

# Traditional Story Telling and Poetry Grammar in Korea 7-8 Century A.D.

*Ki-chung Im*

*This study examines how Buddhism changed the Korean people's way of thinking and how this change affected the grammar of poetry. Korean poetry is characterized by a unique communication style. Koreans prefer the written style to the spoken style. When Buddhism was introduced to Korea a new style of grammar and emotional resonance in poetry was created, which was different from the traditional grammar of poetry. One technique used by Buddhists was to add a word of finishing touch to make the poem come alive. This article shows how this new poetry style is applied to Korean literature, by considering some works of Tosolka, Wonwangsaeangka and Chemangmaeka of the 7-8 Centuries.*

---

Ki-chung Im is a Emeritus Professor of Korean Language and Literature at Dongguk University.

*International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* February 2004, Vol. 4, pp. 49-59.

© 2004 International Association for Buddhist Thought & Culture

## I. Introduction

The process of thinking requires both subject and object. Thinking is created when it has something as an object and is developed based on a certain foundation. It becomes communication when it is transmitted via speaking and writing. If the original thought is skillfully interpreted through speaking and writing it will be effectively communicated. In 42A.D. Kuchika was the first poem written in Korean characters and arranged according to the Korean writing style in order to express the Korean way of thinking. Later, Hwangchoka literature appeared, which was written in Hyangchal Korean characters, based on Chinese characters. This literature style is still extant today. In 17A.D. there was Hyangka, however it was written in Chinese characters and reflected the Chinese way of writing. This kind of traditional Korean literature was mainstream in Korean thinking and way of writing until the Chosun Dynasty and up until the time of the Three Kingdoms and Koryo dynasties. Korean literature also has two streams but both are strongly related to Chinese culture. Buddhism was introduced to Korea mainly by way of a system of Chinese characters.

This study examines how Buddhism influenced the Korean way of thinking and how that influence changed the poetry grammar in Korea. In this article, I use the term "poetry grammar" to refer to the grammar used in poetry. When I speak of poetry grammar I refer to both the grammar form and structure employed in writing the poem, and to the inner structure which helps understanding and creates unity. The main focus of this article will be how Korean Buddhism changed the poetry grammar in Korea and later, Korean traditional literature, especially the Kuchika style of poetry literature, and then how this change was further developed based on ideas in Korean literature.

## **II. Traditional Korean Story Telling**

There are three main styles in Korean traditional tales. First is the narrative style typified by a beginning, "Please tell me an old story." It has the narrative structure of a folk tale such as 'The Fairy and The Woodcutter'. Second is the style of monologue or statement, initiated by the request "tell me about what's happening here." And third is the dialogue or communication style, "they are talking with each other." Korean tales adopt a primitive expression which uses the three types of lingual phenomena familiar to Korean people. Even though these three types are the same in the sense that they all have both speaker and listener, the first and the second ones are monologue style and the third is dialogue style. Koreans have long preferred the monologue style of speaking such as folk tale and statement, to the dialogue style. Korean fathers usually give instruction rather than communicate with their sons, and Korean grandmothers love telling old stories rather than engage in dialogue with their grandsons. Thus, unlike Western culture, Korea is typified as a monologue culture.

Not only do Koreans love to tell stories but when two Koreans meet they usually tell stories about others. This natural communication style provides a frame for narrative literature in that both speaker and listener are the main characters of narrative literature. Many eloquent speakers appeared in Ancient Greece because linguistic style dominated that society. But Korea gave birth to many story tellers as this was considered the most effective means to teach and enlighten people (Ki-Chung Im 1998:10).

