



THE ORCHID DOOR:

ANCIENT KOREAN POEMS

Translated by JOAN S. GRIGSBY

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COMPARATIVE PERIODS OF KOREAN AND CHINESE HISTORY

		KOREA		CHINA
400 B.C	Legendary	Chuntsin
200 B.C	.....	„	.....	T'sin (249-206 B.C.)
100 B.C	.....	Pyunghan	.....	Tsien-Han (206 B.C.—220 A.D.)

(The name Chosen was also used until the
beginning of the Three Kingdoms Period.)

400 A.D.	.....	Kokuryo	.....	Chin
600 A.D.	.....	Pa'kche	.....	Sui
800 A.D.	.....	Silla	.....	Tang
1200 A.D.	.....	Koryo	.....	Mongols
1300 A.D.	.....	Koryo	.....	Ming
1600 A.D.	.....	Chosen—Korea	.....	„
1644—1912 A.D.	.....	„	„	Manchus

NOTE

Chosen (The Land of Morning Calm) was the original name of the peninsula kingdom. It is regularly used by Japanese and Koreans today. The name Korea is a perverted form of Koryo. During the Koryo period the ruling house happened to be

particularly intimate with China. Cow-oo-li was the name by which the country became familiar to China. This developed into “Corea” and “Korea” which, though not strictly correct, are now in general use.

INTRODUCTION

KOREANS trace the origin of their race into the mists of mythology. Picture, song and story are inspired by the legend of Tangoon who is said to have come from the Ever White Mountains in the year 2317 B.C. From linguistic and physiognomical indications the conclusion may be drawn that the original population immigrated from India and from Thibet. Throughout the centuries, however, influxes of wandering tribes have come from Manchuria, the Urals, Central Asia and, most frequently, from China. This has produced a somewhat complex racial mentality. After being stirred in the melting pot of the centuries, it accounts for the distinctive individuality to be detected in Korean art and literature. Though strongly influenced by China, it developed features undeniably its own.

The true Korean who made the literature of his country had less regard for the material roots of his race than for its spiritual unfoldment. This has been largely along such lines of contemplation as are revealed in the Taoist teachings. It should, though, be added that kindred ideas are found in records which antedate the philosophy of Taoism by several centuries. Demonology has always been a strongly motivating factor. The craving for some certain assurance of immortality also sounds a persistent note. Buddhistic influence arose, waned, and rose again. It was left to Confucius to furnish the solidity of Korea's mental life. Once the Korean mind began to assimilate the ethics of China's master mind a firm background was established, against which all other modes of thought seem to fluctuate.

Factual records become fairly reliable from the year 57 B.C. That year saw the opening of the period known as the "Three Kingdoms Period," lasting for six hundred years. The Three Kingdoms were Silla (s.e.), Pak'che (s.w.) and Kokuryo in the north.

Pak'che was too primitive and warlike to produce any considerable form of culture. Kokuryo (High Hills and Sparkling Waters) had scholars who have left us much fine work; but Silla (Silken Fragrance) developed art, literature and music equal to any of her day.

Much of the information regarding the civilisation of these vanished states is obtained from the "History of the Three Kingdoms." This was written under royal command in the year 1145 A.D. by the historian and poet Kim Poo-sik, of whom fuller information is given elsewhere in this book.

The early poems of the Three Kingdoms period are mainly folk songs of a type too primitive to be of interest to the average reader. Only one or two are included in the present collection.

During the fourth century A.D. a fine calligraphy began to develop. This fact is traceable to the influence of Wang Heuiji (321—379 A.D.), a famous Chinese penman. Admiration for his work inspired many a Korean calligrapher. To "walk in the forest of brushes"—i.e., to be counted among the company of fine penmen—came to be considered the highest ambition that a young man could achieve. From this developed an exquisite freemasonry of scholarship which lasted till the end of the eighteenth century and has not been equalled in later times.

During the fifth century the spirit of patriotism became strong in the kingdom of Silla. Numerous instances are recorded of lives heroically sacrificed for the state. These inspired contemporary poets and also those of a later date. As a general rule, however, patriotism and military achievement have never taken foremost places amongst Korean literary themes.

In the early sixth century Silla began to blossom into the flower of her artistic and literary splendor of which an ample heritage remains. Sol-go, Korea's greatest painter, was a man of Silla. His pictures were to inspire poets throughout the following

centuries.

The “Pak-so Moon,” or “White-Haired Composition,” was written during the sixth century by a Chinese scholar. It is better known by its Chinese name of the “Thousand Character Book.” It was used in Korea as the earliest book of instruction for young scholars and was still employed at the beginning of the present century.

Music now began to assume a certain individuality. A record of Silla states that Oreuk, a noted musician of the south, came to the court bringing with him a twelve-stringed harp of his own making. For this harp special songs of a short and delicate type were written.

The seventh century saw the rise to power in China of the great Tang dynasty. The effect of Tang influence is unmistakeable in Korean literature. In fact themes were so often Chinese in origin at this time that confusion is frequent. The student must distinguish carefully between Tang songs which became popular in Korea, and Korean songs written in Tang style upon historical or romantic events of the Tang period. The habit of classical allusion also affected Korean methods, though it never became so heavy and tedious as was ultimately the case in the work of the later Chinese scholars.

