VISION OF A PHOENIX:

THE POEMS OF HisEqualToorea Nansoэр H殖

H isEqualoa Nansoэр H殖
Translated by DR. YANG HI CHOE-WALL
About The Digital Library of Korean Classics

The Digital Library of Korean Classics is a project undertaken by Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) to digitalize selected translated titles of Korean classics published in the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century.

LTI Korea is an affiliate of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Republic of Korea that seeks to promote Korean literature and culture around the world.

This e-book was made by scanning and converting the original book using OCR software. We have made every effort to ensure the book is free of any errors or omissions, but if you discover any, please email us so that we can improve the quality of the book.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements
Abbreviation
Editorial notes
Introduction

Chapter I Life of Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn

Chapter II The Sino-Korean Poetic Tradition of the Late Sixteenth Century

Introduction
Confucian Literature of the early Chosŏn period
Move Towards Transition and the Three T’ang Talents of Korea
“Literature of the Outsiders”: Away from Confucian Literature
Influence of Hsien Taoism on the Literature of the Outsiders
Shamanism as a Background for Korean Hsien Taoism

Chapter III Nansŏrhŏn’s Writing

Part 1 Derivation of Text
Part 2 Study of Her Poetic Thought
Part 3 Nansŏrhŏn’s Poetic Form
Part 4 Translations with Notes and Commentaries

Chapter IV Traditional Sources:

Translations, including discussion on the issue of the authenticity of her work

Bibliography
Index

Table A Traditional akpu titles found in Nansŏrhŏn’s collection
and possible models for her *akpu* found in YFSC

Table B Arrangement of translated poems in the book
Acknowledgements

This book was written in the course of my work in the Division of Pacific and Asian History, in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra. The idea for it sprang from a piece of earlier research on Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn. It may, however, have remained as just an idea without the strong encouragement of two of my colleagues, Dr Kenneth Gardiner and Dr Andrew Fraser, who saw potential in my early notes for a book devoted to Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn’s poetry. I am grateful, therefore, for their advice—given so freely whenever it was sought—as well as for their help in reading the manuscript and making many useful suggestions.

I owe a special acknowledgement to the Asian Collections of the National Library of Australia and the Australian National University Library. To the officers of these libraries I am much indebted for their help, always given so readily and courteously.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CBYS</strong></td>
<td>Yi Sugwang 李晬光, <em>Chibong yuŏl</em> 芝峰類說</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CGTB</strong></td>
<td>Kang Hyosŏk 姜敘錫, <em>Chŏn’go taebang</em> 典故大方</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ch.</strong></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CTS</strong></td>
<td>Ts’ao Yin 曹寅 et. al., ed., <em>Ch’üan T’ang shih</em> 全唐詩</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CWS</strong></td>
<td>Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe ed., <em>Chosŏn wangjo shillok</em> 朝鮮王朝實錄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CYYMJ</strong></td>
<td>Min Pyŏngdo 閔丙燾 ed., <em>Chosŏn yŏktae yŏryu munjip</em> 朝鮮歷代女流文集</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DCM</strong></td>
<td>E.T.C. Werner, <em>A Dictionary of Chinese Mythology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HKCS</strong></td>
<td>Hŏ Kyun 許筠, <em>Hŏ Kyun chŏnsŏ</em> 許筠全書</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HGS</strong></td>
<td>Kuksa P’yŏnch’an Wiwŏnhoe 國史編纂委員會 ed., <em>Han’guksa</em> 韓國史</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HNCJ</strong></td>
<td>Mun Kyŏnghyŏn 文暻鉉, tr. and ed., <em>Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn chŏnjip</em> 許蘭雪軒全集</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KCSS</strong></td>
<td>Hŏ Kyun, <em>Kukcho shisan</em> 國朝詩刪</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KGT</strong></td>
<td><em>Kyŏngguk taejŏn</em> 經國大典. Korea (Republic). Pŏpchech’ŏ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kor.</strong></td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KRS</strong></td>
<td>Chŏng Inji 鄭麟趾 et al., ed., <em>Koryŏsa</em> 高麗史</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NSC</strong></td>
<td>O Haein 吳海仁 ed., <em>Nansŏrhŏn shijip</em> 蘭雪軒詩集</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SGSG</strong></td>
<td>Kim Pushik 金富軾, <em>Samguk sagi</em>, 三國史記</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SHML</strong></td>
<td>Ch’a Chuhwan 車柱環, ed., <em>Shihwa wa mallok</em> 詩話와 漫錄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TDYS</strong></td>
<td>Chosŏn Kojŏn Kanhaenghoe, ed., <em>Taedong yasŭng</em> 大東野乘</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tr.</strong></td>
<td>Translated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YFSC</strong></td>
<td>Kuo Mao-ch’ien 郭茂倩 ed., <em>Yehū fu shih chi</em> 樂府詩集</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>YLSKS</strong></td>
<td>Yi Kŭngik 李肯翊, <em>Yŏllyŏshil kisul</em> 燃藜室記述</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editorial Notes