However, in the political arena the narrative style lacks persuasive power and is not generally well received. Therefore, Korea has suffered diplomatically because, while strong in statement, it is weak in dialogue and debate. An exception to this is the diplomatic relationship with China which has been relatively harmonious for a long time. What is the reason for this? It is because China also uses a poetic form of communication. Korean are

hesitant to express direct statements like "I love you" to the lover. A Western missionary once commented that Korean women are the unhappiest women in the world because they never hear words of love from men throughout their entire life. However, the Korean traditional way to express love is by letter, namely a love poem. Thus, one of the characteristics of Korean poetry is that it directly communicates personal sentiment. "Hwangchoka", written by King Yuri (19B.C.~18A.D.), in Kokuryo, is a poem of the monologue style. "Chemangmaeka", written by Venerable Wolmyongsa at the time of King Kyongtok (742~765) in the Shilla Dynasty, is a poem written in the style of a statement. And the poetry "Yesongkangchonkok and Yesongkanghukok" of the Koryo period (918~1392) uses the metaphor of separation and reunion of husband and wife to express the barrier between the Yesong River in Korea and the Hatu River in T'ang. It is a poem of the dialogue style.

Regardless of whether the poem is of Chinese character (1st style), of vicarious character (2nd style), or expressing the traditional Korean character (3rd style), Korean style of poetry typically communicates directly with the audience. This is so regardless of class, whether royalty, religious people or commoners. This has been the tradition of Korean poetry from the latter period of The Chosŏn Dynasty (1392~1910) until today. Likewise, Koreans are very familiar with poetic dialogue and enjoy communicating through poetry rather than spoken dialogue. So many Korean poems reflect this dialogue style rather than the epic or narrative. style Today, traditional folklore and myths are transmitted both orally and in the written form.

### **III. Korean Poetry Grammar in the 7th and the 8th Century**

The Korean lifestyle and ideology provides creative material for poetry. There are many examples in Hyangga. Experiences such as adjusting to nature(Hyesongka and Tosolka), love, (Sotongyo), fighting illness

(Maengatukanka and Choyongka), separation (Chemangmaeka and Mochukchirangka), social reunification (Sotongyo), and returning to the eternal paradise (Chemangmaeka and Wonwangsangka) are all representative motives for creative poetry. (Im, Ki-Chung, 1981; 261~296). Of course, these kinds of experiences as a basis for poetry are the most common in the world but they also represent Koreans' unique way of thinking. Thus Hyangga's literal characteristics can possibly be considered global in their literary character. The need to communicate a particular feeling or experience dictates the structure preferred to express the poetry.

Korean Buddhist thought influenced new patterns of poetry grammar, which evoking an emotional resonance which was entirely different from the traditional poetry of the past. This new form of poetry was first used by Venerable Won Hyo in his No-hindrance chant. This chant has "Nammu" at the end of vows related to Buddha's teachings (Samkukyusa vol.5). The language used in this poetry, "I vow to Amitabha Buddha" had a great affect on the common people. Venerable Wŏnhoy's 'No Hindrance' promises that everyone who chants "I vow to Amitabha Buddha" will go to the Pure Land. "I vow to Amitabha Buddha" is chanted by everyone together at the end of the final stanza. The change in grammatical structure is representative of Korean poetry in the 7-8century and has survived through the Koryŏ and Chosŏn dynasties until today.

Now I will discuss some works from the 7th and 8th century. I'll start with Tosolka.

I scatter flowers now  
singing a Scattering Flowers Song.  
Dear flower, because you have a pure mind  
You can welcome the host of the chair of Maitreya.

Tsolka speaks of Maitreya's Pure Land and the coming of the Pure

Land. The words, "worship the host of the chair of Maitreya" in the last line are 'the key words of this poem. The poetry language of the keywords changes a 'dirty land of suffering', (which is signified by 'two-suns rising in the air',) into the Pure Land of happiness by welcoming the 'host of the chair'. Thus, this poetry diction is central to the poem and plays the most important role. I call it the poetry grammar which refers to putting the finishing touch to the work. Only by the process of adding a finishing touch can the idea of Amita Buddha come alive, thus Pure Land thought makes the grammar of this poetry lively, which was never the case with Kuchika or Haeka. Nevertheless, it has retained the potential frame of the inner structure such as with "Dear flower" and "Welcome the host of the chair of Maitreya", consistent with the style of Haeka and Kuchika. Tosolka uses the explanatory monologue formula for traditional Korean style of story telling.

