A Historical Reading of the Tale of Ch’unhyang*

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1. The Necessity of Historical Research on the Tale of “Ch’unhyang”

The Tale of Ch’unhyang is one of the most popular among Korean traditional tales. For Korean literature scholars, it has been one of the most interesting research subjects and a number of movies have been based on the Ch’unhyangjeon story. I don’t believe that there is anything else for me to say as to the reasons for its popularity.

It might be necessary to briefly outline the story for those who are not familiar with this tale. The hero and the heroine of the story are very much like Romeo and Juliet. They are two young lovers, both 16 years old. The heroine, Seong Ch’unhyang, is from the lower class and a daughter of a kisaeng. The hero, Yi Mongryong, belongs to the upper class, and is a son of the then Governor of the Namwon District. The tale’s core message is that despite Ch’unhyang’s low

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social status, she was able to overcome her obstacles and marry her fiancé Ch'unhyang was able to prevail over the disparity of their social status through her strong Confucian loyalty to her fiancé.

After her fiancé leaves Namwon due to his father's transfer, Ch'unhyang faced harassing pressures by the new Governor Pyon. She resists, however, and is put to prison. After passing the national exam for high governing officials, Mongryong becomes a Royal Secret Inspector and returns to Namwon Mongryong's secret investigation leads to the punishment of Governor Pyon for his unlawful and unjust treatments while performing his official duty. Ch'unhyang not only married Mongryong but also received the title of "Jeong' yolpu'm," or "Chaste Wife," from the king.

Despite its popularity, the Tale of Ch'unhyang has not been pro-actively researched among Korean historians. I am not sure why this is and this "neglect" is puzzling, since it is obvious that, historically, the story can tell us much about the social trends from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. It seems, therefore, to be more a simple but apparent remiss for historians to exclude it from their historical research. I am afraid that this includes myself. So, to redeem myself from making the same mistake again, I gave a graduate seminar on this topic three years ago. Through this course, the students realized, as I had hoped, the substantial historical significance of the Tale of Ch'unhyang. They also seemed to have obtained many related historical facts and social information. In addition, we discovered that in the absence of a historical approach,

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1 From now until the discussion of the Fifth text, I shall refer to Yi Mongryong as the "Fiancé" for the preceding texts offer incomplete or different names
many faults and limitations existed in the literary research.

One of the dominant reasons why historians have not researched the Tale of Ch’unhyang is that the story’s status has been viewed as belonging solely to the field of literature. This perception also applies to literature specialists. Such separation between history and literature in Korean academic studies must be removed as quickly as possible.

Today, I would like to present some interesting results from my prior seminar. While some of the things that are mentioned here might be things you already know, what I am ultimately hoping is that this lecture will inspire further research into this tale.

2. Six Selected Texts of the Tale of Ch’unhyang

First, I would like to begin by discussing the texts themselves. As you probably all know, there are many versions for the Tale of Ch’unhyang. Among the numerous versions of the story, I chose six texts that seemed representative of their respective periods. A table has been provided to show the titles and the periods in which they were written or published.

As is shown from the table, the *Manhwabon* text is the earliest. This was written by Yu Jinhan, a member of the local literati, in 1754. The text was written as a poem in classical Chinese. Most likely, his writing was based on oral storytelling or performances such as Pansori. Though the source on which Yu based in work is unclear, we know that he lived in Mokch’eon of the Ch’ungch’ung province, the middle region of Korea, and has journeyed to Namwon and Changheong of the Cholla province before writing this text.

For the second and the third texts, *Kyongpanbon* and *Wumpanbon*
respectively, we could not find the exact dates of these publications. There are many similar texts which appeared during the span of the whole 19th century. I estimate that these two texts first appeared almost simultaneously, circa the early 19th century. Some of the contents were changed due to the influences from various famous texts appearing in the latter part of the same century. However, both are different in genre. The Kyongpanbon is written in prose style, whereas the Wanpanbon style is more suitable for Pansori singers. The name Kyongpan indicates that the text was printed in Seoul. Similarly, Wanpan tells us it was published in Wanju (currently Chonju), which has been known as the center of the famous Korean traditional song, Pansori, since the late Choson Dynasty.

