A military man riding by stopped his horse, approached the group, and greeted them. One of the boys said: This is a poetry party: we don’t want anyone who cannot compose.’ The stranger said: ‘I am a soldier, but I know a few easy characters. General Ts’ao Ching-tsung2 wrote a verse on the rhymes kyŏng and pyong. May I join your party if 1 can do as much?’ The young scholars were surprised but they proposed a rhyme character for him. Almost immediately he recited a couplet:

The sound of stream on stones keeps up a gentle rhythm;

Mountains cleansed by clouds stand out like glistening swords.

Chong Kyongse threw down his brush in amazement ,and asked the man who he was. The soldier replied: ‘Just a passing stranger. There is no need to ask more.’ Then he added: ‘Dusk is gathering in the hills,and I have a long way to go.’

With that he took his leave. They sent a man after him,but they could not discover where he went.

Hong Manin (d. 1752)

 Sihwa hwisong SHML 392

1 1563-1633. A much-admired writer.

2 Ts’ao Ching-tsung was a general of Southern Liang who at a victory banquet given by his emperor successfully composed a quatrain on the characters for ‘rival’ and ‘sickness’, which became proverbial for difficult rhymes.

**37**

During the reigns1 of Ch’eng-hua or Hung-ch’ih a scholar named Han was studying at Tosan-sa, a buddhist temple near Yongan. A ragged old man who was begging for rice throughout the countryside met Han and asked him: ‘Why are you at such great pains to study? I spend my whole life begging my food, yet I am content.’ [page 134]

Then he wrote this quatrain:

Lean listlessly by gauze windows, and spring days go slowly;

Bright faces grow old and useless in the time of falling flowers.

Men’s manifold busy affairs never come to anything better ;

Beat time to your songs with a wine cup — who will care?

Koreans have said: ‘Our country is so small that genius cannot stay hidden: no need to worry lest some pearl be left forgotten in the sea.’ But having heard this story, I wonder how many men there are, in countryside or town,that I have never heard of, like this old beggar. Han was a scholar, beyond question a good man, who would not have spoken involously ; and he told me this story.

Nam Hyo’on 1454-1492

Ch’ugang naenghwa SHML 35

1 1465-1505

**38**

When Yu Kun1 was governor of Ch’ungch’ong province, a Ch’ung-ch’ong man wanted to ask a favour of him and begged Yi Chonggu2 to give him a letter of introduction. Yi said: ‘I don’t think a letter from me will have any effect on him.’ but gave the man a simple letter of greeting, adding: ‘When the governor sees my letter he will certainly ask about me, so tell him: “Yi Chonggu is always praising your poetry.” This will make him ask for details,so say: “Yi Chonggu says that recently somebody repeated a couplet by Yu Kun that went:

Su Tung-p’o’s Red Cliff is now the Green Cliff,

Yu Liang’s South Pavilion is now the North Pavilion.

This is a marvellous couplet. If I go on writing verses all my life, I cannot hope to equal it. But he is out in the provinces and I am here in the central government. I am ashamed to think of it.” ‘

The man did as he was told. Yu Kun was delighted. The man got all he wanted and returned.

Kim Manjung (17th century)

Sdp’o manpil SHML 352

[page 135]

1 1549-1627.

2 Otherwise known as Wolsa. See No 32 note 2.

3 The Green Cliff and the North Pavilion were both at Kongju, the provincial capital of Ch’ungch’ong.Su Tung- p’o wrote a poem on the Red Cliff (Ch’ih-pi). Yu Liang was a loyal subject of Chin, who held parties in autumn moonlight in the South Pavilion at Wu-ch’ang. Chonggu’s comment is satirical.

**39**

Ch’ae Yujun went for an outing in a boat at Togum on the East River with the Royal Secretary Yi Wonjin.1 Ch’ae got very drunk and fell into the water. Yi fished him out and straightway Ch’ae composed a quatrain:

I thought the winecup was shallow

And never knew the depth of the river:

But Li Ying was in the boat

And would he let Chii Yiian drown?2

The other revellers praised this highly, but some said later that he had composed the verse in advance and tumbled into the water on purpose. In any case it is a good joke for poets.

