

# Some Optimistic Visions in Korean Classical Literature

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## I.

This paper is not designed solely for Korean literature specialists, but it is directed also to the general public. I would like to give you first a brief outline. One of the most striking features of Korean traditional literature is the absence of tragedy. While tragedy commonly occurs in Western literature, it is absent in Korean literature, and this is probably due to the optimistic or comic view of life the Korean people are endowed with.

Some authorities on Korean literature express regret at the happy-ending plot structure of the *Ch'unhyang chōn* (Story of Spring-Fragrance) which is no doubt a masterpiece of traditional Korean narrative. Their comments can be briefly summarized as follows. "The *Ch'unhyang chōn* regretfully happens to be a sheer melodrama resulting from *kwangdae* (a feat singer or actor)'s easy-going dramaturgy which manipulates a happy-ending"<sup>1</sup> "If the heroine *Ch'unhyang* had been tortured to death, we Koreans, would also have had a great tragedy in the history of our literature."<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, however, it is an absurd idea that just the death of the heroine would have made the work a tragedy and also made it greater than what it is now. In reality, at least in the world of traditional Korean literature, it was quite natural phe-

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1 Kim Tong-uk, *Ch'unhyang chōn yōn'gu* (Study of the Story of Spring-fragrance) (Seoul Yōnsei University Press, 1965), pp 353-4

2 Kim Ki-dong, *Yyo sidae sosōl-lon* (Study of the Novels of the Chosōn dynasty) (Seoul Chōngyōn-sa, 1959), pp 470-71

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nomenon that a story ended with a general assumption that everyone who suffered injustice would live happily ever after

## II.

It is common belief that the tragic is seldom found in Korean literature, meaning by that a defeated feeling arising from man's confrontation with something eternal and immortal which is beyond the limits of human existence. Let me try, then, to examine this notion through an over-view of traditional narrative literature in Korea. I must, however, first acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr Northrop Frye, a Western theorist, in my attempt to give a frame to my argument.

Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, a very persuasive and influential book in contemporary Anglo-American literary studies, has attempted to classify every story that can be told into four categories: the romantic, the tragic, the comic, and the ironic or satiric. According to him, these four categories are not the names of literary genres, but "narrative categories of literature broader than, or logically prior to literary genres"<sup>3</sup> In short, it might be said that these are the four basic modes or archetypes of all stories that can be postulated from human imagination

The first narrative mode, which is romance, happens within a highly desirable world; while the second, satire, happens within a painfully defective world. The third one, tragedy, moves downward from innocence through some frailties or errors to catastrophe; while the fourth, comedy, moves upward from the world of experience through threatening complications to the assumed world of happiness. The first two happen, from the beginning to the end, in a homogeneous world: the only variation is that romance emerges within a desirable and ideal world of innocence, while satire emerges within a frustrated and actual world of experience. But the other two, in contrast, develop in a heterogeneous world: tragedy designates the passage of radical change from the ideal to the actual, while that of comedy is from the actual to the ideal.

Let me, then, try to apply the above-mentioned classification to classical Korean novels. Most of them take the form of a biographic story dealing with the life of a single heroic protagonist: in short, the form of the romance. The typical plot of these novels is as follows.

In the first stage, the hero's noble family lineage and his mysterious birth

3 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism Four Essays*(New York: Atheneum, 1968), p 162

are introduced. It is suggested, usually in the mother's dream, that he has descended from heaven. The next stage shows us that he is spirited away from the family owing to his parent's loss of power, and reared often by a Taoist hermit or Buddhist monk endowed with supernatural powers in a far distant country. In the final stage, on reaching manhood, he returns to the ordinary world, where he distinguishes himself in war. After gaining a victory over his lifelong enemy, he and his family are honored again and he lives in splendor. Very often, an epilogue that ascends to heaven from where he has originated, instead of being doomed to death, is attached to the end of the story.

As indicated above, the hero of these novels lives his ritual cycle—separation, initiation, and return—which is easily found in the quest—romance or heroic epic of Western literature. Adventure is the spirit of quest—romance. Therefore, the characters of romance which are centered around the quest—hero have fantastic features of their own. That is one of the reasons why most Korean novels had their setting in China, a land of fantasy, and where one's full-fledged exoticism was displayed.

Characters in these novels tend to be either for or against the hero. In other words, all characters are divided absolutely between two groups, the hero's side and the enemy's side, like black and white pieces in a chess game. The hero is extremely idealized, and his assistants are purely good-natured; while the antagonist is extremely vicious, and his assistants are sheerly the slaves of that viciousness. Consequently, all sophisticated developments of the story arrive at an obvious conclusion, that is, "rewarding the good and punishing the evil."