Now we will look at Wonwangsangka.

(B-1)

Dear moon,  
You can go to the west  
and speak respectfully  
to Amitayus Buddha

(B-2)

Appealing to the Buddha with a strong wish  
hands held tightly together  
I vow to pass over to the Next World  
I vow to pass over to the Next World  
You can speak respectfully  
that there is a man who deeply longs for this

(B-3)

Alas, is he really going to fulfill  
the Forty- Eight Great Vows if I am left behind?

This work of Wonwangsaengka is a chant for the Pure Land of Amita. Reference to the Pure Land is at the end of the last paragraph. "Forty Great Eight Vows" is expressed as a final sentiment, or finishing touch. The "Ten Phrases of Hyangka are formulated in three parts, each expressing its meaning at the end of a paragraph, as in (B-1), (B-2), (B-3). The "Forty- Eight Great Vows" of the final sentence build on the poetry language of "Amitayus Buddha" in the first stanza and "I vow to pass over to the Next World" in the second stanza emphasize the main idea and put a finishing touch. Amita Buddha fulfilled the Forty Eight Great Vows for saving all sentient beings when he was a monk named Popchang, now stays in the Pure Land. "I vow to pass over to the Next World" is the eighteenth of Forty Eight Vows. So both 'Amita Buddha' and 'I vow to pass over to Next World' conclude with reference to the Forty Eight Great Vows. But, in uniformity with the grammatical structure of the poetry form, such as Kuchika or Haeka " Dear moon" and "tell respectfully" are retained as an internal structure here. The meaning of the last paragraph,"Is he really going to fulfill the Forty Eight Great Vows?" is the hope to go to the Pure Land by Amita's power. But it uses the question form similar to Arirang, as in "if I am left behind, you have only hurt your feet for a short distance". This form expresses the action of another's will. At the end of the first and second paragraphs "tell respectfully" is where the poetry grammar is employed to continue to open up the verse. This work is a chant which speaks of the wish to go to the Pure Land by other's power, namely Amita's. It is in the form of a monologue in the traditional way of Korean statement.

Lastly, we can consider Chemangmaeka.

(C-1)

Afraid of facing

The forked road to life and death,

Did you have to go

without telling me you were going?

(C-2)

Like fallen leaves scattered here and there  
on the early winds of autumn.

Though born from the same branch

Didn't you know whence you would go?

(C-3)

Alas, I'll wait and practice

in this world until I meet you

at Amita's temple in the other world.

This poem written by Chemangmaeka, is about seeking to go to Amita's Pure Land. The finishing touch of this work is 'Amita's temple' at the end of the final paragraph.

'Did you have to go?' in the first paragraph (C-1) and 'didn't you know?' at the end of the second paragraph (C-2) are exclamatory in emphasis. This exclamation comes from sorrow inside 'me' rather than a 'question for you'. Thus the meaning of last paragraph 'alas, I'll wait to practice in this world until I meet you at Amita's temple in that other world' tells me it is 'I' that practice Buddhist way so to meet you at Amita's temple in Pure Land. You are late sister of mine as well as of and Amita Buddha. The intentional exclamations 'did you have to go?'(C-1) and 'didn't you know?' refer to 'Amita's temple' at the end of the final paragraph. This is an expression of will. So this poem points to Buddhist faith in that he will go to the Pure Land by his own power. So the word of finishing touch is located as the last line of the poem. The last line of the first and second paragraph 'Did you?' or 'Didn't you?' seem to be the point where the poem widens or opens up. This grammatical technique of widening can be found in many Buddhist verses, which is well demonstrated in the Koryo ballad of Kasiri. This work of Chemangmaeka is a monologue style, The same as that of Wonwangsaeangka.



Other examples of Buddhist verse are Chosonkayochipsongpon Sowangka, Pokwonyompulmunpon Sowangka, Kwonwangka, Wonwangaengkok, Sacheka and Chonhonwangaengkukraka.

The following works are from ' Inquiry of original Buddhist Verse.' (Ki-Chung Im 2000;10) Here we consider the enduring lines of each verse.