The fourth text, Namwonkosa or Old Song of Namwon District, belongs to the Kyongpanbon line. It is so voluminous and detailed that we can say it is the last comprehensive work in the Kyongpanbon line. It is so comprehensive that it appears to incorporate all the comic expressions and popularized Confucian phrases from previous texts and even other stories. Needless to say, it also provides an abundance of historical facts and social information. This text was written during 1864-69.

Similar to Namwonkosa of the Kyongpanbon line, the fifth text, Shinjaehyo Namch'angbon or Tale of Ch'unhyang for Male Song, is the definitive work of the Wanpanbon line. The date of Namch'angbon 1867-1873 is also very close to the dates of Namwonkosa. Shin supported the Pansori players financially and educationally in the Chonju region. While most of the Wanpanbon texts contain vulgar expressions, this text appears to be more graceful and genteel, revising many of the vulgar expressions. I will discuss these changes
later in the article.

Shin's text also has an unprecedented feature: it gave Ch’unhyang a surname, that of Seong. Before Shin, the heroine had only been called Ch’unhyang. About the same time, Namwonkosa also included a family name for the heroine. This time, however, it was Kim, which was not as popular as Seong. The name Seong from Shin’s text would be accepted as her last name by succeeding writers and readers.

The last one, Okjunghwa, meaning an “imprisoned flower,” was written by Lee Haejo in 1911. This text was written as a script for Ch’anggeuk, a type of a musical that was introduced from Japan. Unlike the Pansori in which one singer plays all the characters, Ch’anggeuk has actors and actresses playing respective roles. Lee Haejo wrote Okjunghwa, based mainly on the Namwonkosa and Nanch’angbon texts. This work showed that the possibility of the Korean traditional Pansori being developed into musicals.

3. Differences in Content between the Six Texts

In this section, I would like to compare the respective contents of the six texts. First to be examined will be the continuous changes of Ch’unhyang’s status in the various texts. In the first text, Manhwabon, Ch’unhyang always maintains a low class status from beginning to end. Ch’unhyang succeeded in marrying a man with an elite status after many hardships. However, she was never considered as his legal wife but as his concubine. At the same time she had to pay to the state to exempt herself from the kisaeng register. Although she
was given a title of Jeong'yo1pu'n by the king as an award for her chastity, her social status remained unchanged.

The continuous change in her status began in the early 19th century. The second and third texts of the early 19th century highlights the conflict surrounding Ch'unhyang's social status. For example, when Governor Pyon orders her to serve as his mistress, Ch'unhyang strongly resists. She argues that she is not a kisaeng because she has paid money to the state to exempt herself from the kisaeng register when she was promised to her fiancé for marriage. Governor Pyon, however, ignores her argument by shouting, "You are still a lowly woman who is responsible for serving me." Interestingly, most of the earlier texts do not show such active opposition to the Governor from Ch'unhyang. This suggests, then, that the writer is attempting to reflect his society's more willing acceptance of social statuses like Ch'unhyang's. Ch'unhyang married her fiancé after Pyon's actions were declared unjust and unlawful by her fiancé who was at that time a Royal Secret Inspector. However, it remains unclear whether she becomes a legal wife or a concubine. This uncertainty indicates that historical change was still in the process.

In the fourth text, Namwonkosa, or The Old Song of Namwon, Ch'unhyang becomes more assertive. Her activeness pertains not only to Governor Pyon but also her fiancé. In this text, Ch'unhyang is a commoner, and her exemption from the kisaeng roster by paying money to the state is provided as an established fact. However, she acknowledges that she does not have the same class status as her fiancé. Still, under such conditions, she approaches her fiancé more assertively, telling him that she will educate herself to make a proper
befitting and pious wife for a man of his position. Moreover, she asks him to give her a promising note of marriage.