In order to clarify the romanized Korean and Chinese words used in this book, the han’gŭl and the Chinese characters are given in the Index, and the English translation of the words within parentheses at their first appearance in the text. The romanization systems used for Korean and Chinese are the McCune-Reischauer Romanization System and the Wade-Giles Romanization System respectively. The works cited include, at their initial appearance in the text, an original description in Korean, Chinese or Japanese, as appropriate, together with the romanization. The bibliography is also presented in both the vernacular script and in romanized form.
Introduction

Among the outstanding literary figures of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910) perhaps the most imaginative was Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn (1563-1589), who lived and wrote her poetry during the reign of King Sŏnjo (r. 1567-1608), a period during which the Confucianization of society was a major factor. The inflexibility of the system and its concomitant sanctions placed severe restrictions on the lives of Korean women, particularly women of the yangban class (ruling class), to which Nansŏrhŏn, as one born into a celebrated family of high and distinguished lineage, belonged. As a girl, aided by both an eminent family tutor and by gifted brothers who were themselves later acclaimed as prominent writers, she showed an early aptitude for learning the Chinese classics. It was largely due to this encouragement that, in spite of the constraints of the system, she became not only one of the foremost poets but also a master calligrapher and painter. The Nansŏrhŏn of literary legend is a divinely gifted poet, possessed of unworldly qualities and enduring beauty, who predicted her own demise at the age of twenty-seven. The dearth of well-documented biographical material (with the exception of a few fragmentary descriptions of her life, gleaned from traditional sources) has no doubt contributed to the mystique that surrounds her.

The late sixteenth century is regarded as the Golden Age of hanshi (Sino-Korean poems). Of the literary works composed, hanshi made up the greater part and thus held pride of place as the principal genre of the time. Although undoubtedly of great importance to future Korean literature, han’gŭl (the Korean alphabet) received slow acceptance, being used initially to write so-called minor poetic genres, such as shijo or kasa. hanmun (Korean writing in Chinese), on the other hand, persisted as the common means of literary expression of the time. This was largely due to the fact that
Korea’s social, political and educational systems were established in line with Chinese neo-Confucian ideology and it was therefore natural for ideas and feelings to be expressed in *hanmun*, which the two countries had in common.

Of the various literary genres, poetry came to be the dominant form of literary expression. The reason for this can be traced back to the adoption of the T’ang system of government service examinations in 958 during the Koryŏ dynasty (918-1392). The most popular categories of examinations were the *chinsa* (Literary Licentiate) with emphasis upon *belles lettres* and *myŏnggyŏng* (the classics). Since the theoretical content made the study of the classics difficult, most candidates gravitated naturally towards the *chinsa* examination which, inter alia required the composition of poems.

