

Korean Hanshi and the Question of Life: Poetry as Communion Between Nature and Human Beings

*MIN, Pyöng-su**

1. Prologue

Today human beings, who believe in the omnipotence of science and technology, do not recognize that humans are but one part of the numberless beings living in the universe. Nowadays people rarely ask questions concerning life, and, if ever, attempt to answer them only in human terms. They are trapped in a dungeon of pride and arrogance, blind to the fact that human lives are inseparably integrated into the processes of Nature

To those people who live in the city surrounded by cars and buildings, nature emerges as an object of praise only when it is practically useful for them. For instance, nature is appreciated for clean water, cheerful bird-songs, and green woods. For today's human beings, nature is seldom the sublime Being or the primordial source of life. As a result, in modern poems, nature is a vehicle for paradoxical or satiric purposes rather than an end in itself.

In traditional hanshi (Korean poetry in Chinese), nature is always connected with human beings far more deeply than modern poems allow it to be. Even in kyöngmulshi (picturesque poetry) which deals with nature directly as an object of poetic description, nature meets humans in a harmonious and mutual way. These poems first depict the object realistically, but then imbue the picture with human emotions, so that nature and human life are mingled and unified. Of course, some of

*Professor of Korean Literature, Seoul National University
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them end up being a thoroughly realistic representation of the object, and others an exclusive projection of the poet's subjective identification with the object. However, these are merely exceptional cases

Consequently, in reading *hanshi*, we have to pay attention to the ways in which nature and humans face each other. Concerning the encounter between nature and humans in *hanshi*, I'll argue three points. First, nature in *hanshi* does not exist aloof "by itself," but is rather a source of human existence. Second, to the extent that humans attempt to find in nature the clue to the meaning of their lives, nature is also a battlefield of real-world forces. Third, nature, nevertheless, becomes an embodiment of that ultimate harmony where subject and object mingle with each other to the point of mutual extinction.

2. Nature as Source of Life

“關關雎鳩在河之洲 窈窕淑女君子好逑 (The water birds singing amorously are sitting on the bank. The ladies debonaire are good partners of a scholar.)” This is the first part of *Sigyǒng* (A Collection of Poems), which is the first anthology of Chinese poetic songs. Here we can see an attempt to legitimate the human desire for mating by drawing on the mingling songs of birds. Although picturesque poems constitute the main stream in the tradition of *hanshi*, they do not attempt to picture the natural things and landscapes as they are by themselves. Usually *hanshi* poems are determined by the ways they depict the encounter between human beings and natural objects and landscapes. Sometimes the poet himself is immersed in nature so that human beings and nature become one, and sometimes the poet relies on nature as a source of life so that the ground for human life becomes a part of nature. The following poems roughly fall into these categories. I'll take them up one after another.

The rock shoots straight up in the air and is reflected on all sides in the quiet lake
 The base of the rock is perpetually washed by waves,
 and on it slender tree branches forever toss in the wind.
 Slanting along the water, its shadow sinks down,
 and again its top reddens as twilight surges up.
 Alone and aloft above other pinnacles,
 it stands solitarily erect among the white clouds.¹

Yǒng-gosǒk (Homage to a Lone Rock)

1 *Koshigi* vol. 117

迥石直生空	平湖四望通
巖根亘灑浪	樹杪鎮搖風
偃流還漬影	侵霞更上紅
獨拔群峰外	孤秀白雲中

This poem was written by Pöpchöngsa, a monk of Koguryö. In the poem, the poet, boasting of his own high spirit, identifies himself with a rock rising high in the air. This poem exemplifies those cases in which humans and nature are integrated into one.

Instead of unifying nature and human beings, the following poem depicts a natural object as it is, while conferring a meaning on the object. The poem is entitled *Yohwa-baengno* and was written by Yi Kyu-bo.