On the other hand, Governor Pyon's attitude does not change at all. He completely ignores her insistence on her exemption from the kisaeng registry, even ridiculing Mongryong as an immature boy who wants a concubine under a pretext of marriage. However, Ch'unhyang's response is equally strong, refusing to believe him. She shouts at him, "The law will punish you for your indecent behavior. Forcing an engaged woman to abandon her partner is the same as betraying the King." Her activeness was praised by the King at the end of the text. The King says, "Your behavior is much better than that of a woman from the official upper class."

The changes become more apparent in the fifth text, Namh'angbon, or Tale of Ch'unhyang for Male Song. The author, Shin Jaehyo, upgraded the social status of Ch'unhyang as well as Mongryong. Seong Ch'unhyang and Yi Mongryong, the complete full names of two protagonists of this tale, appear in this text for the first time. Until now Yi Toryong was most popular but Toryong is not his first name. The term simply means an unmarried young man. The first text called him "Namwon ch'aekbang Yi toryong" which means an unmarried young scholar in Namwon. In the second text, he is named as Yi Ryong, son of the Namwon Governor, Yi Teung.

Before Shin Jaehyo, there was a tacit consent among the writers and the audience that the hero must be given a last name due to his nobility while a first name for the heroine is enough because of her low status. Thus, the appearance of full names for both characters in Shin's Namh'angbon marked a big change. Most literature scholars, until now, interpreted this change as Shin's intention to attract high
yangban attendance I, however, strongly disagree with this interpretation. In his work, Shin reflected the growth of common people's consciousness to cast off the disparities of the social status system. Although he was supported by the royal family, this fact alone cannot be viewed as evidence of an attempt to attract a yangban audience.

And yet, one might ask why the names Yi and Ch'unhyang were chosen. To answer, we need to remember a phrase “Tori Ch'unhyang” which means “The Spring Fragrance of the Peach and Plum Flowers.” I believe that the names of Yi and Ch'unhyang were derived from this romantic phrase. Thus, the name Ch'unhyang came from the Ch'unhyang of “Tori Ch'unhyang,” that is the Spring Fragrance and Yi is the latter part of “Tori,” which means the plum. In addition, Yi is a very common clan name, included among the royal family of the Choson dynasty in Korea, and it was used to satisfy the audience's socio-political desires. These social changes compelled the writers to give them full names, and Shin Jae-hyo did exactly this.

The changes in the fifth text by Shin Jae-hyo can be summarized as follows. The story of Ch'unhyang's mother itself is changed quite a bit. In the previous texts Wolmae used to be an old retired kisaeng who gave birth to her daughter at a young age. There was no reference to the father; thus, Ch'unhyang was an illegitimate child. Shin Jae-hyo changed this completely. In this text, Wolmae is still described as an old retired kisaeng. However, her age when she bore Ch'unghyang was changed. It was over 40. She met an upper class military officer, a third ranking Ch'eeonch'ong, named Seong Wolmae, then, becomes his second legal wife, legitimizing Ch'unhyang's birth.

Shin describes Ch'unhyang's birth as a gift bestowed upon by the
Okhwangsangje, or the Taoist Heavenly god. The god responded to Wolmae's ardent prayers which were offered at daybreak for 100 days. His consent was shown as a peach in her dream. Wolmae was deeply grateful to the Heavens, devoting herself to her daughter's Confucian education, an important mark of the yangban class. Shin jaehyo called Ch'unhyang "a daughter of literati class," thus upgrading her status long before she met Yi Mongryong.

The author describes the family background of the hero as being higher and nobler than in the previous texts. The name "Mongryong," which was given to him for the first time, is quite remarkable in itself. It means "a dragon appeared in a dream." Shin further embellished the hero's name by connecting his last name Yi with the Yon'an Yi clan, one of the most famous and powerful clans in Seoul in the 19th century.

One can probably guess that the changes made by Shin Jaehyo had its own historical background. Before moving into the historical interpretations, let us continue with the introduction of the last text, Okjunghwa, meaning "Imprisoned Flower."

This text also involved lots of changes in the style and contents. The author, Lee Haejo, upgraded the status of Ch'unhyang in two ways. First, he changed her father from military to civil officer of the same rank. At that time, the latter was regarded as a higher position. Second, he emphasized Ch'unhyang's Confucian education. In addition, one cannot find any reference to Ch'unhyang's low social status except the fact that she is a daughter of a second wife.