In spite of the potentially stultifying influence of the imitation of Chinese models, Nansŏrhŏn’s lifetime spanned a period of transition in literary tradition, which moved from the influence of Sung (960-1279) to that of T’ang (618-907).[1] The transition seemed inevitable as disillusionment with Confucian literary values emerged and the ideals of the scholar-officials came under scrutiny. The underlying cause of the transition was the influence of the *Fu ku* (Kor. *Pokko*, neo-classical movement), a form of orthodox archaism. The movement advocated that prose must be modeled on the prose of the Ch’in (221-207) or Han (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), and that poetry must be modeled on that of the High T’ang (Sheng-T’ang, 734-765). The latter meant that it behooved the poets of the day to strive to emulate the poetry of the High T’ang masters, such as Tu Fu (712-770), Li Po (701-762) and Wang Wei (699-759). A group called *Sam-Tang shūn* (Three T’ang Talents of Korea) fully exploited this new tradition as a means of overcoming the embodiment of neo-Confucian orthodoxy in literature, a requirement which could only be fulfilled at the expense of the spontaneous beauty of literary expression. The group rejected the longstanding attitude that poetry should remain as a pastime for the cultured man, maintaining instead that
the study and writing of poetry should exist as a lifelong discipline for writers and that literature must be their major concern. The Hŏ family tutor, Yi Tal (1561-1618, styled Son’gok), was one of this group and it was he and Nansorhon’s brother, Hŏ Pong (1551-1588, styled Hagok), who had the greatest influence on her literary work.

Some two-thirds of Nansŏrhŏn’s poems represent the reworking of traditional themes drawn from early Chinese folk-songs. Notwithstanding this however, she developed an indigenous, aesthetic predilection—simple and open-hearted—with lively diction, reinforced by a very vivid imagination. The influence of “Taoism, with its belief in Hsien (Kor. Sŏn), or transcendent immortals” pervades her works. She was beset by an enduring fantasy of being able to divest herself of worldly shackles and fly beyond the stifling universe, where everything seemed to be wrong for her, to the world of the immortals. A further characteristic of her work is her extraordinary melancholy, even when measured by the Chinese or Korean yardstick. Many of her melancholic poems are imbued with the theme of the renounced or neglected lady-figure. The themes are elaborated for the most part through the persona of the yüeh-fu (Kor. akpu) tradition; some poems express the disenchanted love of a woman for her husband, which can possibly be seen as a reflection of her own feelings.

The Confucian code imposed severe restraints on both the social and intellectual activities of women. Any seemingly untoward conduct was considered to be “evil virtue.” Nansŏrhŏn can be grouped with those writers whose literature is known, because of their deprived standing in society as well as their disenchantment with Confucian ethics, as the Literature of the outsiders. Their literature was influenced more by Taoism, with its belief in Hsien than by either Confucianism or Buddhism or indeed any other philosophy. Nansŏrhŏn’s poems are pervaded with the influence of the belief in Hsien and the Ch’u tz’u (The Songs of the South) tradition, and are predominantly melancholic. Nansŏrhŏn’s work has occasioned considerable
controversy. Some critics accuse her of plagiarism and there is certainly some
evidence to support such a charge. The amount however is considered minimal in
relation to the total volume of her collection. Other scholars have reasoned that her
brother, Hŏ Kyun (1569-1618, styled Kyosan, also known as Sŏngso), introduced
additional lines when he compiled her collection and made it public, following her
death. This too, must remain as conjecture. It seems likely that her akpu style poems
are the major cause of the controversy. Akpu, particularly the new akpu, are a
recreation of old folk-songs which on occasion adopt the song title itself, thus creating
the impression of poetry copied from old established songs. Much of Nansŏrhŏn’s
poetry was lost, when it was burnt following her death. A sufficient amount has been
handed-down however to show that her work has both enriched and modified Sino-
Korean poetic language, marking her as a great poet. Her writing on the Taoist
immortals has been accepted as the classic of Hsien Taoist poems in Korea.

Her work, entitled Nansŏrhŏn chip (Collected Works of Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn),
of Nansŏrhŏn’s poems and one of her prose pieces have been translated and
interpreted and these are presented herein, following the order of their appearance in
her collected works. Poems have been chosen to represent each thematic or stylistic
group. Another, admittedly somewhat subjective, criterion for selection has been how
well the poems go over in English.

