European Interests in Korean Studies


*Cho Dong-ui*

This book is a landmark in Korean studies. It shows the results in Korean studies cultivated by twenty scholars of nine European countries. Korean studies are now beginning to arouse worldwide attention. But, in most areas outside of Korea, there are not so many scholars and research activities that could attract even passing curiosity. Sometimes academic inquiries are distorted by non-academic factors. Korean studies in Japan have concentrated on devaluing Korean history. American interests prefer to choose contemporary issues in the social sciences. Far from these distractions, real images of Korean culture are beginning to be introduced to the world by European scholars who have no non-academic relations with Korea.

As explained in the preface by Daniel Bouchez, the chief editor of this book and the President of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe (A. K.S.E.), the association was formed in 1977 and annual conferences have been held continuously since then. All the articles published in this book were discussed in those meetings. The remarks by Daniel Bouchez in the preface that this book shows "the vitality of Korean studies" in Europe and

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that "both the unity of interest and varieties of discipline which characterize A.K.S.E. conferences" are convincing. A.K.S.E. is a very valuable academic group, I think, in two ways. In Europe perhaps it is the only organization for the study of a non-western region, which bears no traces of colonialism. And, through its efforts, the very first truly international meetings on Korean studies come to be held. So the results of research produced through A.K.S.E. must be examined carefully. It would be undesirable, therefore, for a reviewer to offer something like diplomatic congratulations instead of critical discussion.

The twenty articles here collected commemorate professor W.E. Skillend's sixtieth birthday. He is one of the leading pioneers of Korean studies in Europe. As he belongs to the first generation, he could not be trained in Korean studies. He began to teach Korean with a background in Japanese. Such an adaptation was typical. But now the pioneers of the first generation are almost all retired. Younger scholars, whose academic careers were begun as specialists in Korean studies, play leading role in many European countries. The directions taken by Korean studies in Europe are directly responsive to their interests and abilities. The articles in this book offer some reliable evidence on that point. Among the twenty writers only a few, including professor Fris Vos, belong to the older generation. Almost all leading scholars, such as Daniel Bouchez, André Fabre, Li Ogg, Vladimir Pucek, Werner Sasse, B.C.A. Walraven are represented in this book. Some others are promising younger scholars.

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To understand the general trend in the field of study, it is useful to display the nationalities of the writers and their fields of study. For the field of study, "Li" means "literature", "F" means "folklore", "La" means "language", "H" means "history", "A" means "art history", "G" means "geography", "S" means "social sciences".
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The fact that literature (10 articles about it) is the most favoured field of study is worthy of notice, in comparison with Japanese and American tendencies in Korean studies. Literature is an almost neglected field in Japanese and American studies on Korea. As European scholars are free from non-academic influences and want to know Korean culture as it is, willingly study classical literature, the most difficult field to understand. As a whole, European studies on Korean attach great importance to traditional culture with the sphere of the humanities. Such a tendency, identified in all the European countries represented, is based upon, I think, the sound tradition of keeping academic research free from political interest and immediate utility.

The twenty articles can be divided into three categories (a) which gives an introductory explanation of a certain field, (b) which investigates specific new material, (c) which compares the Korean case with that of other countries. The three categories can overlap. So, the number of the articles belonging each of the categories is: (a) 9, (b) 11, (c) 5. The article in category (a) cannot be evaluated as academic achievements. But they are necessary to attract wider attention to Korean studies. To write a research paper in category (b) is quite desirable but not easy, especially for non-Korean scholars. The fact that more than half of the papers are in category (b) reveals the high level of Korean studies in Europe. Category (c) is a newly recognized field, in which Korean scholars can not boast of their superiority. Even just five examples constitute valuable stimulation.

Among the papers in category (a), Minako Debergh’s explanation of the Korean way of making the world atlas is a typically excellent introduction to Korean culture for Westerners. On the other hand, Youngsook Pak’s re-
port on Western research on Korean art history is indispensable for Korean students in that field. Vladimir Puček offers a very important reference for understanding the products and problems of the modern publication of Korean classical literature in North Korea. But the other papers sometimes have certain deficiencies that weaken them as good introductions. Werner Sasse’s cultural history through language reforms would be better if it considered the historical implications of the adoption and abolition of classical Chinese as the public written language. My Hakhukmunnaekhongsa (Comprehensive History of Korean Literature, 5 vols, 1982–1988, revised edition 1989) might be helpful in this regard. A.F. Trotsevic is regretably uninformed about the fact that Korea has its own epic tradition. My book mentioned above can offer useful information on that.

André Fabre’s survey of the main currents of the modern novel (the French title is “Quelques grands courants du roman coréen moderne”) betrays its title, as it gives merely personal impressions of several short stories. W.S. ROSKE–CHO unreasonably connects some worn-out themes in the studies of Korean literature. One who wants to write an introduction to a certain aspect of Korean studies must thoroughly understand the most recent academic research in Korea. Otherwise, it is better to translate a Korean article. Nowadays many good introductory guides to Korean studies, especially collections of useful articles, are being published in Korea.

