



# THE CLASSICAL POETRY OF KOREA

Translated by KEVIN O'ROURKE

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Written by Kim Heung-gyu

Translated by Adrian F. Buzo

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

TO  
MY LITTLE SON  
**GEORGE JAMES MORLEY**  
THE DAYS OF WHOSE YEARS  
ARE  
TWO EASTERN SPRINGS AND AUTUMNS

# FOREWORD

## MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AMONG HUMAN FAMILY

We frequently use the term, “human family.” Peoples all over the world have become so close to one another that they are now regarded as members of one family. In spite of such proximity, different ways of life, customs and modes of thinking have engendered differences in aesthetic sense and in forms of expression.

But the best way to mitigate such differences and to promote mutual understanding is to encounter the artistic peculiarities of other countries through international languages. Many countries are ardently engaged in translation projects. These efforts are taken to further strengthen the intimacy existing among the family of man.

Translation of Korean literature for readers of other nations is an important part of various projects undertaken by the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation. We have already introduced a considerable portion of modern Korean literature to readers abroad with the help of many noted publishers of other countries.

Now we publish a few booklets to introduce the classic literature of Korea. The roots of all modern literatures could be found classic works accumulated through centuries. It is our fervent hope that these booklets contribute to mutual understanding among members of the human family.

*Song Ji-young*

Chairman

The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation

# PREFACE

**Editor**

*Lee Young-gul*

*The Classical Poetry of Korea* offers historical surveys of poetic genres and translations of some representative works to the readers in the English-speaking world.

*hyangga Sijo*, *Gasa* and *pansori* constitute the classical poetry of Korea in contrast to modern Korean poetry which has evolved with the influence of the poetry of the West. *Hyangga* is the oldest tradition; it is the poetry of the Silla and Koryeo dynasties written in Korean by means of the *idu* script. Its length varies from four to eight or ten lines. Reflecting strong Buddhist sentiments, *hyangga* often deals with the mysteries of life and death. Twenty-five *hyangga* have survived, and fourteen *hyangga* from the *Samgukyusa* are offered here by translations of Adrian F. Buzo.

*Sijo*, which had developed from the earlier *hyangga*, is a dominant literary form of the Yi dynasty. It consists of mere three lines, the last one emphasizing a sentiment or mood. A Confucianist outlook is often reflected in contrast to the Buddhist philosophy in *hyangga*. Twenty *Sijo* are offered by Kevin O'Rourke's translations.

While *hyangga* and *Sijo* seek concentration of thought or emotion, *Gasa* is a more leisurely form, in which various subjects receive lyrical development. Enjoyment of natural beauty, Confucianist morality and other didactic purposes are frequent motifs among diverse subjects. Three *Gasa* works are represented here by translations of the present editor.

If *hyangga Sijo* and *Gasa* are essentially lyric forms, *pansori* is a form of oral

narrative poetry. It began in the Yi dynasty around the 17th century. It's performance requires along with the audience a singer and his drummer accompanist. Hence, pansori has a dramatic character.

Historical accounts of *hyangga Sijo*, *Gasa* and pansori have been prepared in Korean respectively by Kim Yeol-gyu, Pak Chol-hui, Lee Sang-bo and Kim Heung-gyu, who all teach Korean literature at universities in Seoul. The present anthology is the common enterprise of many hands.

This enterprise is part of a larger translation project initiated by the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation. The contributors to *The Classical Poetry of Korea* look forward to encouragement and criticism from readers of this anthology.

## **HYANGGA**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1) Terminology**

*Hyangga* is the name used to describe a genre of songs written in a script called *hyangchal* mainly during the Silla dynasty (53 B.C - 918 A.D.) and the early part of the Koryeo dynasty (918-1388). The term is also used more loosely to encompass all the Korean language lyric forms of this period and to set them apart from the Chinese language poetic forms that existed during the T'ang dynasty. In fact, there are, altogether, three terms that have been traditionally used to describe this genre *tosolga*, *sanuiga* and *hyangga* and they are usually defined as follows:

*tosolga*: A short, extremely simple lyric form that was originally embedded in a lengthier epic form of religious content. Extracted, it may stand as an independent work.