Finally, I have tried to include pieces that shed light on her personal life. Since only
minor research has been undertaken on the analysis of some common phenomena of
Chinese poetic structure in her poems, attention is given to both the formal and the
non-formal structure, taking into consideration sound, syntax and meaning. As the four
tonal changes are not acknowledged in Korean hanmun, each character has been
checked against a tonal table to identify the tone of each rhyme, as well as the tonal
pattern of each verse.
CHAPTER I.

Life of Hŏ Nansŏrhŏn
Hŏ Ch’ŏhŭi 許楚姬[4](styled Nansŏrhŏn 蘭雪軒) was born in 1563 during the reign of King Myŏngjong (r.1545-1567) of the Chosŏn dynasty. Her birth place was Kangnŭng Special City,[5] located in the picturesque eastern province of Kangwŏn, a region renowned for its mountains and spectacular waterfalls. Some information exists about her family[6] as well as material written by her family in which she is mentioned. Although her whole life revolved around the family domain however, very little has been written about her. The years between her marriage at the age of fifteen and her death are almost wholly unrecorded. Fortunately, what has been passed down does give an insight into Nansŏrhŏn’s personality. The considerable difficulty in reconstructing Nansŏrhŏn’s biography is largely brought about because the material in her collected works, which could have provided a wealth of information about her life, is largely poems—some 214 in all. Like others of her time, she wrote occasional poems marking momentous events such as parting from a brother or her husband and, in a time of deepest grief, the death of her children. Regrettfully, these arc the only works of Nansŏrhŏn which provide valid biographical information. It is this lack of sound biographical data that has embellished the mystery surrounding her life.

There is nothing to indicate that Nansŏrhŏn’s childhood was anything but happy and peaceful. She was drawn closely to her brothers, the elder Hŏ Pong, the younger Hŏ Kyun, and, presumably, also to her half-brother Hŏ Pong (1548-1612, styled Angnok) by her father’s first marriage. She grew up in a household whose family members were amongst the most illustrious scholars and politicians in the country. The official biographies of Nansŏrhŏn’s father and brothers are contained in Chosŏn Wangjo Shillok (The Veritable Record of the Chosŏn Dynasty),[7] as well as in other traditional sources. The most comprehensive and reliable biography of Nansŏrhŏn’s family is considered to be the epitaph of her father, Hŏ Yŏp (1517-1580), which is located in Ch’odang Village, Shindong Township, Shihung County, Kyŏnggi Province.
According to the epitaph:

Hŏ Yŏp styled Ch’odang was born in Yongin County. He was a scholar official who held several distinguished government positions such as Principal of the National Academy (Sŏnggyun’gwansaesŏng),[9] Censor-General, Office of the Censor-General (Saganwŏntaesagan),[10] Royal Secretary (sŭngji),[11] etc.

Hŏ Yŏp was a distinguished Confucian scholar and writer whose personality and code of honour are reputed to have secured him many admirers. His marriage to a daughter of Prince Sŏp’yŏng (1478-1537) gave him two daughters and a son, Hŏ Pong. After his wife’s death, Hŏ Yŏp married again, this time, a daughter of the Second Minister of the Board of Rites, a Miss Kim, by whom he had three children, Hagok (Hŏ Pong), Nansŏrhŏn and Kyosan (Hŏ Kyun).[12] The direct line of Nansŏrhŏn can be traced back to the thirteenth century, to Hŏ Kong (Mun’gyŏng kong), who was a distinguished statesman and scholar. Through the generations, the Hŏ of Yangch’ŏn maintained a renowned lineage.[13]

Nansŏrhŏn’s half brother, Hŏ Sŏng was also a highly respected scholar and senior government official, holding positions such as Censor-General and Minister of Three Boards—The Board of Rites (Yejo), The Board of War (Pyŏngjo) and The Board of Personnel (Ijo). In 1590 he accompanied the Royal Envoy to Japan, in the position of Correspondence Officer. On his return, he accurately predicted the invasion of Korea by a Japanese force under Toyotomi Hideyoshi.[14]