The papers in category (b) cannot be easily judged as their materials and views are quite different each other. But I can approach them according to the nature of the materials selected. Maria Silvia Codecasa and Alexandre Guillemoz obtained new materials from their own field work. So their papers have much originality. But Codecasa’s field work on serpent worship on Cheju Island was carried out through interpreters. Some explanations are inevitably not correct, Guillemoz is a trained specialist in Korean folklore, but his investigation on contemporary shamanism in Korea is limited to only one case. So, as he says, it must be enlarged with more material on another occasion.

Some other scholars used written materials. Li Ogg’s study of ancient history cannot use unknown materials. But he shows a good example of minute analysis. Even with such endeavour, the relation between Silla kings and their adversaries could not be generalized. To overcome the confining limits of positivism, I think, now is the time to present some theories, even though they may be hypothetical. Daniel Bouchez’ investigation of Kim Manjong’s view on Samkukbi (Sanguozhi) is a pioneering work. He arranges well the complicated expressions in relation with the original novel. But the
conclusion is rather banal. I think it is not important whether Kim Manjong
read the novel as a novelist or as a politician. The significance of Kim
Manjong's view on the novel can be interpreted more deeply when it is com-
pared with his thoughts manifested in other writings on one hand, and oth-
ers' judgements of the novel on the other hand. A.M. Olof's paper shows a
good example of minute biographical work once more. But how it changes
the already existing conclusion is not clear.

M.N. Nikitina's interpretation of the "Unicorn" found in the tomb of
the Paekche King Murōng is very peculiar, as it easily surpasses positivist
investigation and presents an astonishing theory without hesitation. The asser-
tion that the "Unicorn" is "the mythological mother of the male deity, who
has produced her son in the form of an 'object'—the iron horn" (p 180)
comes out of blue. Based solely on the "Unicorn", there is no positive rea-
sion to negate such an imaginative theory. But the additional proofs enu-
erated and compared with it, the legends of Ch'ōyong and Ch'oē Ch'i-won,
are not so obscure as to justify guesswork. Because of wearisome reiteration,
the core idea may be identified her myth.

In category (c), there is an excellent paper. François Martin analyses
what are specifically Korean features in bansi (Korean poems in classical Chi-
nese). Through a systematic and precise comparison of the Chinese and Kore-
an counterparts of poems in the common written language, the writer reveals
that Korean poets preferred to use more regular forms, personal pronouns as
poetic diction, and humorous expressions. Further, the Korean national pride
in a long history of civilization and a beautiful country are clearly identi-
fied. He concludes that literature in classical Chinese must be considered
"not so much as the cultural heritage of a single people, but as the common
wealth of many cultures, to which each has given its own talent" (p 164.
my translation from French). In addition, he says also that Korea occupies a
privileged position among the peoples who created their literatures in classical
Chinese. Such opinions are already presented in Korean. But they are af-
irmed more convincingly as the writer of this paper is not a Korean but a
Westerner, and not a Koreanist but a Sinologist.

Those scholars who are experts in the studies of neighbouring countries
can contribute to Korean studies by using comparative methods. Rosén's
paper is another interesting example. But the records on Korea in Mongolian
chronicles are too scanty to analyse the question of mutual understanding.
So he tries here to compare different methods of historiography. I think such
a work must be accompanied a wider understanding of comparative
historiography, in historical as well as literary studies. Nikolaj Melanowicz is an expert in Japanese literature. He reads Korean literary works in Japanese translation. But he does not attempt any type of comparative study. He simply writes papers as it he were a Koreanist. Moreover, his discussions of his favourite write Yun Hûng-gil seems to be too repetitive here and there.

Frits Vos' paper demonstrates an eminent example of a comparative study. He easily uses the rare documents of various countries—Korea, China, Japan, Philippines, Spain, France etc. But, in this paper, his wonderful erudition could not yield a fruitful conclusion. The already known fact of "a Chinese book in Korean disguise" was reaffirmed by a long tour round the world. On the other hand, B.C.A Walraven's comparative study of the tale about "the root of Evil" was solved. He suggests simply that the origin of that type of tale must not be searched for within Korea. But because of that point many discussions of historical-geographical methods have been generated. To get beyond previous failures, new ways of comparing and reasoning must be proposed.

Comparative studies are very important, even for Korean scholars. But those who have lived and studied only in Korea cannot understand other cultures well enough to compare them with the Korean case. Thus, Korean studies abroad can make a meaningful contribution toward making up for that defect. European scholars have a native ability to use European materials. And they can also utilize the results of European studies of the Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese cultures. Some papers in this book, which I have not had an opportunity to mention, would make good subjects for comparative study. Judith Cherry's paper on Korean women's legal status could be the basis of a comparison with the cases of other countries. I should like to know if the grammar of Sino-Korean words discovered by Romuald Huscza is similar in Japan or Vietnam. Such opportunities also exist for many other papers. But a deep understanding of Korean culture is, of course, an indispensable precondition of comparative studies.