Biography and Confession: Eastern and Western Modes of Cultural Memory*

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1. Two Archetypes

It is a common desire of the human race to preserve cultural memory using some kind of narrative form. Among various narrative forms, the highest one is the mode that passes the final judgment on human conduct. This is chosen according to religious traditions.

Eastern Confucianist society and Western Christian society each has its own mode biography for the former, confession for the latter. These two archetypes of recording personal history have been handed down, with modifications, over the long course of literary history. They can help to explain many of the contrasting features in literary production of the two civilizations.

The formal biography, written as a part of official historical records of the Eastern nations, following Sima Qian’s model, decided a man’s honour or dishonour, which is then passed on to his descendants. This is the last judgment of Confucianism. The historian

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must be fair and impartial, the readers of later generation will judge his sincerity. All other forms of biography are advised to follow this norm. Any life history without the objective third person point of view is unacceptable, autobiography is not allowed.

In Western civilization, the highest mode of life history is the religious confession to God, who judges the confessor’s conduct—Augustine best exemplified this form. There is no other way to get to Paradise. The writer must be honest, God does not forgive any lie. In later modifications, the audience may not be God himself, but the first person narration revealing an undisguised inner truth is retained. It is desirable for all distinguished persons to write autobiographies.

2. Two Novel Forms

The East Asian novel began as a mock biography. It was a fictitious story of a humble person who was not qualified to be treated in formal biography. Assuming the place of the biography, this enfant terrible registered its illicit birth, and started to destroy from within the declining medieval society.

The first novel in Europe, the picaresque novel, was a mock confession. It was a non-religious confession producing social disorder. The confessor was a swindler (picaro in Spanish) who boasted of his evil deeds under the pretext of begging pardon for them. The receiver was changed into an ordinary social leader.

The main concern for the two rising novel forms was love. The transitional society between medieval and modern eras underwent a process of secularization and, as a result, love stories were in demand. This story was embodied differently in the frameworks of
the two modes of cultural memory. The basic structures of the two novels showed an interesting contrast, and each modified a common tradition.

In East Asia, what was popular was the polygamous novel. It revealed the life history of a dignified man making love with many female partners. Such a situation helped to gain wider support for the mock biography. Whether the female characters were also interesting or not differs from work to work.

One Japanese example, Ihara Saikaku(井原西鶴)'s Koshokuichaiotoko (好色一代男, The Life of an Amorous Man, 1682) was, as the title indicates, a man's story. The male protagonist pursues his adventure of sexual love unilaterally. There is no reference to the life histories of the female partners, they are expendable commodities.

A Chinese novel with a similar theme by an unidentifiable author, Jinpingmei (金瓶梅, The Plum in the Golden Vase, late 16th century or early 17th century), is not wholly dominated by the erotic male protagonist. The three female characters, whose names are revealed in the title, lead their own lives. After the death of the tyrannical hero, the story continues for a while to tell of the women's fate.

In Korea, Kim Manjong(金萬重)'s Guummong (九雲夢, Dream of Nine Clouds, 1687) comprises the life histories of nine characters introduced as the nine clouds in the title. They are one husband and his eight wives. Such a relation can be labeled as unfair, but it is always the women who initiate the meetings for love in different ways, according to their social positions. Female readers could enjoy imagining themselves as each of the eight women.¹

¹ Cho Dong-il, "Male-Female Partnership and Competition for the Classical Novel", 
The Western counterpart of the Eastern polygamous novel was the so-called adultery novel. The polyandrous relationship, a love affair between a woman and two men or more had such a dishonorable name, but there is no decisive difference between the polygamous novel and the adultery novel. The multiple love affairs of polygamy or polyandry make for a more interesting story than monogamy. The two civilizations made its own choice.

The polygamous novel of East Asia was a biography or a series of biographies, so it used the third person point of view without exception. The adultery novel, however, used the first person point of view to confess the suffering of the inner mind. The recipient of the confession was changed into the lover, the lover became a new idol and love, a new religion. Female readers ardently welcomed such a novel.

Its representative example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie ou la nouvelle Heloise* (*Julie or the New Heloise*, 1761) is a collection of letters. Two desperate lovers, who could not realize their love because of social barriers, exchange endless letters repeating unbearable lamentation. What is important is only the inner consciousness. There is no noticeable plot, and only the death of one of the lovers brings it to an end.

This sort of epistolary novel was the rearranged confession of the new age. It became fashionable in all of Europe and produced many variations. Its English representative, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), which was mistakenly received as the founding father of the

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*Korean Literature in Cultural Context and Comparative Perspective* (Seoul: Jimmundang, 1997), p 91.
novel, was an exceptional "happy ending" story. The female protagonist succeeds in making the recipient read her letters and marry her.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1774)* returned to the tradition of useless confession. The recipient of the desperate letters, is not a beloved idol but a third person confidant. The protagonist's death is not the convincing result of a failed love, but the beginning of a novel of inexplicable inner complex.

3. Two Orientations

The modern East Asian novel was strongly influenced by European precedents. Its traditional mode, however, was not lost but recreated. The family novel appeared as a new form of objective biography. It treated the social problem of historical change to the modern age.

The representative examples of such family novels were Shimazaki Toson's *Ie (家, Family, 1912)* in Japan, Ba Jin's *Jia (家, Family, 1931)* in China, and Yeom Sangseop's *Samdae (三代, Three Generations, 1931)* in Korea. They treated a common theme, the death of the patriarch, and through this theme showed the same historical change from traditional to modern society. The specific features, however, differed according to each country's situation and each author's way of thinking.