Hagok, Nansŏrhŏn’s elder brother, was a politician as well as a remarkable writer. [15] However, while holding government office he found himself constantly critical of the government’s handling of state affairs, which naturally led to trouble.[16] It was, in
fact, his integrity and uncompromising nature that were eventually responsible for his political downfall. For his disobedience he was exiled for three years to the notoriously harsh region of Kapsan.[17] This period of banishment was not entirely wasted, however, as while he was there, he was able to read the works of the High T’ang (Sheng T’ang)[18] poets, particularly the work of Li Po. Hagok’s own style was simple yet original, disdaining the exigencies of prosody. He later acquired the pseudonym of “Banished Immortal”[19] and came to be accepted as an illustrious writer.[20] He was indeed a prolific writer with his corpus of material including works such as Hagok choch’ŏn’gi, Haedong yasŭng, and others.

Hagok died at the age of thirty-eight, when Nansŏrhŏn was twenty-six years old and her own demise was only a short time away. Hagok loved his sister dearly and saw great talent and vivacity in her. The two being in harmony, he was in many respects her best tutor. Nansŏrhŏn’s love and regard are commemorated in seven poems dedicated to her brother in which she expresses her sorrow for him and resentment of the circumstances which led to his untimely death. The compilation and preservation of Nansŏrhŏn’s works however is attributed to her younger brother, Kyosan, who is said to have possessed an extraordinary memory, to the extent of being able to learn and recall several hundred characters in a single day’s study. Kyosan came to realize however that true learning lay not in cramming for the government service examination, but rather in following his brother’s advice and reading the ancient writings (komun).[21] He affirms his thoughts in this regard in a letter to his tutor, the foremost poet of the T’ang style Yi Tal (1561-1618, styled Son’gok).[22]

The golden opportunity to learn with her brothers was one which Nansŏrhŏn did not let slip by. She studied the Chinese classics known as the Shu ching (Book of Documents) and Shih ching (Book of Songs), as well as miscellaneous other Chinese works. Her poems clearly illustrate her knowledge of Pullyu Tugongbushi ŏnhae,
commonly known as *Tushi ŏnhae* (The Korean Annotated Translation of the Complete Works of Tu Fu). It is said there was not a single book in the Ch’odang family library that she had not read,[23] signifying she was her brothers’ equal in scholarly pursuits. Nansŏrhŏn’s unrestricted reading during her early years, drawing upon the ten thousand or so books in the library,[24] undoubtedly crystallized her thoughts and suggested themes for some of her poetry. Legend has it that she showed such a precocious gift for literature that she produced *Kwanghanjŏn Paegongmu sangnangmun* (Inscriptions on the Ridge Pole of the White Jade Pavilion in the Kwanghan Palace), when only eight years old. This work alone earned her the title of “immortal maiden.” Hagok was fully aware of his sister’s talent and arranged for Son’gok to teach her T’ang poetry,[25] an opportunity that both guided her to a new literary genre and contributed to her development as an outstanding poet. Kyosan too, held this tutor in high regard and wrote his biography, *Son’gok san’injŏn* (The Biography of Son’gok, the Recluse). It was as a direct result of Son’gok’s influence that both Nansŏrhŏn and Kyosan wrote outstanding poetry in the style of the T’ang.[26]

The following extract from the Biography of Son’gok, the Recluse also reveals the degree of influence that Son’gok could have exercised on Nansŏrhŏn’s writing:

Yi Tal (Son’gok) was born of a *yangban* father by a *kisaeng* (female entertainer) and was thus destined to have an unfortunate life. Although he was well endowed with talent and a good education, he was barred from serving the State in any high official capacity because of his illegitimate status. He had once held a minor government position but resigned from it and retired to his farmstead, Son’gok. In retirement he studied Li Po and other High T’ang poets. His appearance was always shabby and his wayward spirit refused to let him bow to conventional etiquette. It seems that throughout his life he never set up a home of his own.
Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free / Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below.