

Introduction

Peter H. Lee

EDUCATION AND EXAMINATION

In 682, the Silla dynasty (57 BC–AD 935) established a royal Confucian academy. Its core curriculum consisted of the *Analects* and *Book of Filial Piety* as well as specialization in one of the following: the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Documents*, *Record of Rites*, *Zuo Commentary*, and *Selections of Refined Literature*. Students ranged in age from fifteen to thirty and studied for nine years. In 788, a state examination system was instituted whereby students were categorized into three classes, but the system lasted only briefly.

Under the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392), the civil service examination system began in 958, and the fixed number of 300 students was enrolled in the national academy (Kukchagam) from 992. The students studied the Confucian canonical texts for from a minimum of three to as many as nine years. The qualifying examination for entrance to the national academy included composition in poetry (*shi*) and rhymeprose (*fu*). The biennial final examination in literary composition, consisting of three sessions, tested students in the classics, poetry (old-style poetry, quatrain, regulated verse, and regulated couplets [*pailü*]) and rhymeprose, and a problem essay. The classics examination, again in three sessions, tested them on from five to nine classics. The literary composition examination was considered more prestigious, however, and the classics examination was held less frequently. In 425 years of Koryŏ history, some 251 examinations were held with 6,671 graduates in literary composition and 415 in the classics.

In the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), the classics licentiate (*saengwŏn*) and literary licentiate (*chinsa*) examinations were held triennially. At the first stage, candidates were chosen from among county schools in the provinces (*hyangsi*) and the capital city (*Hansŏngsi*). The metropolitan examination – the second stage – was administered by the Ministry of Rites: the first day for the literary licentiate and the third day (one day's interval given) for the classics licentiate. The classics examination tested students in the

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Four Books and Five Classics – initially one question based on one of the Four Books and one of the Five Classics. In the 502 years from 1392 to 1894 when the examination was abolished, the triennial examination in the licentiate was held 230 times, which selected 48,000 licentiates. The two-session final examination (*munkwa*) tested the candidates in the classics, literary composition (poetry, rhymeprose, eulogy, admonition, treatise, memorial, or edict), and a problem essay. The final examination was held 744 times and chose 14,606 candidates. The initially triennial final examination chose thirty-three civil officials and twenty-eight military officials, but its frequency and the number of passers increased as time went on.

In the early period of Chosŏn, some licentiates were appointed to lower-ranking positions, but the number decreased in later times. That is, the classics and literary licentiate examinations were not directly related to employment, but were still a requirement for – and an essential part of – the final examination. Some, however, proceeded directly to the final examination without taking the licentiates, and this trend increased as time went on, and toward the end of the dynasty, only 10% of the final examination passers had the licentiates in hand. The frequency of examinations and the increase in the number of passers is shown during the reign of Kojong (1864–1907), for example, when the examinations were held seventeen times within thirty years, with 7,000 licentiates, of whom only 4% proceeded to the final examination, in contrast to before the seventeenth century, when 25% of the licentiates sat for the final examination. Thus the nature of the licentiate examinations changed in late Chosŏn, but both the government and the educated seemed to feel the need for their continuation, underscoring the fervent aspiration of parents and their sons for a white certificate as a badge of prestige. True, candidates studied for the examination and read specific texts as preparation, but the primary function of the examination was to recruit the main body of officials who constituted and administered the government machinery. Most of education, however, was carried out outside of the examination system.

The three highest-ranking graduates (the first called *changwŏn*, the second *pangan*, and the third *t'amhwa*) received a certificate in red paper with the royal seal; the graduate who was placed first achieved the greatest glory.¹ They were feasted by the government and went to the Confucian Temple to report the news to the master and his disciples enshrined there.