*sanuiga*: A song form originally associated with a particular locality near the Silla capital Gyeongju. One important theory holds that in time it came to stand for the entire corpus of Silla lyric poetry.

*hyangga*: Strictly speaking, the poetry of the Silla and Koryeo Periods written in Korean by means of the *idu* or *hyangchal* scripts.

More broadly, the native Korean (as opposed to Chinese) poetic tradition. Thus *hyangga* is used as a generic term embracing both the *tosolga* and *sanuiga* forms, while the fact that most surviving *hyangga* are, in fact, *sanuiga* has led to an

identification of *sanuiga* with *hyangga*.

The *sanuiga* were Buddhist in content and possessed a very fixed poetic form. The form appears to have been influenced by Sanskrit hymns and Chinese sacred songs in its development and was an important component in the development of Korean and Japanese religious songs.

It remains true to say that while the influence of Chinese sacred songs aided its development, the *sanuiga* represent an essentially autonomous artistic development.

*Hyangga* appear to date back at least to the *tosolga* of the Silla King Yu Ri (24-57). There is a reference to the *tosolga* being sung in *sanuiga* form and so the *sanuiga* makes its earliest appearance as a component of the *tosolga* form. Subsequently, *sanuiga* rose from its folk origins some time around the 3rd. C. to become established at the Silla court with accompanying music and dance forms. Then with the transmission of Buddhism to Korea it became an established Buddhist hymnal form possessing, finally, ten lines. The *sanuiga* appear to have been widely sung both before and after the unification of the Three Kingdoms (668) and a reference attests to the compilation of a major anthology in 888, the *Samdaemok* (Catalogue of Three Generations) by the consort of Queen Jin Seong. Wihong, and a Buddhist monk, Taeko. This work has not survived. Today, there are in all only twenty-five surviving *hyangga* fourteen in the *Samgukyusa* (13th C.) and eleven in the *Gyunyeojeon* (1075).

## 2) The *hyangga* form

The Japanese scholar Okura Shimpei (1882-1944), who was one of the first to put forward phonetic readings for the 25 lyrics written in *idu* script, identified three distinct forms among the *hyangga* in the *Samgukyusa*—ten-line, eight-line, and four-line. This division was not the outcome of any rigorous application of criteria for distinguishing between forms but such was the esteem in which Okura was held by

later scholars that they tended to simply adopt his schema.

According to Okura, four of the fourteen in the *Samgukyusa* represented the essentially pure, artless folk form of the four-line lyric. These were *Seodong-yo* (Mattung, the Potato Boy), *Pung-yo* (*Folk Song*), *Heonhwa-ga* (A Gift of Flowers) and *Tosol-ga* (Fourth Heaven). Then there were three 8-line lyrics — *Mochukchirang-ga* (Grieving for My Lord Taemal), *Cheo-yong-ga* (Song of Cheo-yong), and *Won-ga* (Song of Grievance). The remaining eight plus the eleven songs in the *Gyunyeojeon* were ten-line songs. The eight and ten-line forms are believed to have developed much later than the four line form and were much more sophisticated in their content and their construction.

### **3) The authors of the hyangga**

Of the twenty-five surviving *hyangga* seventeen were written by priests, three by *hwarang*, two by women; there are two folk songs and in one case authorship is unknown.

One should bear in mind, though, that the respective compilers of the *Samgukyusa* and the *Gyunyeojeon* were both Buddhist priests and Silla culture was a Buddhist culture, as is well-known. Buddhism was highly esteemed and its priests were men of learning who enjoyed considerable social status. Thus it was that while the origins of *hyangga* (and especially *sanuiga*) lay in folk-song forms, the literate class that existed after the entry of Chinese poetic forms into Korea (6th century A.D.) mainly consisted of Buddhist monks and this fact enables us to understand their influence on the authorship and content of *sanuiga*. As for the *hwarang*, they themselves followed Buddhist teachings and had close ties with monks. Furthermore, when we remember that the two women to whom *hyangga* are attributed had strong Buddhist connections — the wife of Gwangdeok (*Seeking Eternal Life*, *Won-wangsaeng-ga*) was a nun and

Hui Myong (*Praying to the Gwaneum with 1,000 Hands, Tocheonsu-Gwaneum-ga*) was a devout believer—this gives 22 out of the 25 strong Buddhist connections, which thus also means a strong affiliation with literate (as opposed to popular) culture. Thus, division of the *hyangga* on the basis of ascribed authorship emphasizes their status as the literature of Silla aristocracy. This is what one would expect, after all, for their refined expression and the subtle thoughts they express could not have been the work of ordinary hands.