Kim Tuksin (1604-1684)

Chongnam ch’ongji SHML 270

1 Born 1574. He was governor of Cheju when Hamel was shipwrecked there in 1653.

2 Li Ying (d. AD 167) was a Chinese model of virtue, and Chu Yuan the great but semi-legendary poet of the third century BC who committed suicide by drowning himself

**40**

In the house of Yang Huisu at Songdo there was a twelve-year-old girl called Hujin who played the lute very well. Ch’a Ch’onun wrote a poem for her, and others followed his example till she had enough poems to make a scroll. In the winter of 1620 when I was returning from Peking to Seoul I stayed in Songdo for ten days, and Hujin came each day to play for me. When the time came for me to leave, the local officials gave a banquet in the Ch’onsu-won, and the little musician begged me most earnestly for a poem, there in the midst of the party. [page 136]

Now in olden days when Su Tung-p’o1 once stayed for seven years at Huang-chou, he often wrote poetry in the course of banquets, after he was tipsy ; and when he was about to move to Ju-chou the notables of Huang-chou gave him a farewell party at which the celebrated singing girl Li Yi said to him; ‘All the girls have received poems from you, but I have never dared to ask for one, because I am so inept. I suppose I shall carry this disappointment to the grave.’

Su laughed and dashed off a poem on her scarf:

Tung-p’o spent seven years in Huang-chou.

Why did he never write a verse for Li Yi?

It is just as though Tu Fu in Szechwan

Had left no verse for Szechwan’s lovely roses.

Hujin’s request reminded me of this story. I was befuddled by wine, but I laughed and made her a poem on the rhymes used by Su Tung-p’o:

The sound of the lute is pretty, as yet the night is young;

My failing years are not attuned to this maiden’s charms.

In ten days at Songdo I have not written a single line for her,

But vainly recall old Su’s verses on the roses of Szechwan.

Attributed to Yi Chonggu (Wolsa) 1564-1635

by Hong Manin (d. 1752)

Sihwa hwisong SHML390

1 See No 23 n4.

**41**

When Im Che was still a youth he met a servant girl in the road who was so pretty that he followed hen She went into a large mansion and he followed her into the courtyard. The master of the house was suspicious of the lad and sent a retainer to fetch him. Im said: ‘I am a student. I saw a pretty girl in the road and followed her to this house. Please forgive me.’

The man replied: ‘I will let you off on condition that you compose a quatrain on the rhyme characters I give you. Otherwise I will have you thrashed.’ [page 137]

Im heard the rhyme characters and said:

I know that spring lasts only ninety days

And weep to think that this girl’s bloom will pass.

But need I speak of blossom-seeking butterflies and bees?

Is your delight in beauty, sir, so minuscule?

The girl’s master was amazed. He called for the girl and gave her to Im.

Hong Manin (d. 1752)

Sihwa hwisong SHML 387

1 1549-1587.

**42**

Before Yun Kyol1 first entered public office he was sitting one day at the door of his study when a neatly-dressed servant brought him a card from a visitor asking to see him. An official approached,a remarkably handsome and elegant person. Yun said: ‘There must be some mistake. Why should an important person come here?’

The man said; ‘I want to speak with a gentleman called Yun.’

Yun invited him inside. The visitor knelt very formally on the floor instead of sitting on a cushion, and said: ‘I am rather embarrassed.’ Yun said: ‘You look as though you hold high office. Why have you come to a poor student boy?’

The man answered: ‘Chang Okpang, the mayor of Namyang, has a girl who plays the lute well and sings beautifully. I happened to meet her in Seoul and became so attached to her that I cannot bear to part from her. I asked Chang to let me have her,but he will not. I got letters from important people to back my request, but he will not give way. He says only: “Bring me one of Yun’s poems and I will lend her to you.” So I have swallowed my pride and presumed to come to you.’

Then he drew a roll of expensive gold-flecked crimson paper out of his sleeve and said: ‘Please write something for me, so that I can get the girl.’

Yun laughed and said: ‘Why don’t you take another poem and say I wrote it’?

The other replied: ‘Your poetic skill is famous,and Chang wants to have an example of it. You know I could not deceive him.’ [page 138]

Eventually Yun wrote a five-character octave:

The duck-shaped censer is burnt out,

The courtier guests start to leave.

The lamp cools, the little screen grows dark

The rising moon pierces the half-rolled bamboo blind.

Will my talk be naught but jealousy,

Your oaths,repeated, turn to empty words?