¹ This information is based on Yi Sŏngmu, *Kaejŏng chŭngbo Hanguk ūi kwagŏ chedo* (Chimmundang, 1994); Pak Yongun, *Koryŏ sidae ūmsŏje wa kwagŏje yŏngu* (Ilchisa, 1990), and *Koryŏ sidae sa*, 2 vols. (Ilchisa, 1989), 1:144–157 and 366–382; Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, ed., *Hanguk sa* 13 (1993):367–440 and 23 (1994):279–368; and Song Chunho, "Chosŏn hugi ūi kwagŏ chedo," *Kuksagwan nonch'ong* 63 (1995):37–47. I am grateful to Professor Martina Deuchler for the last reference.

Together with other passers, they would entertain relatives, friends, and examiners and would parade through the streets on horseback, followed by musicians and actors. The Office of Royal Decrees compiled a roster of successful graduates, together with examination questions, and published it for wider circulation. (More than 700 of these lists remain from the Chosŏn dynasty.) From 958 to 1894, when the examination was finally abolished, the examination was the only route by which the government recruited qualified persons for officialdom.

THE WRITER

Candidates for the examination usually began their study at the age of four with the *Thousand Sinograph Primer* (*Ch'ŏnjamun*), progressed to other primers, then to the Four Books and Five Classics. They were required to be proficient in these texts and commit them to memory by reading the same passages and chapters at least a hundred times aloud. In addition, they also read Chinese histories – such as the *Historical Records* of Sima Qian (?145–86 BC), *History of the Former Han* by Ban Gu (32–92), and *History of the Later Han* by Fan Ye (398–445) – and major Chinese philosophers as well as Chinese poets and prose writers.

The students learned the following number of graphs in the classics by heart:

<i>Analects</i> :	11,705
<i>Mencius</i> :	34,685
<i>Book of Changes</i> :	24,107
<i>Book of Documents</i> :	25,700
<i>Book of Songs</i> :	39,234
<i>Record of Rites</i> :	99,010
<i>Zuo Commentary</i> :	196,845

In all, a student had to learn 431,286 graphs. As the *Great Learning* and *Doctrine of the Mean* are included in the *Record of Rites*, they were not counted separately. As Miyazaki Ichisada comments, “memorizing textual material amounting to more than 400,000 [graphs] is enough to make one reel.”²

Among Koryŏ writers, Yi Illo (1152–1220) won the literary licentiate at age 28 (1180); Yi Kyubo (1169–1241), at 21 (1190); Yi Chehyŏn (1287–1367) at 14 (1301); and Yi Saek (1328–1396) at 13 (1341). Among Chosŏn writers, Sŏ Kŏjŏng (1420–1489) passed it at age 18 (1438) and passed the final examination at 24 (1444); Chŏng Ch'ŏl (1537–1594) passed it at 24

² Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, trans. Conrad Shirokauer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 16.

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(1561) and the final examination at 25 (1562). Yun Sŏndo (1587–1671) passed it at 25 (1612). Among Neo-Confucian philosophers, Yi Hwang (1501–1571) passed it at age 27 (1528) and the final examination at 31 (1532); Yi I (1536–1584) passed both the classics and the literary licentiates one after the other in two days at age 28 (1564).

Most Korean writers went through the training described here. For them the civil service examination determined their mode of life. From childhood, virtually all aspirants to public service were trained in the same, primarily Chinese, works. Upon passing the examination, the lucky candidate would receive a political appointment that carried immense social prestige. He was lucky because at times some 90% of classics and literary licentiates were unemployed. From early in life he learned that the arts of statesmanship and literature went hand in hand. The predominance of writers at court provided the courtier with constant encouragement, though it was commonly a source of rivalry as well. Certainly it afforded him an opportunity to observe a variety of men who had achieved distinction in politics and literature – thereby affording him also some insight into human nature. Those at court could exchange erudite views concerning every major event. Apart from time spent on courtly functions and official duties, they found the opportunity to write verse and prose. Poems were produced on every conceivable courtly and social occasion; the courtiers must have dreamed and thought in verse. In fact, numerous poems were indeed inspired by dreams.