In 711 A.D. Kim Saing was born. He was a follower of Wang Heuji to whose work his calligraphy is frequently compared by his admirers. He gave a renewed impetus to the art, which reached rare heights. The relation of calligraphy to poetry is dealt with later in this Introduction, but I would emphasise here that it is, in the orient, the parent art of both poetry and painting. The results of Kim Saing’s inspiring zeal were far-reaching and admirable. The eight laws that governed his own beautiful penmanship are all included in the one character for the word ETERNAL, which seems most appropriate since such exquisite achievement surely belongs to all time.

Buddhistic teachings were now gaining a steady and increasing hold in the country. The effect might reasonably be expected to appear in contemporary literature but

unfortunately few writings remain from the 8th century. Stray records on memorial stones and temple bells indicate that scholarship had risen to a high level. The books of the time, however, were all destroyed.

Very little definite information as to literary development is obtainable until the beginning of the 10th century. In the year 957 A.D. the Kwagu (Government Examinations) were first instituted. Through these Korea earned the high place she held for so long in the scholarly world of the orient. For one thousand years thereafter the Kwagu formed the centre of Korea's civilisation. Success in these became the aim of every intelligent boy. The honor of "holding the brush in the presence of his Majesty" was the highest distinction attainable. The ambition to achieve scholastic eminence impregnated the life of ancient Korea and produced gentlemen of the old Confucian school and of the finest type.

There was a less desirable aspect to this, however, in the fact that after a time no man could hope to obtain any official appointment unless he could show high poetic ability. This led to the placing of many a "square peg in a round hole," and resulted in much misgovernment. Ironically enough, many of Korea's finest poems were written by homesick scholars exiled on account of their failure in positions which they were temperamentally unfitted to fill. There were, of course, notable exceptions. Certain poets proved to be fine statesmen. One of these was Choi Choong and another Yi Kyu Bo, both great men of the 12th and 13th centuries. Fuller details of their lives appear elsewhere in this volume, together with examples of their poetry.

"Choo-ja," or movable type, came into use in Korea about this time. I find mention of it as early as 1232 A.D. In that year Yi Kyu Bo had twenty-eight sets of the "Book of Ceremonies" printed. Movable type was in general use by 1403 A.D. A record of that year reads:

"His Majesty, regretting the fact that there was so little opportunity for the extension

of literature, gave command that there be established an Office of Types. The types were to be made of brass. From them books were to be printed.”

The 13th century saw much unrest in China. A Mongol emperor came to the throne in 1206 A.D., and in 1271 A.D. the Korean crown prince married a Mongol princess. The refined attachments of the house of Tang no longer held Korean thought, which began to develop along somewhat different lines. The delicacy and “silken fragrance” had given place to a harsher, sadder mood. This was the inevitable outcome of the troubles through which the country was passing.

With the end of the Three Kingdoms Period came the unification of Korea into one country. This naturally brought jarring conflicts from all directions, which were reflected in the literature.

In 1408 A.D. the great King Tai-jong came to the throne. He was a ruthless man but a firm ruler. Under his steady guidance Korea quieted down and began once more to develop, especially along Confucian lines of thought. A stream of books poured into the country from China. Buddhism, from which people had begun to fall away, took renewed hold. Many fine scholars were at work.

The 15th century saw the invention of the Korean alphabet. This enterprise was sponsored by King Se-jong, son of Tai-jong. Up till that time the Chinese characters had been exclusively used. These characters were beyond the intellectual grasp of the average middle and lower classes who were, therefore, cut off from the enjoyment of books. Se-jong decided that this was unjust. He met with considerable opposition from his statesmen who felt that his plan threatened the dignity of the scholar class. Se-jong, undaunted, went ahead. He used the musical scale “koong,” “sang,” “kak,” “chi,” “oo,” as his basis. The letters are hung on the Chinese Philosophical Wheel. Originally there were twenty-eight but three of these have been discarded. The student of Korean literature owes Se-jong a debt of gratitude since, from his day onward,

songs, sayings, stories and speeches were preserved which might otherwise have been lost. This applies particularly to certain love songs that afford interesting indications of the life and customs of their times. These, being composed by dancing girls, concubines or secondary wives, would certainly have perished had not Se-jong's alphabet kept them alive.

In the year 1498 A.D. occurred the Moo-o Sa-Wha, or destruction of the scholar class. The cause of this terrible massacre is traceable to a certain paragraph in the records of a noted historian named Kim Chong-jik. The paragraph alluded to the horrible crimes committed by King Se-jo, great grandfather of the reigning king, Yun-san. The allusion was in veiled form under the guise of a fable but was all too obvious to anyone cognisant of the facts. Yun-san, himself a villainous monarch, perceived and resented the justifiable though incautious criticism. Kim Chong-jik was already dead when Yun-san read his fable but the king caused the scholar's body to be exhumed and beheaded. Several of Kim's disciples were then executed. The flame of resentment, thus ignited, spread with dreadful rapidity. At Yun-san's court was a certain minister, Yoo Cha-Kwag, a perverse and hideous creature with a passion for cruelty. He carried the king's revenge right into the scholar class. The finest minds, the noblest souls, the models for generations to come, all were swept away before the Moo-o Sa-Wha, which left a trail of incalculable suffering and sacrifice behind it.