Do you love me as I love you,

More dearly than a hundred nacre bowls?

When it was done he gave it to the stranger, who thanked him, bowed,and left.

A few days later the man returned to thank him again and said: ‘Chang was delighted with the poem and gave me the girl.’

Some say that he was a member of the royal family.

Ch’aCh’ollo 1556-1615

Osan sdllim SHML 234

1 1517-1548. He was executed at the age of 31 for a political error, but had already established a reputation as a writer. This story must refer to some time in his teens.

**43**

Ko Kyongmyong1 was brilliantly gifted, even in adolescence. He had an affair with a Hwanghae singing-girl who was a favourite of the provincial governor. When he was about to leave her he composed a poem and wrote it on the lining of her skirt.

My horse waits by the river, for I hate to say goodbye ;

The topmost branches of the willow-trees are tossing.

You doubt your luck and start to pout afresh,

But my heart is true, and I want to come again.

Peach and plum blossoms are falling: it is the spring festival,

Partridges fly homeward in the evening sun.

Grass grows lush by the southern creek, swollen by spring tides:

Shall we gather water-chestnut flowers there?

After Ko had left, the girl went to wait on the governor, and as [page 139] she was pouring his wine a sudden draught caught the edge of her skirt so that part of the poem was visible. The governor was surprised to see it and asked what it was. The girl dared not prevaricate and told him about Ko. The governor marvelled at the extraordinary skill of the verses,and later, when he saw Ko’s father, he said to him,very seriously, ‘Your son is handsome and gifted, but his behaviour leaves a good deal to be desired. The boy’s father replied: ‘He takes after his mother for looks, but he gets his habits from me.’ The governor smiled wryly.

Im Kyong (17th century?)

Hydnho swaedam SHML306

1 1533-1592. Died leading volunteer troops during the Hideyoshi invasion.

2 Willows are a stock symbol for partings. The poem has a number of classical references.

**44**

At Namju there was a singing-girl of unusual beauty and ability, and one prefect of the county—I forget his name—was very fond of her. When he was due to leave that post, he got very drunk, and said to those with him: ‘When I have gone only a few yards from this place, this girl will have become somebody else’s property.’ Straightway he took a lighted candle and burned both her cheeks all over.

Some time later the great Chong Summyong1 when he went through Namju as military commander, saw the girl and felt very sorry for her. He brought out a sheet of fine poetry-paper and wrote a quatrain for her with his own hand:

The prettiest face among a hundred flowers,

 Buffetted by a gust of wind, lost its bright beauty.

Even otter’s marrow2 cannot mend those fair cheeks ;

A nobleman from the capital is sad beyond words.

He told her to show the poem to any officials who went that way. She did as he said and everyone who saw the poem gave her gifts to console her,hoping that Chong would get to hear of it. Thus she earned double what she had earned before.

Yi Inno 117-1257

P’ahan chip SHML 34

l d 1151

2 Expensive medicine.

[page140]

**45**

So Seryang had withdrawn from public office and was living in the South, in Cholla province, when he was asked to compose poems for two scroll paintings of wild geese and reeds, done by Kim Si. He wrote two quatrains:

Leaves fall but reed-flowers still purvey their scent ;

Listlessly the scattered birds float on the limpid waves.

Heaven’s rim Jast night was hardened by the frost,

And they are thinking of warm weather in the south.

Desolate lonely shadows sink by the river bank;

The smartweed’s pink has gone, both shores are drab.

Crying on the western wind,the geese call their companions,

Heedless of the myriad banks of cloud and ocean.

The poems were allegories of himself, but they deserve the highest praise because they paint such vivid pictures.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’onggang sihwa SHML 162

1 The story refers to the early 16th century.

**46**

In 1556 Liu Ying-ch’i, a Chinese who had been captured by Japanese pirates, was rescued by some Koreans. When he reached Seoul he wrote a poem:

I complain about war, but not against heaven,

Though I was taken far away from my homeland.

Worries bind my sick body and fatigue saps my strength,

Tears flood my young cheeks as I weep for lost years.

I see the moon,and my mind flies over the frontier;

I look at the clouds and my heart is in my mother’s room.