In such a setting, none could dispute the place of literature in society and culture. The typical writer had a circle of close friends among whom manuscripts (or transcriptions) were circulated. Intractable allusions, quotations, puns on people's names, numerous poems of friendship, commendatory verse, prefaces, epilogues, appreciations of individual collections – all attest to the intimate nature of the group. The reader, who was himself a writer, was presumed to be just as knowledgeable as the writer and was expected to catch all allusions and quotations. An appointment did not always guarantee uninterrupted literary activity, but this was irrelevant. Poetic talent was presumed to ensure political advancement, and most of the literati combined writing with their official duties. The relative lack of mercenary flattery or fawning – as compared, for example, with Elizabethan England – is refreshing.³ This may explain why so few works were dedicated

³ Phoebe Sheavyn, *The Literary Profession in the Elizabethan Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), ch. 1; Edwin H. Miller, *The Professional Writer in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), ch. 4; and J. W. Saunders, *The Profession of English Letters* (London: Routledge, 1964), p. 28.

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to patrons (although dedication was no proof of patronage). No one wrote for pecuniary gain, and no one made a living by writing (ghost writing excepted). Yet few forsook literature.

THE HIERARCHY OF GENRES

It is essential to understand the distinction between what were considered the primary and secondary genres in the traditional canon, the relations between literature written in Chinese and in the vernacular, and the generic hierarchy in the official and unofficial canons. The first higher civilization adopted by Korea and Japan was Chinese. When Chinese civilization with its Chinese writing system arrived, neither Korea nor Japan had a script of its own. Even after the appearance of the Japanese syllabary in the ninth century and the invention of the Korean alphabet in the mid fifteenth century, the Chinese graphs were accorded deferential status. The Japanese syllabary was called *kana* (temporary, or borrowed, script) as opposed to the Chinese *mana* (true script), for example; and the Korean alphabet (1443–1444) was called *ŏnmun* (common script), though its official name was “Correct Sounds for Teaching the People” (*Hunmin chōngūm*, now called *hangūl* in South Korea). If these terms smack of ideological bias, it was an ideology of the literati, who espoused the Confucian and official Chinese canon and, through their alliance with the government and the ruling class, exercised power in Japan and Korea respectively.

The major texts that Koreans and Japanese studied after the formation of their states were the Confucian canon (first five, then eleven, and finally thirteen texts). In Korea these texts formed not only the basic curriculum of education for almost 1,000 years, but the foundation for the civil service examination for 900 years (even when Buddhism was the state religion for more than seven centuries).⁴ The employment of Confucian scholars at court, the establishment of a royal academy, and the recruitment of officials through the civil service examination helped in the victory of Confucianism and the hegemony of the Confucian canon. As the *sine qua non* of the educated and ruling class, knowledge of the canon was the subject of serious and sustained study. As the repository of a cultural grammar, these texts constituted the interpretive community of those with an orthodox education in East Asia.

⁴ For the rise of Confucian learning in Japan see Yukio Hisaki, *Daigakuryō to kodai jukyō* (Tokyo: Saimaru, 1968), and Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 71–88.

In China, the canon's formation coincided with the expansion of the Chinese empire and the consolidation of bureaucracy. Confucianism and the Confucian canon came to Korea and Japan at a time when both countries were in the process of consolidating monarchical power in the early history of their unified states. Administrative and penal codes, cosmology and rituals, the recruitment and education of officials, inculcation of social virtues, historiography in Korea and Japan – all were influenced by the Confucian canon and its ideology.

Although the normative values of the canon were considered immutable, its functions were diverse. Certain historical moments – such as dynastic changes, a restoration of the ancient (utopian) order, the initiation of institutional or social reforms, or the rise of nationalism – invoked the canon and its ideology for support and justification. The canon served also as an ideology by which the ruling class rationalized the political order or curbed despotic power, anti-establishment scholars censured bureaucratic corruption, censors impeached the ruler and his officials, reformers advocated their cause, and Confucian martyrs vindicated their innocence.

