

Book Notes

The Korean Vernacular Story: Telling Tales of Contemporary Chosŏn in Sinographic Writing by Si Nae Park. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 309 pp.

Si Nae Park's *The Korean Vernacular Story: Telling Tales of Contemporary Chosŏn in Sinographic Writing* offers a new look at the intriguing classical literary genre of *yadam*. Her thorough study of the late eighteenth-century collection known as *Dongpae naksong*, or *Repeatedly Recited Stories of the East*, compiled by No Myeongheum, casts light on the formation and significance of the *yadam* genre in the literary history of the Joseon period.

The book begins with the compiler of the collection, No Myeongheum, tracing his journey from a provincial *yangban* who never passed the final stage of the civil service examination (and thus was not eligible for a government post) to a live-in tutor for a prominent family in Seoul, the center of Joseon society and culture. The next chapter sets the stage for the compilation of the collection by depicting the contemporary situation in Seoul and discussing the issues and themes that were on the minds of the educated elite, issues and themes that show a society in flux. Next is a detailed examination of the collection itself that illustrates No's stylistic innovations, investigates the themes that drive the narratives, and problematizes theories on the origins of these tales. Finally, Park looks at how and in what forms the collection circulated after No's death, showing how the interplay between print and manuscript culture created a literary environment in which readers were not merely passive recipients of a text but also active participants in its continued development.

As Park describes in the book's introduction, modern scholarship on the

yadam began in the 1970s as a “nationalist historiographical project,” with the literary genre being seen as evidence of the movement of Joseon society toward modernism. *Yadam* have always been an intriguing clash of worldviews: ostensibly orally transmitted tales belonging to all people transcribed in a written language accessible to only the educated elite. It was assumed that if the style, idioms, and language in general of these tales differed from classical standards, this was the influence of the vernacular spoken language in which the tales originated. *Yadam* research has of course moved on since then to question many of those original assumptions, but Park takes these arguments to their logical conclusions and questions many of the dichotomies that have been taken for granted—dichotomies of vernacular and literary, oral and written, contemporary and traditional, and even phonographic and logographic.

The *Dongpae naksong* holds a mirror up to contemporary society, including as it does tales that deal with people, events, and themes that were important at the time. This in itself is a significant development, signaling that value is no longer to be found only in the past but also in the present. And with most of the tales set in Seoul, the collection also reflects the contemporary idea of Seoul as the center of the Korean universe. Thus the *Dongpae naksong* was truly a literary work for the here and now. If that is so, the question that naturally arises is the same one modern scholars faced in the early years of *yadam* research: Why not use the vernacular script of Hangeul, which had already been around for centuries by that time, instead of Literary Sinitic, which represented the medieval world order? Park answers this question by challenging the underlying assumption that vernacular Korean would automatically be a more suitable medium for a collection of tales that represented contemporary Joseon society. She argues that No instead drew on a wide variety of influences from the literary culture of late Joseon, including the language and culture of Chinese vernacular fiction.

Park also questions the assumption that *yadam* were what they claimed to be: orally transmitted tales of the people that were transcribed in the written language of the elite. She posits that, particularly in the case of the *Dongpae naksong*, this conceit was intended to hide the connections to the prior written sources upon which the compiler drew for many of his tales and to give the collection a claim to contemporary authenticity. This might leave the reader to wonder whether the interaction between oral and written literature is not oversimplified here—after all, we know that oral and written versions of tales coexisted and influenced each other as the narratives crossed back and forth between mediums, and indeed that this process continues to the present day—but a full examination of this relationship likely falls outside the scope of the

book. Another avenue of research that remains unexplored here lies in the Hangeul translations of *yadam* collections that circulated along with the original Literary Sinitic manuscripts; if it is true that the “new literary vernacular” pioneered by No represents an important development in Joseon literary culture, then the translation of these tales into Hangeul deserves a longer treatment. Again, though, this strays from the main point of the research, which is to question long-held assumptions and shed new light on the genre of *yadam*. In that regard, this book adds a valuable voice to the dialogue and will no doubt contribute to the furtherance of *yadam* research.

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Wonbon eomneun pantaji: peminiseuteu sigak euro ingneun Hanguk hyeondae munhwasa [Originless fantasy: Reading Korean modern and contemporary cultural history from feminist perspectives] by O Hyejin (ed.), Pak Cha Minjeong, Yi Hwajin, Jeong Eunyeong, Kim Daehyeon, Han Chaeyun, Heo Yun, Yi Seunghui, Son Huijeong, An Sohyeon, Kim Hyojin, Kim Aera, Sim Hyegyeong, and Jo Hyeyoung. Seoul: Humanitas, 2020. 600 pp.

Originless Fantasy is a 600-page opus written by fourteen authors who interrogate feminist cultural practices at a moment when feminism has become a contentious buzzword in South Korea. Based on a series of public lectures given in 2018, this edited volume is a timely response to the resurgence of public interest in feminism, which started as a reaction to a chain of events including the #MeToo Movement. The contributing pieces vary in terms of their topics, depths, disciplines, and methods. At first glance this volume will strike readers as somewhat unwieldy, but they will realize that the expansiveness is an intended effect pursued by the authors to collectively demonstrate against the practice of taxonomizing diverse works of feminist praxis.

This move becomes a “fantasy” for radical transformation in cultural practices: The contributors imagine the fantasy of feminist praxis as nonnormative practices, which exceed formulaic oppositional binarism, e.g. masculinity vs. femininity, authenticity vs. appropriation, cisgender vs. transgender, heterosexual vs. non-heterosexual (8–9). This act critiques the reduction of

feminism to a “mechanical reversal” of an existing gendered arrangement of identities and cultural practices (9). The title starts to make sense here: if feminist scholarship maintains essentialist binary oppositions, it ultimately fails to explain nonnormative practices and desires as anything other than derivatives of the originary. The edited volume thus insists that we imagine slippages as a productive possibility that troubles oppositional binarism.