17th ~18th Century verse:

Without chanting Buddha, what else can we do?

I vow to Amita Buddha (Pokwonyompulmunpon Sowangka)

Let us sing a Peace Song

I vow to Amita Buddha (Chosonkayochipsongpon Sowangka)

19 Century verse:

Let us accept Natural Pleasure

I vow to Amita Buddha

I vow to the Goddess of Mercy (Kwonwangka)

While standing and sitting

I chant Amita Buddha.

Observing that this body goes as a stranger to the Heavenly World  
(Wangaengkok)

Let's go to Heavenly World, let's go there (i

I vow to Amita Buddha (Sacheka)

Let us accept Natural Pleasure

I vow to Amita Buddha (Chonhonwangaengkukraka)

As mentioned previously, the form of grammatical structure used in this verse, seems to have been originated with Master Wŏnhyo and his 'No-hindrance' chant. The source of this supposition is based on Buddhist Sutras. Chemangmaeka, which emerged from traditional grammatical structure of Kuchika or Haeka, was modified to produce a new and refined

lyric. Throughout Hyangga works, as illustrated in A, B and C above, no matter how Buddhist verse aspires to the Pure Land, that is, Maitreya's or Amita's Pure Land, the words 'Pure Land' are always used as the finishing touch to evoke emotion and impression of a Pure Land as 'mine' as well as 'ours'.

#### IV. Conclusion

From the several factors we have considered in relation to poetry grammar, I offer a summary as follows. First, the traditional Koreans way of thinking and relating created the grammar of poetry unique to Korea. Second, Buddhism changed Korean way of thinking and relating and this change influenced the creation of a new Korean poetry grammar. Third, before Buddhism was introduced to Korea, traditional grammar of poetry was based on the Shamanic song style which is mainly designation and commendation. However, after introduction of Buddhism, Koreans used a new style of poetry grammar, which was typified by putting the word of finishing touch. Fourth, Koreans are not so familiar or comfortable with spoken dialogue. They prefer using a written style of dialogue. This phenomenon also appears in Korean poetry making it a unique style. Lastly, although the technique of adding a finishing touch appeared in the 7th and 8th centuries it was gradually modified until the 15th century and has been a style used continuously in Korean poetry throughout this time until today.

#### Glossary

Notes: K=Korean

Chemangmaeka(K) 祭亡妹歌

Chonhonwangsangkraka(K) 薦魂往生極樂歌

Chosonkayochipsongpon Sowangka(K) 朝鮮歌謠集成本 西往歌

Choyongka(K) 處容歌  
 Hwangchoka(K) 黃鳥歌  
 Hyangchal(K) 鄉札  
 Haeka(K) 海歌  
 Hyangka(K) 鄉歌  
 Hyesongka(K) 彗星歌  
 Kasiri(K) 가시리  
 Kuchika(K) 龜旨歌  
 Kwonwangka(K) 勸往歌  
 Maengatukanka(K) 盲啞得眼歌  
 Mochukchirangka(K) 慕竹旨郎歌  
 Pokwonyompulmunpon Sowangka(K) 普勸念佛文本 西往歌  
 Popchang(K) 法藏  
 Samkukyusa(K) 三國遺事  
 Sotongyo(K) 薯童謠  
 Tosolka(K) 兜率歌  
 Wolmyongsa(K) 月明師  
 Won hyo(K) 元曉  
 Wonwangaengka(K) 願往生歌  
 Yesongkangchonkok(K) 禮成江前曲  
 Yesongkanghukok(K) 禮成江後曲

## References

- Im, Ki-Chung  
 1981 *A Study on Shilla Kayo and Written Materials*,  
 Seoul: Ii Wo Publishing
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1994 *Song Literature through Poem, Wha Dong*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1998 *Buddhist Code of Korean Classical  
 Literature: Buddhism Seen in Literature*,  
 Taisho Univ.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2000 *Inquiry of Classical Buddhist Lyric*, Seoul:  
 Dongguk Univ.