The brook before you abounds in shrimp and fish;
intently you go in after them, ripping the waves
Startled at the sight of a man, you suddenly straighten up
and fly back to the slopes rank with flowering knotgrass
Drawing down your neck and waiting for the man to go away,
you wet your suit of feathers in a drizzling mist.
Though your mind is still intent on the fish in the brook,
people will say you stand there like one who is beyond worldly concerns ²

Yohwa-baengno (Knotgrass flowers and a white heron)

前灘富魚蝦	有意劈波入
見人忽驚起	蓼岸還飛集
翹頸待人歸	細雨毛衣濕
心猶在灘魚	人道忘機立

In the above poem, the poet depicts a white heron aiming at fish in a brook. However, in the latter part of the poem, the poet stops depicting the heron realistically as a detached observer. At the last moment, the poet's worldly jocularity intervenes, and the poem becomes a comic work. Although this poem seems to draw on a phrase from *Hak* by Paek Kō-1, that is, “誰謂爾能舞 不如閑立時 (Who says you can dance? You do not stand at leisure.),” these two poems do not have the same attitude toward the object. “Standing at leisure” in *Hak* belongs thoroughly to the bird, and we cannot detect any trace of human intervention in this poem. On the contrary, “standing as one beyond worldly concerns” in *Yohwa-baengno* is already in communication with humans, deeply tinged by secular human emotions. Needless to say, human intervention in the world of nature could be a

² *Tongguk tsangguk-chup* vol 2

reason for decreasing the value of the poem, but this is not a good place to elaborate on this point.

The following poem, composed by Kim T'aek-yŏng, grounds life in nature.

The greening of the bamboo hedges shows that rain has passed through,
the old cottages lie dependently pillowed on the roots of the mountain.
Though the sublime beauty of the Chiri Mountains plies itself into three-thousand folds,
twin peaks were artfully chosen, and one village was created there.³

Kurye dong Yu i-san hanun (A Poem Composed at Kurye with Yu i-san)

籬竹青青過雨痕 古堂依約枕山根
頭流秀色三千疊 妙選雙峰作一村

In this poem, the Chiri Mountain Range is not an object of nature which exists by itself. This poem achieves a successful union between the natural world of Chiri Mountain and Kurye Village. It can be seen immediately that the twin peaks provide the people living in the village with their source of life. The poet, Ch'anggan Kim T'aek-yŏng, who is well-known for poems of supernal elegance, for being a poet who rejoices in 'words beyond words,' displays his poetic ability in this poem as if to show his readers the consummation of poetic subtlety.

The next poem we will discuss is *Yugam* (Being Touched) composed by Yi Yong-hyu

Coming out of the pine forest, I found the road split three ways,
I reined in my horse at the edge of the hill, looking for Lee's house
A farmer pointed with his trowel to the northeast,
pomegranate trees were flowering in a village overhung with magpie nests⁴

Yugam (Being Touched)

松林穿盡路三丫 立馬坡邊訪李家
田父舉鋤東北指 鵲巢村裏露榴花

This poem is full of excitement and vivacity. It is a rare exception in Yi Yong-hyu's poetry, since the poet is distinguished by disciplined restraint in poetic expression. The nature created by the poem is a nature without embellishment, or 'nature as it is,' yet it is full of vitality as the ground of human lives. In this poem, the communion between nature and human beings is completely peaceful.

Yugaek (A Wanderer) is the next poem we will discuss.

3 *Sohodang-jip* vol 2

4 *Hyehwan-sich'o*

A wanderer is visiting Ch'öngp'yöng temple,
 let us go up and freely enjoy the springtime on the mountain.
 Though birds sing, the lone pagoda is silent;
 though flowers fall, the brook flows on
 Good-tasting greens are even faster if you know when to pick them,
 fragrant mushrooms are more tender after a rain.
 Strolling along reciting poems, we enter a hermit's mountain grotto;
 the anxious cares of a hundred years fall away from me ⁵

Yugaek (A Wanderer)

有客清平寺	春山任意遊
鳥啼孤塔靜	花落小溪流
佳菜知時秀	香菌過雨柔
行吟入仙洞	消我百年愁

This poem, one of Kim Si-süp's last works, is an especially well regulated work. For Kim Si-süp, who began his life as a wanderer and finished it still a wanderer, nature would be something more than a simple background for life. However, the nature represented in this poem is very subdued and regulated. More importantly, it is not an artificial construct produced just out of the poet's pen, but an embodiment of the poet's experienced reality itself. As such, nature in this poem is cherished as the source of life that engenders and grounds everything in the poet's life.