The preface is followed by robust discussions of case studies in fourteen chapters. While chapters are roughly sequenced in chronological order in four segments, they are curated in a way that deflects from a “unified vision” (12) cohering to a singular feminist cultural history.

Section One explores the sexual politics of deviant bodies in colonial and pre-1980s Cold War Korea. Pak Cha Min Jung [Pak Cha Minjeong]¹ examines 1930s writings and discusses homicide cases involving women’s same-sex relations, which shaped clinical pathology on women’s deviance. Lee Hwajin [Yi Hwajin] explores ethnic crossdressing of Korean women in kimono in filmic representations. Their colonial mimicry conforms to the empire’s demands and simultaneously troubles the ethnic distinction. Siren eun young jung [Jeong Eunyeong] interrogates the act of archiving *yeoseonggukgeuk* or women-only performance. Jung proposes sensorium as a way to understand the traces of queer subjects in *yeoseonggukgeuk*, problematizing the visual imperatives as the only form of archiving the performance form. Lastly, Kim Daehyun [Kim Daehyeon] examines the “diva” performers on the 1960s Walkerhill Hotel stage, including ciswomen and gender nonconforming talents. Their feminized performances furnished them with visibility even as they fought the state-sanctioned commodification of women’s bodies.

Section Two enters the 1980s, when young women’s pop-cultural consumption began to destabilize cultural normalcy and authenticity. Hahn Chaeyoon [Han Chaeyun] writes a unique contribution based on her own 1980s archival materials and experiences as a “fangirl.” Han investigates the fans of singers Lee Sun-hee [Yi Seonhui] and Lee Sang-eun [Yi Sangeun], who fashioned themselves as tomboys. Expanding her discussion to include Amber of girl group f(x), Hahn offers an alternative genealogy of tomboy singers and

1. Instead of following the standard Revised Romanization of Korean system per the official editorial guidelines, it has been decided to keep the names in the book authors’ preferred spelling. This exception is made with regard to the professional and academic visibility of the contributors, a number of whom are already using their preferred spelling in their respective fields. For instance, the name Jeong Eunyeong, one of the authors, would be unrecognizable to readers who may already be familiar with her internationally established professional artist name, siren eun young jung (all lower case). Revised Romanization of Korean is used otherwise throughout the book note.

their fans as the agents who “queer” heteronormative cultural practices. Oh Hyejin [O Hyejin] recuperates the acts of reading Harlequin Romances and women’s magazines in the 1980s. Oh concludes that women’s reading culture was an experiment that allowed women readers to articulate sexual and intellectual desires, blurring the borders between literature and pop culture. Heo Yoon [Heo Yun] focuses on the popular romance comics series *Blue* and its 1990s women fandom. Heo reads possibilities of subversive metanarratives from *Blue*, which transgresses a heteronormative romance scenario through its subplots of homosociality, same-sex desires, and incestuous fantasies.

Section Three surveys the post-1990s emergence of women cultural consumers and their feminist consciousness. Lee Seung-hee [Yi Seunghui] suggests that the women fandom consumes emotional excess in exaggerated *makjang* drama and identifies with strong female figures who challenge gendered melodramatic emotions. Sohn Hee-jeong [Son Huijeong] examines the alignment between “K-democracy” and masculine intimacy in the cinematic representations of nationalism following the Candlelight Revolution in 2016. Ahn Sohyun [An Sohyeon] discusses “Degenerate Art,” an exhibition she curated in 2016 where she parodies the homonymous 1937 show organized under the Nazi regime. Ahn connects her experiences of adopting the mirroring tactics in the exhibition to that of young feminists and proposes mirroring as a performance that produces meaningful differences. Finally, Kim Hyo-Jin [Kim Hyojin] traces young Korean women’s consumption of BL culture (*yaoi*, Japanese homoerotic fiction targeting women readers) and their gradual move away from BL culture as they start to develop feminist consciousness.

Section Four presents works on feminism and media technology. Kim Aera discusses young women and their neoliberal management of self on social media, which doubles as a marketplace for the consumption of beauty and a public sphere for their political mobilization. Sim Hyekyong [Sim Hyegyeong] examines comedy actor Lee Young-ja [Yi Yeongja] and her re-emergence as a top celebrity in 2018. Following Lee’s gender stereotype-defying TV performance, Sim suggests that while Lee does not outright identify herself as feminist, reading her from feminist perspectives allows us to consider feminist subjectivity in the making. Lastly, Cho HyeYoung [Jo Hyeyeong] discusses the feminist subjectivity of women gamers whose capacity, she argues, lies not in merely depriving male gamers’ power, but in reconfiguring the digital gaming space entirely by introducing new forms of imagination and creativity.

Each case study offers an abundance of provocations for a wide range of methods and methodologies for feminist and queer praxis. The texts are versatile and accessible, well suited for various courses on Korean feminism,

queer studies, literature and film, and cultural history. Admittedly, some chapters tend to rely on an oft-cited body of American feminist literature, including the works of Rita Felski, Janice Radway, and Donna Haraway. While this does not undermine the book's significant contribution, readers may anticipate seeing what the authors' future works will look like when they engage with intersectional and postcolonial feminist theories. Such a desire only calls for more books like *Originless Fantasy* to build on the rich and vital dialogue painstakingly set up by the authors.

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