#### **4) The content of hyangga**

The key to the content of *hyangga* lies in their strong Buddhist affiliations. In fact, a characteristic of Korean Buddhist literature seems to have been its development as a branch of Buddhist art that developed alongside ceremonial music and Sanskrit hymns. In doing so it assumed the form of song lyrics reflecting Buddhist teachings or else simply song-forms that accompanied ceremonial.

Among the *hyangga* that have survived, those whose Buddhist content is especially marked include the *Gyunyeojeon* songs which emanate directly from Hwayen Sutra teachings, *Seeking Eternal Life (Won-wangsaeng-ga)* with its invocation of Amitabha, and *Song of the Fourth Heaven (Tosol-ga)* with its Pure Landism. *Hyangga* scholars, in fact, make almost constant reference to this essential Buddhist background.

However, as Buddhism was not a present factor in the actual development of *hyangga* it is equally important to consider an older sub-stratum in Korean thought, and one that is in fact not limited to Korea but was widespread in North East Asia as a whole, namely, shamanism. We are probably safe in ascribing a key role to shamanism in the development of *hyangga*. There is, for example, the omenism present in Shin Chung's *Song of Grievance (Won-ga)* and in the *Cheoyong-ga*. The figure of Cheo-

yong in particular appears to have been a widespread shamanistic deity in North East Asia.

Apart from the *sanuiga*, which are the most representative type of non-aristocratic *hyangga*, there were other forms of popular singing that existed at this time, the sacrificial song, or *muga*, the folk song proper, the creation song, the epic song form, the Buddhist chant, the *gunak* and so on. The sacrificial song was sung at ancient sacrificial ceremonies and its form can be glimpsed through the *tosol-ga* form. A song was usually addressed to the harvest deity and the practice can still be detected in the *nongak* (farmers' music) in areas to the south of the Han River, where one person gives the verse and the others give a chorused response. The folk song proper was a significant source of the *hyangga* form and examples of it may be found among extant *hyangga* for example *A Gift of Flowers (Heonhwa-ga)* and *Folk Song (Pung-yo)*. As far as the creation song is concerned, only a few dozen song titles but no actual verses can be gleaned from the *Samgukyusa* and *Samguksagi* so they must remain in the realms of speculation.

## **5) The extant *hyangga***

We shall now look at the 25 individual songs that have survived, taking them in their chronological order.

### **a) *Seodong-yo* (Mattung, the Potato Boy)**

*Mattung, the Potato Boy* is a four-line *hyangga* that dates to the reign of King Jin Pyeong (159-632). Il Yeon, the author of the *Samgukyusa* says that it centers around a Baekje King, King Mu (600-41), who, as a boy, sold potatoes in the streets of the Silla capital and taught the song to children in the streets in order to compromise the Silla

princess Seon Hwa. The princess was duly banished, he accompanied her into exile, wooed her and eventually succeeded in bringing her back to Baekje as his bride. The story properly lies in the realms of fantasy and many theories have been put forward as to its origin. The most likely explanation so far seems to be that after the fall of Baekje in 663. the monks at *Mireuk-sa*, a temple founded by King Mu, propagated the story to publicize a link between them and Silla so as to counter a possible threat of destruction at the hands of their conquerors.

### b) *Hyeseong-ga* (Song of the Comet)

A 10-line song dated to King Jin Pyeong's reign (579-632), the story that accompanies it tells how three *hwarang* named Goyolrang, Silchorang and Podangrang had planned to go on a journey to the Diamond Mountains, but decided against it when a comet, which was regarded as an evil omen, suddenly appeared in the sky. The priest Yung Cheon then composed and sang the *hyesong-ga*, the comet then disappeared and with it went an invading force of Japanese soldiers. The song thus appeared to have been a species of magical incantation.