3. Nature as Battlefield of the Forces of Reality

When we find out that our youthful dreams are never to be fulfilled, we tend to wander in the deep valley of despair. We sigh in the dungeon of frustration, when we see things gone astray. Our disappointment and despair grow in proportion as reality blocks our desires. We want to fly away in the air or go down underground, faced with a reality in which we are estranged not only from ourselves but also from the world. It is at this moment that the battlefield of the forces of reality is transferred to nature. In the next poem, we can see how nature becomes such a battlefield.

Mount Halla greenest of green spots,
 far away in the vast stretches of the billowing sea.
 Following the stars, people come in from the sea,
 and noble steeds are bred and sent off to the king's stables.

Though the land is remote, the people make a living in this way,
 and boats, in trade, are carried back and forth by the wind.
 When the glorious ruler's ministers revised the map,
 they did not cut away this country, small and shabby though it be ⁶

T'amna (Cheju island)

蒼蒼一點漢擘山	遠在洪濤浩渺間
人動星芒來海國	馬生龍種入天閑
地偏民業猶生遂	風便商帆僅往還
聖代職方修版籍	此邦雖陋不須刪

This work is one of the poems written by Kwon Kūn for Zhou Yuan-chang, the First Great King of the Ming dynasty. Kwon Kūn wrote these poems at the king's command in order to clarify certain phrases—phrases which had irritated the king for their lack of respect towards him—in writings attempting to explain the foundation of the Chosun dynasty to him. Kwon Kūn took the responsibility of soothing the king's anger, and wrote the poems demanded by the king. Thanks to his poems, which satisfied the king, the potential conflict between the two countries was resolved. It is not an exaggeration to say that Kwon Kūn was the only person at that time who had the talent and capacity to settle the predicament. In the above poem, Cheju island (i.e. T'amna) is described as a tiny point on a wooden map which could have easily been erased yet survived the danger of extinction due to the King's generous rule which did not make little of the small island. Needless to say, T'amna signifies Chosun, and the island's fate indicates indirectly yet obviously that of Chosun. In this poem, insofar as an island serves as a figural place for resolving real conflicts, nature can be said to be a place for real conflicts. "Kūmgang-san", one of Kwon Kūn's best known poems, is another example in which the battlefield of real conflicts is transferred to nature.

Next poem we will consider is *So-yŏp* (Sweeping Fallen Leaves) by Kim Si-sŭp.

At the sound of the sweeping up of fallen leaves, I am startled out of a daydream,
 I rise and see white clouds over the mountains to the east
 Fish and birds, such creatures as these, having no mind, no special pleasures,
 have peacefulness, being emotionally unattached to the world
 Beyond the bamboo window-blind, in the odor of chrysanthemums, the people too seem
 truly still;
 looking at the moss in the garden, one can tell that the rain has just now stopped
 Without reason, a passion for sad autumn comes over me,

and even reading from Iso-gyǒng [The Book of Leaving Commotion Behind] cannot calm my heart.⁷

So-yǒp (Sweeping Up Fallen Leaves)

掃葉聲中午夢驚	起看東嶺白雲生
直將魚鳥無心趣	剩得烟霞不世情
簾外菊香人正靜	庭前苔潤雨初晴
無端起我悲秋興	細讀離騷心未平

In the above poem, the poet attempts to immerse himself in a state in which the distinction between self and world is transcended. For this purpose, he draws on the calmness of nature; yet, he cannot preserve his peace of mind because he cannot ultimately subdue overflowing emotions. Although he commits himself to nature, the very force of nature, embodied in the smells of chrysanthemums and the moss in the garden, will not leave him alone, disturbing his calmness of mind.

Next we will read *Ki-hoe* (Describing the Heart's Thoughts) by Chǒng Sa-ryong.

In the garden the moongrass has withered, the moon once more is waxing,
 yet no one comes or goes, riding through the woven-twig gate.
 Once one has put aside the old study of the classics, it is hard to take it up again;
 new work around the farmhouse also does not go as one had planned.
 Rain clouds oppress the twilight, and suddenly the mountains darken,
 yet the waters of the brook brightly reflect the moonlight.
 Since work of the mind troubles me no longer,
 this body must simply work at plowing fields and fishing.⁸

Ki-hoe (Describing the Heart's Thoughts)

四落階蕘魄又盈	悄無車馬鬧柴荊
詩書舊業拋難起	場圃新功策未成
雨氣壓霞山忽暝	川華受月夜猶明
思量不復勞心事	身世端宜付釣耕

This poem is known as one of Chǒng Sa-ryong's early works. The narrator of the poem has not yet surrendered everything earthly. However, he cannot find any meaningful work to do in this world either. He chooses the farmhouse as a place which could compensate for his lack of engagement in life. Consequently, the farmhouse stands for a temporary battlefield of real confrontations.

