
Discussing Korean modernity some scholars tend to treat modernity as the result of a specific historic and global development with a given time and space, leading up to the society we live in today. For these scholars the tumultuous late nineteenth century and the colonial period constitute the beginning of Korean modernity, a process to a large extent dependent on external factors, and these scholars often pay minimal attention to late Chosŏn socio-economic change. Other scholars treat modernity as a set of qualities that in theory could be found anywhere and anytime, qualities like rationality, nationalist sentiments, and capitalist relations. Many of these scholars argue that Korean modernity can be traced back to the late Chosŏn period, and that the events at the turn of the twentieth century rather halted this development. As these scholars often charge these modern qualities with a positive value, for them the colonial experience can not be understood within the framework of this Korean modernity. So whereas the former scholars avoid bringing in late Chosŏn developments into their arguments, the latter group find it difficult to extend their narration of Korean modernity into the colonial period.

The above situation makes Kyung Moon Hwang’s Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea a valuable contribution to the study of Korean modernity, as it bridges the late Chosŏn situation with the developments at the turn of the twentieth century. While strongly stressing the historicity of Korean modernity, and while regarding the late nineteenth century and the colonial period as most crucial in its formation, he still argues that “although Korea, like other civilizations, was stimulated from outside to undergo a process of comprehensive transformation, its road to modernity was paved more by internal than external demands” (p.330). These “internal demands” go back to late Chosŏn society, and with what seems to be a contradictory twist, the dynamics of these demands had its roots in the strictly hierarchical status system of Chosŏn.

At the core of Hwang’s study lies the fact that in the early stages of Korean modernization groups that previously had been excluded from top positions in the bureaucracy came to the forefront and in many cases came to lead this development. This might seem as a clear break with tradition, but in fact
emphasis shifted towards practical and technical knowledge and skills. With the establishment of the new T’ongni Amun ... themselves positions or the education needed to obtain them. The study also shows the central role members of these groups on state was reformed in the late nineteenth century and as the educational modern bureaucracy and also came to hold leading positions in civil society is not supported by any extensive ... modernization of Korea due to their position as members of the “secondary status groups”. Although these cases are good illustrations ... made with social stratification and status demarcation in other countries or civilisations.

The study provides a very good overview of the social status system of Choson and the position of these groups between yangban and the commoners. The discussion of their self-identity is highly interesting as they all sought recognition by the aristocracy and in their efforts tried to distance themselves from the other groups. They wanted to reform the system, not so much to recognise ability instead of birth, but rather to recognise their status as equal to that of the yangban, a recognition that would open up for advancement in the bureaucracy. This zeal for social advancement continues into the modern period and many members of these groups would seize the opportunities provided by the ever-growing bureaucracy of the Japanese colonial government, a bureaucracy that played the same role in bestowing social status as the Choson bureaucracy together with the examinations system played in ordering Choson society in clearly defined status groups. It was the yangban that passed the munksua examinations that monopolized the highest positions in the bureaucracy; the muban, passers of the military munksua examinations, and chungin, the passers of the practical and technical chapksaes examinations, held lower and less prestigious positions; the hyanggwi managed the provincial and local extensions of the bureaucracy; and as for the str0f and northerners, their group identity was closely intertwined with the fact they were discriminated against in the examinations system, and the staffing of the bureaucracy regardless of their education or accomplishments. The social standing of each group was dependent on its relation with the bureaucracy.

The second chapter, “Opening the Ranks: Appointment to the Bureaucratic Elite, 1880-1930”, shows how this order was changed as the Choson state was reformed in the late nineteenth century and as the educational emphasis shifted towards practical and technical knowledge and skills. With the establishment of the new Tongui Anom organs in the 1890s these groups that previously had been excluded from top positions rose to prominence due to their skills or their ability to buy themselves positions or the education needed to obtain them. The study also shows the central role members of these groups played in both the failed Kapsin coup and in the Kabo-reforms. This trend continued into the colonial period. One group of prominent “secondary status” personalities in the period were pro-Japanese reformers who had lived in exile in Japan after the Kapsin coup and after the group behind the Kabo-reforms were ousted from power, and who later returned and were given top positions during the protectorate and after the Japanese annexation. Another group mainly came from the hyanggwi, but also from other “secondary status groups”, and they filled the rapidly expanding provincial and local administration. Particularly positions within the police force became the starting point for a successful career.

Chapter three through chapter seven then introduces each of the “secondary status groups”. The author gives the history of their formation, discusses their self-identity, depicts their struggle for recognition in late Choson, details their role at the turn of the twentieth century and during the colonial period, and also gives a few case studies of prominent lineages within each status group. Each chapter ends with a discussion of that specific group’s role both in traditional society and in the modern transformation, and in these discussions comparisons are made with social stratification and status demarcation in other countries or civilisations.

Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950) is one of the great names in Korean literature and in modern Korean history. He is universally and unhesitatingly recognized as a twentieth century literary giant and activist leader for social reform and national modernization. His name is readily recognized outside Korea as well. Consulting a number of widely used anthologies in English translation, the foreign student of modern Korean literature would quickly learn that Yi Kwang-su was a literary pioneer widely credited with being the father of the modern Korean novel, and even of modern Korean literature. Although not his earliest work, Yi’s first full-length novel Mujong (The Heartless, 1917) has come to represent not only the practical beginning of his writing career but also the title most commonly associated with his name.

Yi Kwang-su is also a controversial figure for many Koreans. Between the years 1936 and 1942, Yi wrote “collaborationist texts” (pp. 1-2) for the Japanese colonizers in Korea. For this and other reasons Yi has been identified with Japanese imperialism at the expense of his reputation for being a proudly nationalist Korean patriot. Ann Sung-hi Lee deals early and quickly (and for this reviewer, gratefully) with this long-contested and irresolvable issue, asserting her intention to focus on Yi Kwang-su’s subjectivity through his literary work (p.2).

Powerfully resonant though his name may be, relatively few Koreans have read widely from his rich literary legacy of twenty-seven novels, numerous short stories and poems, dramas, and essays. Nor does his fiction routinely appear in the growing number of translated anthologies of twentieth century Korean literature. Fictions of the 1920’s and 1930’s by writers such as Kim Tong-in, Hyön Ch’ŏn-gŏn, Yi Hyeo-stik, and Chi’a Man-sik, to name but a few, are what most students of early twentieth century literature read and respond to. Korean literature-in-translation courses around the world do not readily sample material that the translator has not selected for rigorous scrutiny first. It would appear patently obvious from this verity that, given Yi Kwang-su’s renown as a pioneering “literary giant” of Korean literature, translators would have sought out his work over that of others had he proven to be a more compelling storyteller of stylistic merit.

Although a brief segment of Mujong appears in one widely used English language anthology, Ann Sung-hi Lee’s translation is the first complete English
rendering of this lengthy novel originally serialized in 126 installments for the 
Mainichi Shinbun in 1917.

The translation in 272 pages is prefaced by a lengthy 74-page introduction. Lee begins with a discussion of the widely discrepant arguments on peri-
dodization and modernity in Korean literature, following with a brief but highly
informative biography of the writer. Much of the source material for intimate
details about Yi’s life is from his own autobiographical writings, especially No 1 (I, 1947), and Nami Kobae (My Confession, 1948). Through Lee’s translations of
materials such as these the English reader is provided with firsthand access to Yi
Kwangsu’s feelings on the passing from chelsea of both parents in 1902 when he
was ten, his sympathies with the Tonghak movement and its apparent “ethos of
serving others”, his first love (infatuation) experience at age fifteen, his experi-
mentation with various writing styles, his association with other stellar twentieth
century nationalist leaders such as Choe Nam-sun and An Ch’ang-ho, his arranged
first marriage, to which Yi agreed out of a sense of obligation to an elderly
family clan member, his early studies in Japan, and his chequered expe-
tience teaching at the Osan School in North P’yongan Province. We follow Yi to
Shanghai and to Vladivostok, his encounters with Korean nationalists in both
cities, followed by his return once again to Japan for study at Waseda University
where he began his writing of Majung. The introduction is then given over to a
thorough discussion of the novel with self-explanatory topic subheadings such as
“emotion and gendered subjectivity”, “irony and character development,” and
“modernity and Koren culture.”

Majung was a most rewarding experience for this reader, despite its many
serious artistic shortcomings. As a serialized novel it was designed, at least in
part, to hold the interest of daily readers of the Mainil Shinmun, as well as to usher
new readers as effortlessly as possible into the narrative. This inevitably required
repeated updates of a very disjointed plot that highlights, at least in the first two-thirds of the novel, the triangular love story of the semi-autobiogra-
phical main character Hyungguk and his two love interests Yitgkh’ae and Son Yong. The setting, of course, is a Korean society struggling with an avowed
rejection of its Confucian past and a...

South Korean cinema has enjoyed a prosperous decade. From a virtually doomed cinema churning out dismal products and earning even more dismal attendance numbers, it emerged in the middle of the 90’s as a cinema capable of producing commercially viable movies that also earned much critical praise. Domestically, South Korean movies are now stronger than Hollywood blockbusters in Hollywood and outperform even the LOTR-trilogy. Internationally, they are popular candidates for the prizes of the prestigious festivals. Add to this vibrant movie culture the presence of an increasing number of successful film festivals, ranging from the internationally well-known Pusan International Film Festival to the smaller, but not less interesting Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival and it is hard to deny that South Korean cinema is one of the world’s leading cinema’s of today and fulfills an exemplary role for other emerging Asian cinema’s. The same, however, cannot be said about the international academic field of the study of South Korean cinema. Partly because South Korean cinema developed so rapidly and, to most observers, unexpectedly, and partly because Korean Studies is an underpopulated field in most of its disciplines, there is relatively little available in on South Korean cinema in other languages than Korean. A new contribution to this field, then, is always welcome.