The three novels agree that the death of the patriarch cannot be stopped or delayed, as it is an inevitable process of the historical change from traditional to modern society, from authoritarian to democratic values. But the characters of the patriarch are different. In
Shimazaki Tson’s *le* he is a leader of peasants, in Ba Jin’s *Jia* he is a member of the Chinese gentry who achieved his privileged status through the civil examination, and in Yeom Sangseop’s *Samdae* he is one who bought his position in the Korean gentry, the yangban, with money.

There are two types of successors: the moderate successor, who mourns the death of the patriarch, and the rebellious successor, who welcomes it. The successor in Shimazaki Tson’s *le* is moderate. the successor in Ba Jin’s *Jia* is rebellious, and in Yeom Sangseop’s *Samdae* there are both moderate and rebellious successors.

The moderate successor in Shimazaki Tson’s *le* wants to inherit the fading Japanese tradition in order to overcome the impact of the West. The rebellious successor in Ba Jin’s *Jia* adopts Western liberalism to be free from patriarchal despotism. Yeom Sangseop’s *Samdae* depicts the complicated conflict of Western liberalism, Communism, and conservatism among various successors.

The European novel had a similar work Roger Martin du Gard’s *Les Thibaut* (*The Thibauts*, 1922-1936), in France, depicted the death of the patriarch and showed a competition between the rightist way of the moderate successor and the leftist way of the rebellious successor. But it is regarded as an outmoded work and has been excluded from the canon of 20th-century European novel.

The European novel inclined toward the stream of consciousness technique. Its models, Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Times*, 1913-1927) and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), receive ever increasing attention. They are new forms of the confession where the recipient is oneself. There is no lover or confidant, communication beyond oneself is impossible. It is the inner
monologue in its literal sense.

The critical comment on such novels, that "even the most painstaking analysis can hardly emerge with anything more than an appreciation of the multiple enmeshment of the motifs but with nothing of the purpose and meaning of the work itself," is convincing. But it cannot change the situation. There is no alternative but to follow the course already chosen.

Franz Kafka and some other novelists destroyed the novel once more. At last, the so-called *nouveau roman* or *anti-roman* appeared. This is the final assault on the novel. The story is disturbed, characters disintegrate, and historical consciousness has disappeared. There seems to be no remedy for the crisis of the novel.

New models of European literature are always highly esteemed by East Asian literary critics with a background in Western learning. They advise writers to imitate them. But the epistolary novel was not adapted as a fixed form, and experiments in writing stream of consciousness novels produced no noticeable results.

Confession without religious faith brought about the crisis of the European novel, but it is not a crisis of world literature. The tradition of biography, East Asia's mode of cultural memory, is still valid in secular and modernized society. East Asian novels continue to depict history using third person point view.

The Japanese *watagushi shosetsu* (私小說, "I" novel) uses first person point of view, but it does not destroy the novel. Historical novels on a large scale are very popular in Japan and Korea. Chinese and

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Korean novelists are more eager to narrate modern social and political history than historians.

At first, the novel was a mock biography, but now it is a new form of the formal biography of society. The novel of mock confession cannot be labeled as hopeless. If it can avoid too extreme an orientation, it will be able to offer a sincere testimony of human experience.

The East Asian mode of cultural memory emphasizes the outer world. While life in the family, community, and nation are highly valued, the individual's inner consciousness is relatively neglected. To unite the outer and inner orientations is the best method to improve cultural memory.

4. The Third Way

Just as the European sense of superiority is harmful, the East Asian insistence of self-righteousness is wrong. Yet there are more than just two civilizations on the earth, and each civilization has its own mode of cultural memory. Comparative study in a wider scope will help overcome any kind of ethnocentrism.

Indian and Arab civilizations do not forget their glorious histories. The peoples without a written heritage should not be neglected either. Among them, I will select Africa to discuss the relation between its traditional mode of cultural memory and the modern novel.

Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o said that the European novel died with the death of God, but the African novel is still alive. "There was even a movement in search of nouveau roman but I am not
sure whether there was also a parallel movement in search of a new
God or, for that matter, whether the search was fruitful." This is the
European situation. "What’s clear is that something answering to the
name ‘novel’ has been showing significant signs of life somewhere in
Africa and Latin America." This is the other side of the story.

It is a well-known fact that the African novel was born as an
imitation of the European model. Then why doesn’t it have the same
life cycle? The answer is that Africans did not believe in the
European God but in their own myth.

The European God produced its peculiar mode of cultural memory,
the confession. The death of God is well manifested in the decay of
the confession in the novel. But the African mode of cultural memory
is the myth and other oral folk narratives. African myth does not die,
since it is a continuous prophecy concerning history.

The African novel is a union of its own tradition and the imported
model. Its own tradition refuses to fade away and continues to
protest against imperialism. Its mythical imagination goes beyond
factual description of African tragedy and seeks a hopeful future. The
Latin American novel has a similar orientation.

The European novel is not an obstacle. It has helped in the
investigation of the psychological side of the historical problem.
Minute insights into the inner complex, received from European
novel, are used well. Even the technique of the inner monologue
produces appropriate effects. So the African novel has a better
organization than the East Asian novel. It opens the third way that

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3 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind, the Politics of Language in African
Literature* (London: James Currey, 1981), p 64
successfully unites the different modes of cultural memory.

If all civilizations on the earth were to exchange their merits in an egalitarian fashion, human wisdom would be greatly increased. This is the way to avoid the clash of civilizations and to realize the harmony among civilizations. Whether the new millennium is hopeful or not depends on our efforts.