### c) *Pung-yo* (Folk Song)

Four lines, dates to Queen Seon Deok's reign (632-647), a Buddhist song in folk song form. When the priest Yang Ji was modelling a large image of the Buddha at *Yongmyosa* (Temple) in Gyeongju, his helpers sang this song while transporting clay to him. It has been interpreted as a work song, but the dimensions recorded for the image, some 12 feet, are such that the work of transporting the clay would not have been especially onerous. The song is more likely to have been devotional in nature, sung to

accompany an act of piety.

d) *Won-wangsaeng-ga* (Seeking Eternal Life)

Ten lines, dated to King Mun Mu's reign (661-681). The song is ascribed to the wife of Gwangdeok, a devout Buddhist who lived in the western precinct of *Bunhwang-sa* in Gyeongju. Its Pure Land Sect overtones are strong.

e) *Mojukjirang-ga* (Grieving for my Lord Taemal)

Eight lines, attributed to Sil O, a servant of Taemal at one stage. Dated to King Hyo So's reign (692-702).

f) *Heonhwa-ga* (A Gift of Flower)

A four-line creation song attributed to an anonymous old man during the reign of King Seong Deok (702-737). The story tells that a prince named Sunjeong enroute to a post in Gangneung, paused to rest by the sea. His wife, Suro, was struck by the beauty of an azalea blooming atop a rock cliff nearby and asked that someone in the entourage climb up and pluck it for her but no one had dared. At this point an old man passed by leading his cow. Singing a song he climbed up to pick the flower for her.

g) *Won-ga* (Song of Grievance)

A ten-line song, the last two of which have not survived, attributed to Shin Chung, a retainer of King Hyo Seong (737-742). Before King Hyo Seong ascended the throne he

promised Shin Chung, a constant loyal retainer, to reward when he became king, and swore an oath to that effect by a pine tree in the palace garden. However, after ascending the throne he did not appoint Shin Chung to any office, whereupon Shin Chung composed a song and affixed it to the pine tree. The pine then withered, and by doing so recalled to Hyo Seong his promise. When he carried out his promise, the pine grew whole again.

#### h) *Tosol-ga* (Song of the Fourth Heaven)

A four line work attributed to the priest Weolmyeong in the reign of King Gyeong Deok (742-765). In the fourth month of the year 760, two suns appeared in the sky. To banish this bad omen an act of merit was called for and the priest Weolmyeong was designated as the priest to perform it. He composed and sang this song whereupon the strange phenomenon disappeared. The song arose out of the Maitreya cult which was strong at that time and its basic intention is the invocation of the Maitreya to favourable intervention in the affairs of state.

#### i) *Je-mangmae-ga* (Song to the Deceased Sister)

A ten-line song also attributed to Wolmyeong during the reign of King Gyeong Deok. Addressed to his deceased sister, the song also invokes the cult of the Maitreya.

#### j) *Chan-Kiparang-ga* (Kiparang, the Hwarang)

A ten-line song attributed to the priest Chungdam during the King Gyeong Deok's reign. It is a song of praise in honour of Kiparang, a *hwarang*.

### k) Anmin-ga (Song of the Good Ruler)

A ten-line song attributed to Chungdam. The accompanying story tells how Chungdam was returning from a tea ceremony to the Maitreya on Namsan(mountain) outside Gyeongju when he was hailed by the king and asked to compose a song about the duties of a good ruler.

### l) Tocheonsu-gwaneum-ga (Praying to the Gwaneum with 1,000 Hands)

A ten-line song dated to Gyeong Deok's reign and ascribed to one Hui Myeong. Hui Myeong was a devout Buddhist who went to *Bunhwang-sa* (Temple) to pray that the sight of her blind son be restored. She composed this song for him to sing before a picture of the *gwaneum* with 1,000 hands; he did and his sight was restored.

### m) Ujok-ga (Brigands in His Path)

A ten-line song ascribed to the priest Yongjae during the reign of King Weon Seong (785-798). On his way to hermitage in the Jiri mountain, Yongjae ran into a band of brigands and his fearlessness strongly impressed them. They asked him to sing a song for them and he sang the *Ujeok-ga* whereupon they offered him two rolls of silk as a token of their respect. These he refused and subsequently they followed him into the Jiri mountains where they were given tonsure and became monks.

### n) Cheoyong-ga (Song of Cheo-yong)

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