With *New Korean Cinema*, the editors, Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, have done the international academic audience of South Korean cinema a service. According to the introduction, *New Korean Cinema* argues that “the dynamic and glamorous South Korean movie industry now being ‘discovered’ and celebrated all over the world has a past and a history” (p.3). It furthermore attempts to answer the question “of how, why and on what terms ‘new cinemas’ emerge and find their place within world film history” (p.4). The editors have set the bar high and aim to map out answers to these questions in the books three sections entitled ‘Forging a New Cinema’, ‘Genre Transformations’ and ‘Social Change and Civil Society’. This tripartite division is in itself interesting, representing the three major approaches to South Korean cinema at the moment. The four or five essays that make up each section are for the most part well written, well researched and contribute new perspectives, or at least new interpretations, of Korean cinema and movie industry.

The first part is opened with an introductory essay by Michael Robinson which provides the historical and cultural background to the other essays. Robinson argues that the recent cinema boom has effectively challenged and replaced the “master narratives of nation, anti-Communism, and lament over modernisation’s assault upon traditional Korean culture and memory” (p.27) through its many and diverse cinematic products. This argument certainly carries significant weight, but at the same time the reader is left to wonder whether Robinson’s account of Korea’s past, its traumatic experiences in the form of the colonial period, the Korean War, and the division of the country, is in itself not a retelling of the dominant master narrative of Korea’s recent history. Instead of contrasting the master narrative of the nation with the diverse and fragmented narratives found in the films of the new cinema, it would perhaps be better to understand nationalism itself also as a fragmented discourse. The essays by Seoyung Kim (on film festivals and identity) and Hyangjin Lee (on Chunhyang) underline the necessity to do so. Both essays position new Korean cinema against the traumatic history of the 70’s and the 80’s, contrasting the unified Korean nation before democratization with the free but also fragmented society of the 90’s and beyond. This somewhat nostalgic view of Korea’s recent past sits strangely with other forms of art; the literature of the 70’s and 80’s, for instance, offers a diversity of counter narratives that is not (yet) equaled by the diversity of new cinema movies. To put it differently, although it may seem as if diversity, contradictions and anxiety only made their appearance after the lifting of the dictatorship’s censure on divergent cinematic narratives, as the Introduction correctly argues, Korean cinema “has a past and a history”, and although the recent boom is unprecedented, it is not fundamentally alien to the movies that proceeded it.

This criticism, however, should not detract from the value of the essays mentioned above. Both Kim’s and Lee’s contributions stand out in the sense that they open up new avenues of exploration into Korean cinema. Kim’s analysis of how film festival’s are related to the search for a social identity by feminist groups shows an often underestimated function of the movie industry, while Lee’s analysis of Chunhyang and how this mythological tale incorporates a radical inversion of traditional oral culture explains why, ironically perhaps, Chunhyang failed with the Korean audience, while appealing to viewers outside of Korea. The essay by Darcy Paquet in the same section furthermore offers a solid investigation of the groundbreaking needed for the Korean movie industry to take off. His examination of the changes in film financing and producing are invaluable if one is to understand the recent boom.

The second part of the book tries to situate Korean cinema in world cinema. Referring to some of the more typical genre transformations prevalent in Korean cinema, the contributors to this part discuss the function of horror as...
critique (Kyu Hyun Kim), the buddy film in male and female format (Chi-Yun Shin), the violent comedy of disenchanted youth (Nancy Abelmann and Jung-ah Choi) and the Korea-Japan relationship on and under the sea (Chris Berry). The quality of the contributions is high, but particularly impressive are Kim’s piece on horror in which he convincingly reinterprets Tell Me Something and Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance and Shin’s informative juxtaposition of the IMF-inspired tale on male friendship in gangster buddy film hit Friend and the much more restrained elaboration of female perspectives on friendship in Take Care Of My Cat.