Irony or satire, a parody of romance, is the absolute inversion of heroism. In Korean literature, a good example of satirical tales which emerge "within a frustrated world of experience" can be easily found in the works of *Pak Chi-wŏn* (1737–1805), renowned as one of the great exponents of Practical Learning in the eighteenth century. I would like to take one of his works, *Hojil* (The Tiger's Rebuke), as a typical satire. In that work, he postulated an honorable Confucian philosopher who wrote several hundred books, and a beautiful widow for whom the authorities set up a Red Gate of Chastity in honor of her loyalty to her deceased husband. But in reality, the hero commits adultery with the heroine every night. Moreover she has, in fact, five sons who were all born of different fathers. Even in this case, we can sense the frustrated world of satire in which everyone is caricatured. Satire, as a form of narrative fiction, was usually written by some of the intellectuals who used to write their works in classical Chinese and who

assumed a critical attitude toward social hypocrisy. But, in Korean literature, while satires as a complete narrative form are rarely found, we have innumerable works in which satire is implicit. Satiric aspect of Korean narrative literature is in general one of content and not form.

Now let us turn our attention to tragedy. It seems superfluous to examine it at length having this paper adopted from the premise that tragedy as a literary form is scarce in Korean literature. I might say, however, not only that there is no such grand tragic figure that looms through the dark scenery of pathetic catastrophe, but also that we can hardly find stories with a simple tragic ending, except for a few cases, in Korean traditional narrative literature. Originally, in Korean myth there was no such a figure as the 'dying god' which is easily to be found in the West, except for a few of its somewhat naive forms in legends.

In regard to this, we may just take a look at *Tongmyǒng wang p'yǒn* (The Lay of King *Tongmyǒng*)<sup>4</sup> which is a unique epic work in Korea, in the sense that it presents us an excellent example of the typical hero-myth with full-fledged narrative details. We can notice the recurrence of the hero's heavenly son lineage and his mysterious birth, his adventurous growing up, and his brilliant achievement. The work, however, does not show us a detailed description of the hero's dying phase beyond a mere indication of his death. In the heroic epic of Western literary tradition, the absence of a catastrophic scene concerning the hero's dying phase is, I think, rather unusual.

It seems to me that in his *The uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim has tried to interpret the distinction between fairy tale and myth in terms of "optimism versus pessimism" from a philosophical or psychological viewpoint.<sup>5</sup> Seen from this angle, I believe that most of the Korean myths are not so much myths as fairy tales. It is no wonder, therefore, that an archetypal figure looming up in our latent mind is a child-hero, whenever we try to imagine the main characters in Korean classical novels which take the form of the romance.

In the same vein, the Korean specialists of classical literature have in general indicated that the world of Korean traditional narrative literature, just like that of the fairy tales, is almost entirely subject to the rule of the

4 A poem of Yi kyu-bo(1168-1241) which allows us to see a real aspect of the *Koguryǒ* epic narrative poem on King *Tongmyǒng*(37-19 B C ), the founder of *Koguryǒ*.

5 Cf. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 35-41, "Fairy Tale versus Myth: Optimism versus Pessimism."

pleasure principle. To quote some of them, "almost all of our myths are to be regarded as a folktale which is derived from the myth."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, "as fairy tales recurrently recount stories about a blessed prince, so recurrently do the biographical novels of Chosŏn dynasty . deal with the life of a blessed *yangban* (nobleman) who rises again from misfortune. These are rather fairy tales for grown-ups."<sup>7</sup>

At this point, I would like to borrow one more typical comment on this subject:

The tragic, a defeated feeling arising from man's confrontation with something eternal and immortal which is beyond the limit of human condition, is seldom found in Korean literature. This element is one of the distinctive features of Korean literature that is radically different from those of Western literature. Accordingly, such a logic as saying that the tragic is an unavoidable and essential aspect of human existence is not defensible in Korean literature. This is due to a kind of optimistic belief 'No matter how fatal and tragic our present defeat is, we can eventually snatch a victory out of it in the long run.' As seen in ancient Korean myths, an optimistic way of thinking based on man's mundane existence might be regarded as a consistent view of life which Korean have had in the past. In Korean literature, at least in the classical period, we can hardly find out the type of tragedy in which man's pathetic feeling is highly stylized as a literary genre.<sup>8</sup>

According to Frye's definition, the comedy is a story which moves from an irrational established society towards a desirable new society. He talks about the comic formula transmitted by Greek new comedy through Plautus and Terence in Rome to most Renaissance comedy, to include Johnson's and Shakespeare's. Frye states

The normal action is the effort of a young man to get possession of a young woman who is kept from by various social barriers her low birth, his minority or shortage of funds, parental opposition, the prior claims of a rival. These are eventually circumvented, and the comedy ends at a point when a new society is crystallized, usually by the marriage or betrothal of hero and heroine. The birth of the new society is symbolized by a closing festive scene featuring a wedding, a banquet, or a dance.<sup>9</sup>

6 Chang Tök-sun, "Ujuron, Segyesang" (Cosmology or World View). *Han'guk sasang taegyŏ* I (Korean Literary Thought Series, I), edited by *Daedong munhwa yŏn'gu-wŏn* (Seoul Sŏng kyun kwan University Press, 1973), p. 206

