Korean View of Korean Literature

Due to political circumstances, Korean Studies has had a late start compared with the study of Japan and China and, consequently, in many fields there still is a scarcity of authoritative standard works and handbooks in Western languages. For the study of Korean literature the publication of Histoire de la littérature coréenne is a milestone, similar to that of the Sourcesbooks of Korean Civilization for the study of Korean culture some years ago. It is the fruit of a collaborative effort by Cho Dong-il and Daniel Bouchez, both scholars who, in their own way, have played an important role in their field.

By Boudewijn Wolters

Choo Dong-il, who belongs to the generation of students who toppled the regime of Syngman Rhee in 1960, has not only published studies of various aspects of Korean literature and a comprehensive five-volume history of the subject (of which this book is an abridgment), but in his numerous books also has devoted a great deal of attention and literary criticism to the works of modern Korean literature. His book "Korean language and literature, from the outset with unrivalled energy he has attempted to develop a perspective that could overcome the limitations of the Eurocentric views that also dominated Korean academia. Daniel Bouchez first went to Korea to teach philosophy to Korean Catholic priests (in Latin!), but turned out to be one of the most prominent European scholars of classical Korean literature. Through his groundwork-breaking work on the seventeenth-century author Kim Man-jung he became one of the central figures in a fierce debate in Korea concerning the language in which Kim wrote his novels. Bouchez has not only translated and abridged the first four volumes of Cho’s history (leaving the truly modern literature of the twentieth century for a future publication), but also adapted the text for non-Korean readers, thus becoming the co-author of this volume. The result is excellent. Cho’s original work is so long that most readers will only consult it piecemeal, whenever they need information on a specific topic. The French version, too, may be used in this way (it contains a 34-page index and a detailed table of contents), but also is a pleasure to read from beginning to end. In fact, it provides one of the most attractive and most stimulating introductions to Korean cultural history I know, not least because of the attention paid to intellectual developments in general.

To avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that Cho Dong-il’s Korean literature does not only mean modern literature in the Korean language. Koreans have from the very early in their history made ample use of Chinese characters and the Chinese language to express themselves in writing, and to write in Korean was difficult before the Korean alphabet was invented in 1443. Cho Dong-il has firmly broken with the tendency of some narrowly nationalistic historians of Korean literature, after liberation from Japan, to simplify the history of the language, and to equate the biculturalism (diglossia) in which the Koreans (some of whom continued to write in Chinese until the twentieth century) found themselves during most of their history. The vernacular language is not just an important language in itself, but is in a complex relation with the two languages of classical literature. One of the two languages had a certain affinity with a specific gender and class (for example women and commoners were largely excluded from literature in Chinese), while the other was a universal language for all, and the two were in an ongoing exchange. Cho emphasizes that there has been disagreement about the language in which the original was written and that the last word has not been spoken, but it is not unlikely that it was first written in Korean, then translated into Chinese, and subsequently retranslated into Korean. Chinese was used for all kinds of purposes and not, as one might be tempted to think, always associated with conservatism and a lack of respect for Korea’s own culture. In many cases Chinese served to mediate native traditions and Korean self-esteem and could the vehicle for trenchant social criticism, as the cutting irony of the short stories of Pak Chi-won (1777–1805) attests.

National identity and tradition

Two other prominent themes reflect basic concerns of intellectuals of the generation to which Cho Dong-il belongs. One of the most interesting parts of the book is the last chapter, dealing with the years 1860–1919, which is seen as the final transition to the age of modern literature. This is a period of important changes in the West, being neither truly ‘classical’ nor fully modern. It is the period in which the Korean alphabet and the Korean language finally gain the upper hand, although even then Choo transmitted one of the languages of Korean literature. The contoh in Chang-gyun, who in 1909 killed the Japanese Resident-General Hirohito, expressed his nationalistic emotions in Chinese verse. This adaptation of Cho Dong-il’s General History of Korean Literature proves the added value of cooperation between Korean and Western scholars. I look forward to a companion volume on modern Korean literature (and a similar treatment of the History of English for the non-francophone world).


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House of Glass: Culture, Modernity, and the State in Southeast Asia

By Heidi Dahles

This book examines the relationship between discursive practices, modernity, and state power in Southeast Asia. Moving away from political economy, the authors — representing diverse academic disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, and cultural criticism — choose four sectors as case studies: unification, tourism, informal sectors, and HIV/AIDS. Southest Asian societies focus on cultural purity and pollution in an attempt to renegotiate national identity in a globalizing world, and the commodification of culture is an Occidentalist paradigm that reverses the Orientalist idiom. In this context, the nationalist identification with Western modernity, and partly conflicting processes of identification, Anti-Western discourses have become popular. The authors draw on recent research as the second section in this volume illustrates.