The third part deals with how social critique on contemporary Korea is reflected in some of its movies. Although the tendency to heavily rely on theory and postulate a desired developmental model for Korean society is at times too conspicuous (something which bothers some of the essays in the first part also), again the quality of the individual contributions is high. Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park reviews Peppermint Candy, perhaps the most significant movie on Korea’s most recent history and the traumatized 3-8-6 generation, concluding that in order for the Korean nation to deal with its collective trauma, it needs to directly acknowledge them, rather than to repress them. Magnan-Park evokes the protagonist’s slow descent into despair and suicide in Peppermint Candy as the illustration of his argument that remembrance of the painful past is imperative for the Korean nation to move forward. Andrew Grossman and Jooran Lee’s contribution deals with notions of queerness in Memento Mori, the second instalment of Korea’s most popular teen horror series. Although the authors’ repeated insistence on how South Korean society should develop is not entirely in its proper place here, their highlighting of the importance of the concept of ‘ghost’ to discuss sexual identities shunned from mainstream media is illuminating as well as timely, one might add. Their essays not only make the reader understand the cinematic and social importance of Memento Mori’s treatment of lesbian relationships by using ghostly presences, but also shows how the presence of ghosts functions in a completely different manner in the horror genres of the West or of other Asian countries. Particularly illuminating was the last essay in the book on E. J.-young’s Aako In Baby Shoes (Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient). Reading the movie as an exploration of the isolation of the individual in contemporary society and as a commentary on the troubled relationship between Japan and Korea, the authors enrich the understanding of this movie significantly, while simultaneously showing how narratives of the nation’s history may be very personal.

The writing and editing of a volume such as this necessarily involves selections. Aspirations towards completeness are impossible. Nonetheless, the inclusion of an essay on Korean Orientalism would have added another dimension to this volume; a deeper probing of how and why the most popular Korean directors abroad (Kim Ki-duk and Im Kwon-taek) are not nearly as popular in South Korea and why their visions of Korean history, society and culture are accepted as authoritative by most international viewers, but highly contested in South Korea.

The quality of the essays in New Korean Cinema is high. The editing, however, might have benefited from a more consistent transliteration. At places, the McCune-Reischauer system is unrecognizably butchered and turned into something that resembles pinyin. The glossary also reflects a peculiar choice of important words and concepts in Korean cinema. Entries such as ‘ppaen’u’, ‘mudaep’o’ or ‘kunyang’ do not significantly advance one’s understanding of Korean cinema, while entries such as ‘banmal’ and ‘Dokdo’ should have been filed under ‘panmal’ and ‘Tokto’ respectively. The bibliography on Korean cinema, however, is useful for students and researchers alike.

The publication of New Korean Cinema is, notwithstanding the above-mentioned critical remarks, a very good thing. The contributions are diverse, present different points of departure, insights and ways of writing about and understanding Korean cinema and offer more than enough material for further research and discussion. It is a volume that is accessible to specialist and non-specialist alike, dealing both with the individual films’ contents and with the film industry in general. This is without exaggeration a book that everybody interested in Korean cinema, modern Korea or cinema in general should not hesitate to purchase or make one’s students read.

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Books on North Korea tend to focus on political issues, and rarely venture beyond describing and discussing various aspects of the state system. This book is different in so far as the subject matter is less obvious. This is the first publication in any Western language dealing exclusively with the multiple art forms produced in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. It does so from
Culture in general is important to totalitarian regimes in as far as they subscribe to the construction of a ‘new man’. This is not different for the DPRK. From its inception, education and culture have been at the heart of the project to revolutionize Korean society. Every Korean had to be turned into a revolutionary. Utter dedication to the nation building project was demanded, and no deviation was tolerated. In such a system, art is a political tool of the state, artists valiant fighters for the cause of the national revolution. Small wonder that the training of artists does not solely focus on their skill, but also pays considerable attention to their ideological training. A good artist is an artist who can read the reality ‘correctly’. Over the years, the DPRK has formulated an accomplished art theory, culminating in Kim Jong Il’s theoretical writings on film, architecture and art. Abstract and conceptual art has been rejected as a decadent excess of bourgeois societies. Instead, following the example set by the Soviet Union, socialist realism (a socialist content in a realist style) was the core of North Korean art, even though already in 1966 Kim Il Sung spoke of a ‘national’ rather than ‘realist’ style (p.27). Kim Jong Il, in his ‘Treatise on Art’ uses the term ‘juche realism.’ Stylistically realist, juche realism ‘correctly grasps and truthfully reflects the objective reality.’ Importantly, it does so in a ‘national form,’ a form that pleases the taste of the Korean people. The content, however, is socialist, in North Korean parlance reflecting the ‘new historical era where the popular masses, having risen to be the masters of history now chart their destiny autonomously and creatively.’ Just as in Soviet socialist realism, a central position in juche realism is taken up by the positive depiction of true heroes of the nation’s revolution and reconstruction. Thus, not only style, but also subject matter is clearly defined and circumscribed. Major themes are Kim II Sung’s anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle, the Korean War (known in the North as the Fatherland Liberation War), the construction of a socialist society, and national reunification. Rousing as these subjects may be, more sedate themes that please the emotions of the people are also acceptable. Both in painting and embroidery, traditional flowers and birds’ (huogo) depictions are far from unusual sights.