7 Kim Yŏl-gyu, "Han'guk munhak-kwa in'gansang" (Korean Literature and Its Image of Man), *Ibid*, p. 289

8 Cho Dong-il, "Mi-chŏk pŏmju" (Aesthetic Categories), *Ibid*, pp. 514-5.

9 Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), p. 72

In the light of the quotation, the *Ch'unhyang chŏn* might be taken as a good example of the works which follow the comic formula. The story is as follows: The son of a provincial governor *Yi Toryŏng* falls in love with *Ch'unhyang*, the daughter of a *kisaeng*(geisha), whose social status is too low to become the wife of a governor's son. After turning down the repeated overtures of the hero through his cunning and comical servant *Pangja*, *Ch'unhyang* finally yields to his requests. The hero, however, is soon ordered to accompany his father who has been renominated to a post in the capital. During the absence of her lover, *Ch'unhyang* is imprisoned and subjected to sadistic torture by the newly-appointed governor who is enraptured by her beauty. She decides to die rather than give her body to the governor. At the governor's birthday party, *Yi Toryŏng* who in the meantime successfully passed the civil service examination, appears on the scene as a Secret Royal Inspector in the guise of a beggar. He reveals his identity and hands out stern punishment to the governor and rescues the girl at the brink of death. They live happily ever after.

Most of the classical heroic novels of Korea evoke the highly mimetic world of literature which gives us the image of a sacred society, but the so-called *P'ansori*(Story in Song) novels, including *Ch'unhyang chŏn* evoke the low mimetic world of literature which gives us the image of a somewhat profane society. Accordingly, the former has its setting in a remote country such as China where fantastic characters are depicted, and the latter takes place in Korea with ordinary people as its characters.

In the heroic novels, we can easily find that the most idealized masculine and feminine figure is projected respectively into the hero and heroine, while the most negative and satanic figure is projected into the antagonist. In *Ch'unhyang chŏn*, however, the hero and heroine are just immature young lovers, at least in the beginning. And *Pyŏn Hak-to* as an antagonistic character in *Ch'unhyang chŏn* is not a purely evil figure but a comic blocking character who is uncontrollably dominated by his own obstinate and impatient temper. One of the extant versions<sup>10</sup> of the work describes his personality as follows:

He was a famous author and fine figure of a man, well-versed in music and widely respected, but had one fault: he sometimes behaved irresponsibly, forgot his morals and made errors of judgement. So it was commonly said of him that he was unusually stubborn.<sup>11</sup>

10 *Yŏllyŏ Ch'unhyang suyŏl ka* (Song of the Virtuous Woman *Ch'unhyang*)

11 Quoted from *Virtuous Women: Three Masterpieces of Traditional Korean Fiction* (Ko-

As Frye points out, one interesting characteristic of comic works is that they add social criticism to their attacks on those who claim paternal authority over the young lovers. *Ch'unhyang chôn* also describes the wrongdoing of spoiled bureaucrats represented by the new governor as an extreme, and this aspect makes us read the novel for its strong protest against the feudal society. And, all the more, the heroine *Ch'unhyang* appears sometimes as ideal woman who incarnates Confucian morality, sometimes as a real woman who can speak out licentious words without reluctance, sometimes as a fragile woman who is suffering from her love, and sometimes as a symbol of masculine power which defies the existing aristocratic society. The problem she faces is so real that her chastity is rather militant, unlike that of other heroines in romance stories. *Ch'unhyang* truly is a woman with a thousand faces!

### III.

I would like to conclude my discourse by quoting again the highly instructive work of Frye, *A Natural perspective*, where he relates tragedy and irony to the first half of the natural cycle, "the movement from birth to death, spring to winter, dawn to dark"; and comedy and romance to the second half of the cycle, "moving from death to rebirth, decadence to renewal, winter to spring, darkness to a new dawn."<sup>12</sup>

In this connection, stories in our classical literature do not belong to the movement from dawn to darkness, but to one from darkness to dawn. Our ancestors perceived the inevitable order of nature which is dramatically shown in our famous proverbial expression: "Sweet after bitter, bitter after sweet." But they seem to have greater belief in the latter half of the cycle: "hope after despair." No matter how bitter their real life was, they wanted to hope and laugh at least in the world of literature. If a lack of tragedy is a distinctive feature of Korean literature, what could be the reason for this? It is a question awaiting a sensible interpretation.

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rean National Commission for UNESCO, 1974), translated by Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un, p 293

12 Cf pp 119-21

**GLOSSARY**

*Ch'unhyang*  
*Ch'unhyang chôn*  
*Hojil*  
*Kisaeng*  
*Koguryô*  
*Kwangdae*  
*Pak Chî-wôn*  
*Pangja*

春香  
 春香傳  
 虎叱  
 妓生  
 高句麗  
 廣大  
 朴趾源  
 房子

*P'ansori*  
*Pyôn Hak-to*  
*Tongmyông wang p'yôn*  
*Yangban*  
*Yi Kyu-bo*  
*Yi Toryông*  
*Yôllyô Ch'unhyang sujôl ka*

판소리  
 卞學道  
 東明王篇  
 兩班  
 李奎報  
 李道令  
 烈女春香守  
 節歌