How many days I watch the creeping hill-vines,1

A lonely boy in abject misery. [page 141]

The prime minister Yi Sanhae,when2 he was still a young lad, wrote a poem on the same rhymes as Liu’s poem:

Leviathan thrashes the sea till the waves touch heaven,

Beyond them to the south, how far away is your homeland?

A stranger far from home,you are a lonely shadow

Forced to roam in foreign lands despite your youthful years.

Like a dreaming butterfly you fly beyond the frontiers,

The wild goose takes your message straight home to your room.

I know: every night you think of your parents and weep,

Like autumn rain on your pillow,tears of misery.3

When they wrote these poems, Liu was about fourteen years old and Yi was sixteen. Although they were so young they wrote acceptable poetry. It has been thought for centuries that if a man writes good poems in youth he will die early, but Yi has become prime minster. I do not know what happened to Liu. Some say that he graduated and took public office,but I have no way of verifying this.

Kwon Ungin (16th century)

Songgye mallok SHML 136

1 The quotation in Liu’s poem is from the Book of Songs I iii 37 Mao ch’iu.

2 See No. 27 n 1, and No 33.

3 Yi’s poem has references to Chuang-tzu (the leviathan and the dreaming butterfly). The wild goose is a symbol of homesickness.

**47**

In 1466 a country lad named Cho Kijong was lodging in the Nakson ward of Seoul He studied with me at the South School. He was very young and could not yet either construe Chinese prose or compose Chinese verse. One day he dreamt that he entered an empty house. It was spacious, cool, and quiet. The jujube trees were in blossom, as though it were early summer. Grass was beginning to grow in the courtyard and the east breeze was soughing, as though it were late spring. There were two or three students like himself, but they were all unfamiliar to him. They asked him to compose a poem,and immediately he pronounced a quatrain:

Jujube flowers bloom on the trees;

The emptv house is silent; no one is there. [page 142]

Spring breezes blow without ceasing,

Everywhere grass is thick and fresh.

When he awoke he hurried to note it down, He recited it to his schoolfellows without altering a single character, and wrote it on the wall of his room.

The following day he died.

Cho Sin (15th century)

Sumun swaerok SHML 124

**48**

In olden days a poem that was extraordinarily subtle or mysterious was called ‘ghostly’. There was, for example, the T’ang couplet:

Sky seen from a cave,in the loneliness of springtime ;

There is no path for man in the vastness of moonlight.

Nowadays it is reckoned that people who write such verses will die young, because the human body cannot bear the ghostly force of such words.

The minister of state Ch’ae Paekch’ang was lying in his room when he heard one of his sons talking outside with a friend about poetry. The boy said: ‘I have just hit on a wonderful couplet — perhaps I shall die very soon.’ and then he recited the verses, which were so ordinary and clumsy they were laughable.

Ch’ae called out from the room: ‘Here, boy,listen: you don’t need to worry overmuch. I heard your couplet; you will live to be over a hundred.’

Kim Manjung (17 th century)

 Sop’o Manp ‘il SHML 357

**49**

At the end of the Life of Song Sammun1 somebody has added a note saying that in the tumbril on the way to the execution ground Song composed this quatrain:

The throbbing drums are hastening life away, [page 143]

I turn my head and see the sun is setting.

There are no inns among the Yellow Springs:2

I wonder in whose house I’ll sleep tonight.

Hong Manin (d. 1752)

Sihwa hwisong SHML 176

1 1418-1456. One of the ‘Six Loyal Martyrs’ of Tanjong. This verse is recorded also in the 18th-century Yollyŏsil kisul bk 4.

2 The Yellow Springs means the life beyond the grave.

**50**

The interpreter Chong Hwa was an illegitimate son of the prime minister Chong Kwangp’il.1 In Kwangp’il’s garden there was a flowering prunus, and his birthday fell in the season when the tree was in flower. A generation later his grandson, the Chief Secretary Chong Yugil,2 was sitting under this tree with other members of the family drinking and composing verses about days gone by. Hwa started them off by writing:

Thirty years ago I knew this flowering plum:

Year by year it never failed to blossom on his birthday ;

Now it has been damaged by years of frost and wind

And I cannot bear to come here when it blooms.

Tears welled in the eyes of the grandchildren and they laid down their writing-brushes.

Yi Chesin 1536-1583

Ch’onggang sihwa SHML 177

1 1462-1538

2 1533-1617. A disciple of Toegye.