Unlike many South Korean publications on North Korean art, which are solely based on North Korean publications, this book has grown out of two field trips to the North. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the DPRK, cultural exchange was one of the areas where efforts were made to increase cooperation. Jane Portal, curator in the Oriental Antiquities department at the British Museum was twice a member of a British delegation visiting North Korea (p.181). It was during these visits that Jane Portal not only bought art works for the collections of the British Museum, but also collected relevant art publications for sale at that time in Pyongyang’s bookshops. These books, along with the interviews she had with a number of administrators form the foundation on which Art under Control in North Korea is built. But no construction is solid when the foundation is not strong. Jane Portal clearly has run into the problem anyone working on (and in) North Korea is faced with: getting reliable information. One always depends on what one is shown/ told. Hence, more than anywhere else, the importance of arriving well prepared in North Korea. The most frustrating part is that one never knows the relevance or representativeness of the information one is given. The hazardous task is then to try to contextualize the received information. In Jane Portal’s case, she tries to work her way around this problem by relying (heavily) on South Korean publications on North Korean art to get a deeper insight in how the art world in the North is organized, functions and has developed over time. The final chapter of the book, on ‘the production and consumption of art’ quite closely follows the structure of Yi Kyu-yol’s “50 years of North Korean Art.” The problem with relying on this work is twofold. On the one hand, the discussion does not go beyond the 1990s. Even more problematic is that Yi Kyu-yol’s book takes the statements of North Korean art critique for granted. Confronted with art and artists on the ground, however, one quickly learns that art critique in the North both focuses disproportionately on ‘theme paintings’ (chujehwa) and also interprets paintings ‘by the book,’ giving a ‘politically correct’ understanding of the art works.

Another way around the hazards of contextualization, Jane Portal found in approaching North Korean art from the theoretical perspective of totalitarian art. In the first chapter on ‘art for the state’ the reader is taken on a rather descriptive and copiously illustrated thematic stroll through (totalitarian) art history. However, focused on showing how dependent North Korean art is on foreign models, Jane Portal unwittingly undervalues the (reinvention) of traditional styles. She thus falls into the same trap that others have fallen into. In response to North Korean solipsism that asserts the purity and autonomy of anything North Korean, Western authors in an ideological reaction of aversion have often belittled this claim to autonomy. While it goes without saying that North Korea did not develop in a void, it would be equally mistaken to ignore the remnants of traditions that were mobilized in support of the emerging new order. In the field of the arts, the case in point is without any doubt “Korean painting”
(Chosŏn'hwae), which has been proffered by the North Korean leadership as the quintessential Korean art form. Both in technique and in subject matter, Korean traditional painting has evolved into the accomplished 'Chosŏn'hwae' form which more than anything else represents art in the DPRK today."

For a book that purports to deal with art, it is rather mystifying to find so much space devoted to the history of (North) Korea (chapters two and three). Less surprising is the fourth chapter on the personality cult, given that artists are massively mobilized in support of the cults of the Great and the Dear Leader. The fifth chapter on archaeology could also be justified on the grounds that archaeological artifacts can count as art objects. Since there is no introduction, it is difficult to figure out the logic behind the structure of the book. Granted, an attempt is made at weaving cultural history into the more general historical chapters, but treatment of the colonial period without linking it to the development of North Korean art seems rather haphazard. This same lack of coherence is apparent in the more general treatment of history. Uncritical use of secondary sources written from a South Korean vantage point results in a historical overview of the colonial period (and the national resistance movement) that is largely irrelevant to the gestes of the North Korean state and its ideology. A similar lack of critical acumen is also apparent when Jane Portal suggests that North Korea in line with other dictatorships and totalitarian regimes reshapes history to its advantage (p. 105). While there is no denying this, it is a fallacy to think that this is typical for dictatorships and totalitarian regimes. Nation-states have always had a stake in history writing, regardless of the political system they host.

More rigorous editing might have spotted some unfortunate mistakes (attributing a painting to Chung Young-man when the kun'gŭl caption does not even mention his name, but gives it as a ‘collective work’ (p. 61), not to mention Entartete Künstler rather than Entartete Art (p. 7)). Translations could have been tighter. The propaganda poster on p. 75 does not read ‘the army is the sacred duty of the people; but rather ‘to support the army... the poster on p. 88 does not refer to the ‘Spirit of the Great General’ but rather to the ‘spirit of revolutionary soldiers’ (depicted in the background!); and the slogan kangsŏng tangik does not translate as ‘strong native land’ but as ‘strong and prosperous country’ (p. 63).

Ultimately, this book lacks in synthesis. It collates information from a wide variety of sources, but fails to integrate them into a coherent expose. Rather than to provide us with new insights in North Korea through the angle of art, this book offers hardly more than a rehash of existing interpretations. Art is crafted onto these interpretations. In its elaborate descriptions, this book scratches the surface, but fails to penetrate the North Korean art world. A rigorous confrontation of the theories of totalitarian art with Kim Jong Il’s writings on art—totally overlooked in this book—might have been helpful in understanding North Korean art from the inside out. Now, we are left with the musings of an outsider (literally, someone on the outside) who speaks for North Korea but largely ignores what North Korea says for itself. Some would call this Orientalism.