The next work to read is *Kalyŏk-chabyŏng* (Poems at Kalyŏk) by Kim Ch'ang-hŭp

7 *Maewoldang-jip* vol 2

8 *Taedong-shusŏn* vol 2

Having eaten and gone out the garden gate as usual,
 I suddenly notice a tiger-striped butterfly fluttering along behind me.
 I cut through a field of hemp and saunter unsteadily along the ridge of a barley field,
 hemp flowers and barley awns lightly cling to my clothing.⁹

Kalyök-chabyöng (Poems at Kalyök the First Song)

尋常飯後出荊扉	輒有相隨粉蝶飛
穿過麻田迤麥壟	草花芒刺易罥衣

This poem looks as if it were singing the leisure and boredom of a country life. However, the poem shows that life in the mountains is tinged with the conflicts of the real world. Thus, it depicts the difficulty of surrendering and transcending the real world, and nature is shown as figurally representing the conflicts of the world.

4. Hanshi as Art of Harmony

Verses, however subtly impressive, cannot be good poems when they depict only landscapes without conveying emotions. Even *kyöngmulshī* (picturesque poetry) whose immediate poetic objects are natural objects have, as their principle of composition, first the depiction of the external contours, yet they must also go on to imbue them with human emotions. Despite the long history of *hanshi*, which has amplified and diversified its scope almost limitlessly to such realms as the social, political, and erotic, the inveterate characteristic of *hanshi*, which runs throughout its complicated history, is that it attempts to create and establish an order of its own where disputes and conflicts are resolved and overcome by the harmonious commingling of landscape and emotion. Therefore, we can say that *hanshi* fulfills itself when it reaches the acme of perfection by achieving a state of non-distinction between thing and self, and hence a state of non-self. In reading the following poems, we will take a look at attempts to reach this state of perfect harmony.

A single leaf falls in the garden,
 under the bed, all the crickets are wailing
 You go off so impulsively I cannot prevent you
 But where are you drifting off to so idly?
 My devoted heart runs to where the mountains end
 and dreams a lonely dream on a moonlit night
 When in springtime the waves are green at Namp'o,
 oh, do not turn back on our pledge to meet again!¹⁰

9 *Samyöŋ-jip* vol 14

Song-in (Seeing Off a Friend)

庭前一葉落	床下百筵悲
忽忽不可止	悠悠何所之
片心山盡處	孤夢月明時
南浦春波綠	君休負後期

As is often pointed out, the works of the poets of the Eloquence-and-Elegance School (Yuryö-gye) is characterized by the profuse overflowing of strong feelings, and the above poem is not an exception from this. Although the narrator of the poem should be separated from the lover, he overcomes his emotional conflict, by combining the promise of future union with the springtime waters at Namp'o, producing a poetic world in which every distinction and division has blurred and evaporated.

The next poem is by Chöng P'o, another representative poet of the Eloquence-and-Elegance School

The earth is so reclusive that even autumn is ready to depart,
 the mountain so cold that the chrysanthemum still has not bloomed
 I find in sickness writing poems is more gruelling,
 and I see in poverty getting wine to drink is difficult.
 On the path through the fields, the sky seems vast,
 sunlight slants over a vacant plot in a village
 A wanderer with no way to unburden his heart,
 I pass by a farmhouse as dusk comes on.¹¹

Kyemi junggu (Written on September 9th in the Year of Kyemı)

地僻秋將盡	山寒菊未花
病知詩愈苦	貧覺酒難賒
野路天容大	村墟日脚斜
客懷無以遣	薄暮過田家

In this poem, the poet effusively exposes the hard reality of his harsh life, and yet he overcomes the pains of life by relying on the farmhouse.

Next is *Chöngju junggu Hansang-myöngbu* (Written on September 9th at Ch ngju in Reply to Prime Minister Han) by Chöng Mong-ju, who is famous for poetic "high grandeur."