Lee Haejo also introduced Yi Mongryong with an impressive family background. His clan Yon'an Yi was described as the richest in Seoul and his mother's lineage Ch'eeongpung Kim was one of the most
famous and powerful families in Seoul. In other words, he is from the most famous and powerful family in Seoul of his time.

The most startling change for us, the scholarly readers, is Ch'uhnhyang's behavior. Unlike her past character of refinement and wisdom, she is now very wild and harsh. For example, she throws a hand mirror, upturns a full-length mirror, and smashes her calligraphy brush, ink stone, and papers, when she hears that her fiancé cannot take her along to Seoul. The author intended to describe them as a symbol of pleasures in liberal love, instead of Confucian morality. Lee also changed the villainous image of Governor Pyon. His name is changed to Pyon Hakto from Pyon Akto. Hakto means "a gentleman learning the way of Confucianism" while Akto means simply "a bad guy." Pyon Hakto is a handsome and refined man who drinks well and pays for others without hesitation.

An incredible scene appears when the Royal Secret Inspector arrives at the official court Surprisingly, Ch'uhnhyang's mother Wolmae defends the new Governor Pyon instead of accusing him of tormenting and threatening her daughter. She says to the Inspector, her son-in-law, "it is very natural for a heroic man to want a beautiful woman"; "it was rather very generous of him that he did not put my daughter to death in spite of her cursing and swearing at the official court." This new positive attitude toward Governor Pyon is emphasized when the Inspector confronts him. Yi Mongryong, a Royal Inspector, says to Pyon: "I have heard of your great fame"; "It is not a scandal for a man to want a flower because that is expected of a great man. I am grateful to find your services that reveal Ch'uhnhyang's loyalty through the sexual harassment." Instead of punishing Pyon Hakto for his misadministration, he only requests
good governance in the future and leaves

4. Difference in Content Caused by Historical Change

The varying contents in the different texts of the Tale of Ch’unhyang suggest a continuous development of the tale throughout history. There is, therefore, a need to interpret them historically. Thus, I would like to finish this lecture with a few historical comments.

The 18th-19th centuries in Korean history was a period of progress for the common people. The Choson society had started with the literati-official class as its center. The “yangban” class means two lines in bureaucratism—civilian and military. The yangban class, having taken up 10-12 percent of the population by the 17th century, was the bedrock of the monarchy.

However, the society changed as the common people’s role grew bigger. The Choson dynasty had a principle of national management which endowed each individual with a specific role for the state. The role of the yangban class encompassed all positions, from the official high rank to the low posts in the military. It was a privilege for the yangban class to even attend the Seowon or the private academies, which was regarded as a prescribed role. The newly emerging class, who benefited from the socio-economic development of the 18th century, began to encroach upon this very system. They attempted to socially move upwards, strengthening their positions.

As a result of this social mobility, the yangban class in the household register increased to make up about 30-40 percent of the
population by the late 18th century. This change made the yangban-centered state powerless. In the 19th Century a new trend occurred when the officials in the prefectures and counties sold to the common people various duties of the yangban class in exchange for large sums. They pretended that the local governments were in a heavy financial deficit. Such mis-administration resulted in a dramatic increase of yangbans, sometimes up to 70-80 percent in the household registers. The yangban-centered national system now became completely meaningless.

All these changes demanded King's action. The various conflicts between the "original" and the "new" yangban class resulted in the sacrificing of the common people. The 18th century monarchs (Sukchong, Yeongjo, and Cheongjo) were concerned about the ill treatment of the common people. Under the banner of protecting the common people, they called for the overthrow of prevailing factional politics, insisting on the propriety of direct rule. Previously, the monarchs had been the head of the ruling yangban class and had actively applied the Confucian concept of the people being the foundation (minbon). This means that though it is the king and the literati who practiced politics, they must not forget that it is the people who were the foundation of the country. In this concept, people were not the subjects of the state.