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2 Rather than to see life ‘through the prism of the old critical realism,’ ‘Socialist realism... demands truthfulness from the artist and an historically concrete portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development.’ Such was the definition of ‘socialist realism’ as it appeared in the statutes of the USSR Writers’ Union in 1934. Jeffrey Brooks, ‘Socialist Realism in Pravda’ (http://afronord.tripod.com/thr/srealism.html).
3 Kim Chongil, Misullon [Treatise on Art] (P’yongyang: Chosŏn Rodongdang Ch’ulp’ansa, 1992), p. 36.
5 Ibid. pp. 43-8.
8 In 1971, Kim Jong Il already declared that North Korea art ought to develop on the basis of Chosŏnhwae. See Chong Ch’angmo, Minjok-ui charang Chosŏnhwae [Chosŏnhwae, the nation’s pride] (Pyongyang, 2.16 Yesul kyoyuk ch’ulp’ansa, 2002), p. 6.


There is this informal saying in the Chinese literary circle: poetry is for the young, fiction for the middle aged and the essay for the old. Nobody knows the origin of the saying and even less is known about the reason behind the sweeping generalization. Remarkable is the fact that many modern Chinese writers, to varying degrees, have followed this pathway in their writing. Is this a case of the working of the collective unconscious or of the power of cultural suggestion? At any rate, examples abound, of which Bei Dao is a recent addition. Known primarily as a poet in China and internationally, Bei Dao has started

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writing prose essays as he crosses the threshold of fifty. *Midnight’s Gate* is actually Bei Dao’s second collection of essays, the first one being *Blue House* published in 2000 simultaneously by Zephyr Press in the U.S. and by Jiuge chubanshe in Taiwan. It is evident that Bei Dao has matured measurably as an essayist over the passage of five years and now in terms of both quality and quantity he ranks among the best of Chinese writers who practice this literary genre.

I suspect that some readers of this journal may not be familiar with *sanwen* 散文 as a Chinese literary genre. The usual translation of “prose essay,” which recalls the works of essayists such as Henry David Thoreau and Michel Eyquem de Montaigne in Western literature, cannot fully cover the meaning of *sanwen* in Chinese literature. Most likely originating from the polemical writings by scholar officials during the Warring States period (480-221 B.C.E.), *sanwen* has enjoyed an enduring and varied tradition in the history of Chinese literature even though it always plays second fiddle to poetry in the hierarchy of genres. In contrast to the highly developed and well-established aesthetics of poetry, *sanwen* has received scant theoretical attention, and even today stylistic criticism of *sanwen* remains rare in China. This is the strange status of *sanwen* everybody loves it but nobody knows what it is. That *sanwen* is what poetry is not is as close a definition as possible that one can muster about this kind of writing. On the other hand, one can argue that generic openness and flexibility are what gives life and color to *sanwen*: it can be long or short, true or fictionalized, and covers any subject matter that the writer desires. Flipping through the voluminous *Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature* edited by Joseph Lau and Howard Goldblatt, which is the first English anthology to list “essay” along with poetry and fiction, one finds such interesting titles as “Reading on the Toilet” [Zhou Zuoren 周作人], “On Shopping” [Lin Yutang 林语堂], and “A Bizarre Kind of Robbery” [Xiao Wenyuan 萧文源] in addition to Ba Jin’s 巴金 famously emotional memoir to his wife “Remembering Xiao San.”

The essays in *Midnight’s Gate* do not have similarly catchy titles. Apparently, writing *sanwen* for Bei Dao is not merely an activity of play and leisure. But Bei Dao offers plenty of humor, poignant commentary, stimulating philosophical musings, and riveting story-telling that keep one captivated. In animated language and suspenseful narrative, Bei Dao brings the reader into his private world, the world of a Chinese exile fumbling his way through the Western landscape, an internationally renowned poet living his life on the run, and a lonely soul finding connectedness through surprising friendships and social contact. Reading Bei Dao is more than going to places and meeting interesting people; it is the vicarious experience of a life in constant transition that rewards the curious and the adventurous, leaving a tremendous aftertaste about home and travel, about modern man and his shrinking self, and ultimately about the meaning of life—its wonders and its failings.

Even though place and people figure prominently in the twenty essays in *Midnight’s Gate*, it is evident that Bei Dao does not intend to write a long travelogue, at least not in the tired formula of history, geography, and cultural landmarks that has been an unfailing presence in the contemporary Chinese essay (take for example the most popular essayist Yu Qiuyu 杨牧 in China today). Bei Dao covers many places, from New York, Paris, and Prague to Ramallah (Palestine), Altea (Spain), and Durham (England), but instead of conforming to what these places project in their familiar and public images, Bei Dao privatizes them in the sense that they have become no more than a backdrop for the staging of his personal narrative about exile and free wandering. Thus New York is described as an experience of “a conflagration” that invites an apocalyptic imagination, and as a site of urban claustrophobia among the forest of concrete and steel that only reinforces the desire to escape. Prague, seen through the eyes of either Kafka in the past or aspiring young American artists today, is not a place of nostalgia but a permanent point of transit to nowhere. Ramallah, a battleground and a ghost town caught in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a metaphor for darkness and death where the will to power results in an endless exercise of evil and horror.