On the ninth day of the ninth month, I climb to a high place in Chöngju

10 *Tongmunsön* vol 9

11 *Sölgok-chip* vol 2

the chrysanthemums brighten before my eyes as in former times
 The silt banks of the estuary continue southward to Söndök,
 and the mountain peaks run northward to the citadel of Yöjin.
 A hundred years of war is the work of rising up and falling to ruin,
 the soldier, come from far, far away, is full of sorrowful indignation
 After we've drunk our wine, the captain helps me up onto my horse sunlight
 slanting over a low mountain brightens the red banners.¹²

Chöngju junggu Hansang-myöngbu (Written on September 9th at Chöngju in Reply to
 Prime Minister Han)

定州重九登高處	依舊黃花照眼明
浦漵南連宣德鎮	峰巒北倚女眞城
百年戰國興亡事	萬里征夫慷慨情
酒罷元戎扶上馬	淺山斜日照紅旌

The poets of the Splendor-and-Spectacle School (Unghon-gye) usually restrain the upsurging of emotions. In the above poem, the poet just makes factual statements, not attempting to embellish his diction. The sadness of a man in the turmoil of war is completely sublimated in the final lines, "After we've drunk our wine, the captain helps me up onto my horse;/ sunlight slanting over a low mountain brightens the red banners." High on horseback, the narrator of the poem feels the mountain to be low and looks at "the sunlight over a low mountain." Such a feeling naturally brings the sad mood of the poem to an end.

Next we will discuss a poem which exemplifies the harmonious union between nature and humankind. Let us read *Köjung gimong* (Dreaming in a Dray) by Y1 Sang-jöök.

Hunched down with a few fur garments pulled over me, I fell suddenly asleep,
 and dimly in my dreams I visited my house in my hometown
 Snow had fallen around the house, but no one was sweeping it away
 Only a plum tree and a crane were guarding the door.¹³

Köjung gimong (Dreaming in a Dray)

坐擁貂裘少眠溫	依依歸夢到家園
雪晴溪館無人掃	一樹梅花鶴守門

This poem was written while the poet was accompanying the envoy to China to inquire after the king's health at the winter solstice. The poem made the poet known to the literati, bringing honor to him. In this poem, the plum flower and the crane

12 *P'oän-jip* vol 2

13 *Taedong-shusön* Vol 9

are not natural objects that stand by themselves aloof from humans. Because the plum and the crane, taken together, allude to the old saying, “the plum as a wife and the crane as a son”(Maech’ō hakcha), the poet treats his wife and son as part of nature. In doing so, he superimposes nature on human beings and humankind on nature. In this harmonious union that the poem achieves between nature and humanity lies its poetic strength.

Next we will read *Hyobal-Yōnan* (Leaving Yōnan at Dawn) by Yi Tōg-mu.

The cock will not stop crowing east of my lodging in the early morning,
and the morning star shines in the heavens in consort with the moon
In a field bleared with the clatter of hooves and the shadow of my bamboo hat,
in the midst of a dream, I mount a woman, then go on my way ¹⁴

Hyobal-Yōnan (Leaving Yōnan at Dawn)

不已霜鷄郡舍東	殘星配月耿垂空
蹄聲笠影朦朧野	行踏閨人片夢中

Generally, when a poet sings for love, he keeps his distance from the poem, for instance, by narrating in the third-person, in order not to intervene personally in the poetic situation. The frequent use of the Akpu style is also for this purpose of separating the poet from the poem. However, in *Hyobal-Yōnan*, the poet narrates his experience boldly and daringly in the first person. Leaving for another place, after having stayed the night, the poet looks back at that last night’s lover in a confessional tone. He achieves successfully a poetic mood in which the poet becomes integrated with his surroundings and the things in nature.

Next we will read *Chungya mun-gūm* (The Sound of Strings at Midnight) by Pyōn Chong-un.