The 18th century monarchs, advocating the protection of the common people, began to use the newly coined term minguk, which means republic, instead of minbon. This term means that the country was made up of mun, the people, and guk, the king (or roughly equated as state). This republican concept of the 18th century monarchs was a newly coined concept, which was made possible by
the new ways of thoughts and social influence. Now kings became more sympathetic to the commoner’s plight than the privilege of yangban literati. Up until then, the yangban literati had either monopolized the ethics of the Samgang or the Three Bonds, and Oryun or the Five Moral Rules, or they had been exemplary social figures, which the masses only followed. As the 18th century progressed and brought forth ideas like minguk, the common people became proactive, empowered subjects, and the kingly authority was transformed into one that relied on this new foundation of people’s loyalty.

In light of these historical trends, we can point out the important historical facts that the Tale of Ch’unhyang tells:

First, the continuous changes of Ch’unhyang’s status reflect the real longings of the common and low-class people. Their strong desire to remove status discrimination was shown by the writers’ change of Ch’unhyang’s status.

Second, the education problem in this tale also holds a very important historical aspect. According to the minguk concept, Ch’unhyang’s Confucian education could be interpreted as the necessary process for a common person to change into an empowered subject of the monarchy. Her stubborn protestations to Governor Pyon’s immorality raises the question of “who is the real, loyal subject?”—the newly educated common person like Ch’unhyang, or the unlawful yangban such as Governor Pyon?

Third, the King’s reward to Ch’unhyang’s loyalty is, of course, related to the new minguk republican concept. The award at the end of the story, repeated in all the various texts, might easily be overlooked. However, it is a very meaningful ending when we
recognize the emergence of the minguk concept and its historical significance. The King’s award for Ch’unhyang’s loyalty is a scene that displays his sympathies to the loyal commoner, rather than the immoral literati-official.

Lastly, what about the story reversal in the sixth text, Okjunghwa? For this, we need to consider the publication year of this work very carefully. This Ch’anggeuk version of Ch’unhyang first appeared around the time of Japan’s forced annexation. The introduction of Ch’anggeuk from Japan resulted in the disintegration of Pansori singers who had been supported by the Kings since the late 18th century. Here, we hear the first sounds of the Korean people’s value system collapsing, a value system that had been formed around the core tenets of Confucianism. What we then see is a changed value system in which people believe not in ethical mastery but in virtues that stress natural instincts and feelings. The loss of sovereignty is not simply a political indignity but also a cultural insult.

Lee Haejo was a pro-Japanese writer in the beginning of the Japanese colonial rule. He shook the Korean morality with the Tale of Ch’unhyang in the name of a new civilization. We need to analyze other scripts of his from the same viewpoint. In actuality, his works were strongly supported by the General Residency and General Government. There are few Koreans who realize that their national sovereignty was destroyed by such policies of cultural distortion.

At present, Koreans generally view recognize the Tale of Ch’unhyang simply as a romance between a young boy and a girl. They do not realize the historical meaning of Ch’unhyang’s strong protest against the new Governor Pyon. Pansori performance came back to cultural prominence in the late 1960s through President Park
Jeong-hee's policy of the Human Cultural Property, but the real spirit of the Tale of Ch’unhyang has yet to be understood.

Thank you.

Table 1. Texts of the Tale of Ch’unhyang

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Text</th>
<th>Author/Writer</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Style</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manhwebon (Text of Manhwada)</td>
<td>Yu Jinhan</td>
<td>around 1754</td>
<td>Poem in classical Chinese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kyongpanbon (Print in Seoul Area)</td>
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<td>Early 19c</td>
<td>Prose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanpanbon (Print in Chonju Area)</td>
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<td>Pansori Song</td>
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<tr>
<td>Namwonkosa (Old Song of Namwon)</td>
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<td>1864-69</td>
<td>Prose</td>
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<tr>
<td>Namch’angbon (Male Song of Tale of Ch’unhyang)</td>
<td>Shin Jaehyo</td>
<td>1867-1873</td>
<td>Pansori Song</td>
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Bibliography