Place is a vital part of one’s identity: even an exile and a wanderer must have a place from which to depart. A place, however, is ultimately defined by the people residing in it. In this sense, Bei Dao’s place stories are really people stories, and telling people stories is where Bei Dao excels. Early in his career, Bei Dao wrote several well-received short stories. It is no coincidence that many of the people stories in *Midnight’s Gate* read like fiction. From the eccentric Danish poetry critic Poul Borum to the irrepressible South African literary rebel Breyten Breytenbach, from the studious German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin to the supercilious Dutch poetry advocate “King Martin,” Bei Dao’s sketches of people who come in his path are often witty, sharp, and enthralling. These unforgettable characters, whether they invite admiration, sympathy or scorn, will remain with you long after you close the book. It may be safe to say that Bei Dao is interested in them because each one of them reflects Bei Dao’s own version of the self and the world. That Bei Dao’s people narrative is an extension of his personal narrative is even true when he tells stories about friends, relatives and acquaintances. For example, the essay “Uncle Liu” is the portrait of an ordinary man with an extraordinary life. How extraordinary a life has Liu Jie led? As a start, he was born to a Chinese father and a Georgian mother in 1923 and
spent his childhood in Russia. It was when Liu Jie moved back to China with his family that his life became intertwined with the chaos of modern Chinese history. To survive, Liu Jie drove trucks in the Northwest, taught Russian at a university, sold fur on the streets of Shanghai, and worked as a government purchaser in Stockholm and Paris, meanwhile conducting a futile search for his lost father and witnessing his lovers die in his arms due to illness or Japanese bombs. All this happened before the year 1949, and Bei Dao suggestively leaves blank what happened to Liu Jie living in the People’s Republic of China because, Bei Dao writes, after that year, “the stories of all Chinese people are similar—a collective story, the story of a generation” (p. 255). Bei Dao affectionately calls Liu Jie “Uncle Liu” to underscore his connection with this remarkable man, for the description of a hybrid, migratory, rootless and transnational living experience in Liu Jie’s story is very much the self-portrait of Bei Dao as a Chinese exile.

The book is of course not flawless. There are places where Bei Dao’s philosophical musings becomes too self-assuming and where his story telling is plain and stale. The short essay “Backyard” is a case in point. The essay is not without merit, but it lacks the subtle witticisms that define Bei Dao’s style. However, I believe that the book as a whole is a rich and rewarding read for all those interested in Bei Dao’s life and work.

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Author’s riposte to the review by Anders Karlsson of James B. Lewis’ Frontier Contact between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan. (vol.3, no.1: pp.117-120).

I would like to respond to a few points raised by Dr. Anders Karlsson’s review of my book, Frontier Contact Between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) that appeared in this journal (Volume 5, Number 1, April 2005). I was greatly pleased that Dr. Karlsson read my book so closely and considered my points so thoroughly. His comments and criticisms are greatly appreciated, but I would like to correct a few misinterpretations.

Firstly, Dr. Karlsson questions whether the 조진 (조진) fielded within Tsushima’s forces to support Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea in 1592 can “really be interpreted as Koreans.” My writing was not as clear as it should have been. My test actually raises the same question: “Nakamura deduces that Kim Han-sei was a Korean in Sô’s employ, leaving us with the distinct impression that Sô was employing Koreans to aid the Japanese war effort.” (p.32) I believe Nakamura was right to point out that the one name associated with this group is clearly a Korean name, but the purpose of my argument in that paragraph and the next is to borrow Murai Shôkei’s concept of the ‘marginal man’ and use that to question the usual markers of identity (Korean or Japanese). I argue that these soldiers or guides and a significant portion of the people on Tsushima and in the Korean ports—certainly prior to 1592—are probably best thought of as people of ambiguous identity. In the same paragraph, I alert the reader to a later chapter in my book where I return to the question of miscegenation and how it posed a political threat to the Choson state by raising the spectres of treachery and espionage. In other words, developments in the frontier were forcing the centre to define itself.