In the middle of the night, when all sounds have died down to silent stillness,
someone makes the strings of the *komun*’go sound.
In the garden, the leaves fall rustling down,
the west wind blows through the ancient grove.
The recluse, unable to hear even half of this,
sits disquieted, fretting upon his clothes
Though crickets in autumn spontaneously sing,
how can they exhaust the heart’s cares?
The bright white moon high in the heavens
illuminates the man, yet does not illumine his heart ¹⁵

14 *Ch’ōngjangwan-jōnsō* vol. 9

15 *Sukhūmyae-shich’o* vol. 1

Chungya mun-gŭm (The Sound of Strings at Midnight)

中夜萬籟寂	何人弄清琴
撼撼庭前葉	西風吹古林
幽人聽未半	愀然坐整襟
寒筵秋自語	豈盡不平音
皎皎天上月	照人不照心

Hearing the sound of crickets, the poet feels they are singing in concert with his own uneasy heart. Although the crickets sing instinctively answering the call of nature in autumn, the poet's response to the singing of crickets converts a natural sound to a human one. In other words, natural objects no longer belong to nature alone, standing by itself, but to human lives as well. Through the commingling of nature and humanity, every conflict and division is overcome and sublimated.

5. Conclusion

Ever since its early foundational stages, *hanshi* has taken nature as the source of its material and has never regarded nature as existing "by itself." Even the later *hanshi* tradition of *kyŏngmulshi* (picturesque poetry), whose poetic objects were mainly natural objects, only rarely depicted landscapes and things as they were. Of course, in some poems, poets are often wholly immersed in nature—at one with it, and, in others, one can see nothing but a perfectly realistic representation of a landscape, comparable to that in Southern Painting. However, *kyŏngmulshi* has developed a multiple poetic world in which a whole variety of the combination of landscapes, things, and humanity can be found. Thus, we have seen how nature and human beings meet in picturesque poems.

In *hanshi*, nature is sometimes cherished as the source and ground of human lives and sometimes transformed into a battlefield of the forces of reality when the world goes against the poet's mind. More than anything else, however, *hanshi* achieves the ideal beauty of harmony, when the barrier between self and thing is removed and thereby every conflict and division is resolved and overcome. At this moment, nature is just part of human life and humanity part of nature.

(Translated by Gwanghyun Shynne, Professor of English, Seoul National University)

GLOSSARY

- Akpu 樂府
 Ch'anggang 滄江
 Ch'ongjangwan-jönsö
 青莊館全書
 Ch'ongp'yöng-sa 清平寺
 Cheju island 濟州島
 Chiri Mountain 智異山
 Chungya mun-güm 中夜聞琴
 Chöngböpsa 定法師
 Chöngju 定州
 Chöngju junggu Hansang-myöngbu
 定州重九韓相命賦
 Chöng Mong-ju 鄭夢周
 Chöng P'o 鄭誦
 Chöng Sa-ryong 鄭士龍
 hak 鶴
 Halla-san 漢拏山
 hanshi 漢詩
 Hyehwan-sich'o 惠詩抄
 Hyobal-Yönan 曉發延安
 Iso-gyöng 離騷經
 Kalyök-chabyng 葛驛雜詠
 Ki-hoe 紀懷
 Kim Ch'ang-hüp 金昌翁
 Kim Si-süp 金時習
 Kim T'aek-yöng 金澤榮
 Koguryö 高句麗
 Koshigi 古詩紀
 Kyöngmulshi 景物詩
 Kurye 求禮
 Kurye dong Yu i-san hanun
 求禮同柳二山限韻
 Kwon Kün 權近
 Kyemi junggu 癸未重九
 Köjung gimong 車中記夢
 Küm-gang-san 金剛山
 Macch'ö hakcha 梅妻鶴子
 Maewoldang-jip 梅月堂集
 Ming 明
 Namp'o 南浦
 P'oün-jip 圃隱集
 Paek Kö-i 白居易
 Pyön Chong-un 卞鍾運
 Samyön-jip 三淵集
 Sigyöng 詩經
 Sohodang-jip 韶濩堂集
 Song-in 送人
 So-yöp 掃葉
 Sukhümjae-shuch'o 肅欠齋詩抄
 Sölgok-chip 雪谷集
 Söndök 宣德
 T'amna 耽羅
 Taedong-shisön 大東詩選
 Tongguk isangguk-chip
 東國李相國集
 Tongmunsön 東文選
 Unghon-gye 雄渾系
 Yi Kyu-bo 李奎報
 Yi Sang-jök 李尙迪
 Yi Tög-mu 李德懋
 Yi Yong-hyu 李用休
 Yohwa-baengno 蓼花白鷺
 Yugaek 有客
 Yugam 有感
 Yu I-san 柳二山
 Yuryö-gye 流麗系

Yöjin 女眞
Yönan 延安

Yöng-gosök 詠孤石
Zhou Yuan-chang 周元璋