The recovery from this disaster was slow and painful. Memories of the horrors they had witnessed haunted the few fine minds which were permitted to remain and the shadow is perceptible in their work. In 1545 A.D., however, King Im-jong came to the throne and set about raising the literary standards from the desolation into which they had been cast. Im-jong reigned only one year but during that time he gathered around him a fine company of men who have been reckoned among Korea's greatest scholars. Foremost of these was Yi-I or Yool-gok (Chestnut Valley). He is described as the

master saint of Korea, and has left many austere beautiful compositions.

In 1550 A.D. Im-jong's successor, Myung-jong, instituted the first country school for the study of the sacred books. During the centuries which followed many such "study halls" were established. Each was dedicated to some noted saint and sheltered his spirit tablet, a small wooden plaque on which his posthumous name, or name in spirit life, was written. Sacrifices of food were offered before this tablet. Scholars of the district met in the hall to discuss the sacred writings, to study and to teach. The first of these schools was dedicated to Master An Yoo (1287-1350 A.D.). An Yoo's zealous observance of Confucian teaching and his own high achievements made him a source of inspiration to later generations. For several centuries these study halls exercised a stimulative influence on literary and religious thought but later on various abuses invaded them, with the result that nearly all were abolished. The finest centre of learning that Korea ever instituted was the Confucian College. This stands as a symbol of all that the country owes to the teachings of Confucius—religion, literature, music, ethics of conduct, family relations, civilisation itself. There is no doubt that all of these eventually developed with the touch of independent and humorous individualism which is the hallmark of Korean psychology. But neither is there any doubt of the fact that their roots were in the teaching of China's master mind. As contact with this influence decreased, the splendor of its illumination faded from Korea.

It is difficult to specify any date as marking a definite onset of decadence. Much of the 16th century was occupied by warfare. The year 1600 A.D. set the usurper king Kwang-hai on the throne. He was finally exiled to Quelpart Island where he fretted out his wretched life for eighteen years. He wrote many poems, some of which show considerable merit.

Great names emerge sporadically from this century, notably that of Yi Chung-kwi whose life and work marked a short space of peace which seemed to promise a return

to scholarly pursuits.

The 17th century saw Korea's first real contact with foreigners when a Dutch ship was wrecked off Quelpart Island. In 1627 A.D. came the Manchu invasion. From this brave men arose, and of it poets sang, but not with the contemplative beauty that belonged to the earlier days.

Notable scholars of the 18th century were An-chung-pok and Hong Yang-ho. Hong, as the result of political intrigues, was banished to the north, and while in exile wrote a satirical review of contemporary conditions under the guise of a poetical essay. It was called "Letting Go the Wild Geese" and is full of clever double-edged allusions which, however, have little significance for the casual reader. The 18th century was less remarkable for book production than for the setting up of memorial stones. This ancient custom was revived all over the country. Some of the stones are beautiful pieces of work and the lettering on them is finely executed. Father Eckhardt has dealt exhaustively with them in his book, "History of Korean Art" (E. Goldston, London, Eng.).

In 1776 A.D. King Chung-jong came to the throne. He was noted throughout the orient for his erudition, and he halted for a few years the decline of learning. He held a great literary festival in Seoul, the capital city of Korea. Contests in penmanship and in rhyming characters took place.

But with the passing of Chung-jong and with the dawn of the 19th century a change set in. As gradually more foreigners entered the country western usages began to gain foothold. The old sense of values gradually disappeared. Scholarship was no longer the most important factor in the national life.

Slowly but surely the breach widened between the ancient times and the new. On the one side of this gulf stood the Korean of the old school, Confucian gentleman, scholar, dreamer, idealist, whose spirit wandered frequently and far into the realms

that are called “unreal.” Opposed to this dignified figure of the past appeared the youth of the present day Korea. These two scarcely comprehend each other’s speech. The breach widens so rapidly that the youth is quickly losing sight of the ancient silk-robed scholar.

Before the end of the 19th century the history of Korean literature, as individual to that country, may definitely be said to end. Whether a new revival will develop out of the modern educational methods as they are now applied remains to be seen. The aim of the present volume is to present to the west a small portion of the ancient beauty of this little known corner of the orient.

II

The poems in this book do not profess to be literal translations from the Korean. Such would offer little of interest or beauty to the average western reader. This point is illustrated by the following literal rendering:

Oriole Song

This month, third month, green willows,

Oriole sings.

Butterfly passes, silent, flower seeking.

Boy, bring zither, must sing.

Taken as it stands, the above seems merely a bald suggestion of ideas. The Korean, studying such a poem in “picture writing” or ideographs, fills in, from these, a wealth of color, light and sound. The result is the perfect spiritual union of poem, picture and calligraphy which the oriental mind habitually creates. I have endeavored to fill in,

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