Dr. Karlsson appreciated my argument about the importance of the economic ties between Kyongsang Province and Tsushima and asks if the Waegwan really had a “direct economic effect” on the province. If the province had to pay taxes anyway, and those taxes were not going to the central government but to the Japanese, then wasn’t the effect rather on the central government than on the province? Again, I think Dr. Karlsson and I agree. My argument is that there was a “direct economic effect” on the finances of the country, both central and provincial. Perhaps Dr. Karlsson wants to know what the centre or the province would have paid for if payments to the Japanese had instead stayed somewhere in government coffers but this is a discussion I do not recall coming across in documents. Given the tightly woven nature of the finances and their complexity, I could only point out from where the funds for the Japanese were sourced and their magnitude, thereby demonstrating quantitatively the “direct economic effect”. Furthermore, Dr. Karlsson wonders if I am arguing that the level of taxation was influenced by the Japanese presence or if the medium of payment had to adapt. I apologise for the dense detail of chapter four that addresses economic matters, but I think Dr. Karlsson will be able to find there that the level of taxation and the medium of payments were affected. The Choson government sought to fix its costs as much as possible so that the level of taxation would meet a stable and predictable demand, but this was clearly impossible in connection with the Irregular Envoys. There were also changes in...
the medium of payments to the Japanese, which had knock-on effects back to taxation sources. As the civil wars in Japan abated and as Japanese cotton production took off, Tsushima successfully negotiated having cotton converted to rice, although the original taxation was taken in cotton. As Choson taxation was becoming accustomed to conversions over the course of the seventeenth century, the Japanese request that cotton be converted to rice did not pose a particular problem, but as payments to the Japanese came to be more and more in rice, the potential for disruption due to bad harvests increased, rice shipments were delayed, and these triggered many of the riots that Dr. Karlsson finds thin on the ground in chapter six. (By the way, a cursory look at the Pyolche chibyo 將例 集要 will reveal that the character for “nan” in “nanch’ul” (disorderly exiting or ‘rioting and storming out’ of the Japan House, 聚居) is the correct character.)
The short answer to Dr. Karlsson’s question is that the Choson government worked the Japanese payments into their budgetary considerations over the course of decades and centuries and sought to deal with the Japanese as a stable entry in government budgets, but this was not always possible. I sought to point out the size of that budgetary entry and the significance of the Japanese presence in the Korean economy (both central and provincial).

Finally, I was obviously not clear in making the connection between ideas held by the centre and ideas held by people in the frontier about the Japanese, because Dr. Karlsson wonders “to what extent was a theoretical framework based on ‘frontiers’ really useful in analysing existing material that tells us more about central government concerns than local society?” I do not think that the existing material tells us more about central government concerns than local society. I think it tells us about the day-to-day life of the frontier and the linkage between the frontier and the centre. Unlike his excellent study of the northwest, around Tongnae there was not a sharp distinction between the interests of central government and frontier society. Interests overlapped at least to the extent that there was not an explosive incident like the Hong Kyüngnae Rebellion. Because there was no real conflict, the question in my mind was: ‘what was the image of the Japanese that was coming out of the frontier and making its way to the centre?’ I found that observers in the centre were generally out of touch with the frontier; their information was second-hand at best, and they often had no grasp of the Japanese position or even the complexity of the Tongnae scene. Central observers developed opinions about the Japanese, and the reproduction of their opinions in official and private writings created widespread memories of the connections with the Japanese. I showed that reports from Tongnae provided the data for the centrally-held late Choson-era notions of ‘how the Japanese are different, dependent, and dangerous to us’, just as the Spanish-French frontier villagers invoked far away central governments to protect local water rights and in the process created a boundary between Spain and France. Even more so after Hideyoshi’s invasions, the Korean centre had an interest in defining and protecting its territorial claims, and central interests produced records and reproduced views that related to problems, ignoring or hardly commenting on the great deal of peaceful intercourse that occurred, which also included trade. I’m afraid local and central government documents generally fail to comment unless there was a problem. Given these limitations of the local and central official documents, I have indeed failed to give a complete picture, as Dr. Karlsson complains, but that is because the Korean government documents are plentiful, the Korean private documents are few, and there is only so much that can be done at one time. There is still much to discover about the merchants, peasants, and fishermen who composed frontier society on the Korean side, not to mention the Japanese side. Take, for example, Kim Dongchul’s study in Acta Koreana No. 7.1 (2004) entitled “The Waegwan Open Market trade and Tongnae merchants in the late Choson period”. Professor Kim gives us glimpses of a local scene where women carried Japanese parasols, people ate sukiyaki, and a Tongnae resident succeeded in buying a Japanese sword and wearing it as he went about his business.

We have only begun to consider Choson’s frontiers north and south. To retrieve the atmosphere and the significance of the frontier to the larger society, we have to be resourceful in our researches, and for the southeast we also have to use the rich Japanese sources that exist.

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Reviewer’s Remark

In my review of Dr. James Lewis’ Frontier Contact between Choson Korea and Tokugawa Japan published in this journal (Volume 5, Number 1) I wrongly criticised the author due to my own misreading of the term nanch’ul (“rioting and storming out”). I stand corrected and apologise, although I still find the cases introduced in chapter six insufficient to support the argument of the riot as a Japanese negotiating tactic.

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