The influence of the Confucian political, historiographic, and moral tradition on East Asian literature was pervasive. The tradition provided rhetorical commonplaces, inspired the “mirror for princes” literature and other prose narratives – both official and popular – and allegorical exegesis. In such Confucian-inspired works, the distinction between history and literature is often vague. These works use epideictic formulas, the end of which was didactic. The use of mythological and historical personages from Chinese classics and histories was the common device of comparison and amplification in all genres, primary and secondary.

The hegemony of the Confucian canon in East Asian culture and literature was long and strong. From their inception, the Confucian classics were treated as canonical by the literati (the ruling class in China and Korea and occasionally in Japan)⁵ in their roles as scholars, officials, and writers. Accepted as binding texts in politics and morals, they defined the nature and function of the literati. As translators of morality into action, the literati enjoyed authority, power, and prestige. Because they were also influential writers of their times, they played a major role in forming the canon of refined literature.

The importance of the Confucian canon in traditional Korean literature is underlined here because most extant literary works were produced in the

⁵ Japan adopted certain standards of the canon but not its political apparatus. See Hisaki, *Daigakuryō to kodai jukyō*, pp. 218–235.

Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), a period in Korean history strongly influenced by Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. The literati that constituted the dominant social class in Korea wrote almost exclusively in Chinese, the main source of their prestige and power. This class, which controlled the canon of traditional Korean literature and critical discourse, adopted as official the genres of Chinese poetry and prose. The *Wenxuan* (*Selections of Refined Literature*), the most widely read and influential anthology, exercised a lasting influence in the formation of the canon.⁶ The official canon includes most genres of poetry and prose in the *Selections of Refined Literature*. Of these, poetry was paramount in the generic hierarchy, as attested by anthologies and collected works of individual writers. Of the sixty chapters in the *Selections of Refined Literature*, the first thirty-five are assigned to poetry. In collected works of individual authors, poetry is presented first – even in the works of such Neo-Confucian philosophers as Zhu Xi (1130–1200) in China and Yi Hwang (1501–1571) in Korea. No single writer tried all prose forms – the *Selections* lists some thirty – but such forms as memorials, letters, admonitions, tomb inscriptions, treatises, and accounts of conduct enjoyed a lasting place in the generic paradigm.

Three secondary genres in Korea (as in China) include prose fiction, random jottings, and drama. The East Asian term for fiction (*xiaoshuo*, *shōsetsu*, or *sosŏl*) does not denote the Western novel. The East Asian term was used derogatively to designate all traditional prose fiction which created a world other than that sanctioned by the establishment and which offered alternative views of reality. The tyranny of historiography and the Confucian insistence on historicity exercised considerable influence in the development of fiction. Viewed with suspicion and contempt by the authorities, fiction was considered to be outside the literary canon. Some encyclopedias may include certain fictional works under various headings, but such compilations, often undertaken for political reasons to keep the literati out of trouble, were regarded as miscellaneous compendia. The literary miscellany, or random jottings (*biji*, *zuhiitsu*, *chapki*) is an anti-genre that flaunts the prescriptive conventions of the formal prose genres, with their stilted rhetoric. It disregards the hierarchy of subjects but values the activity of the author's inquiring mind. It includes the reportorial, biographical, and autobiographical (and sometimes fictional) narrative and poetry criticism. Studied nonchalance and self-disparagement found expression in the title, which usually contains the East Asian equivalent of the Latin *sylvae*

⁶ The Japanese anthology patterned after the *Wenxuan*, *Honchō monzui* (14 chapters) was compiled in 1011. The Korean anthology *TMS* (156 chapters) was compiled in 1478 and 1571.

(Ben Jonson entitled his collections *The Forest* or *The Underwoods*). The fact that the literary miscellany was excluded from a writer's collected works, even in the case of a high state minister, demonstrates its low status in the hierarchy of prose genres. Korean literati seldom attempted drama, which was regarded as mere entertainment or pastime.

Any canon that labels certain literary genres as secondary – outside the mainstream and unofficial – is ideological. Indeed, since the ideology of prestige and power grounded in the dominant class radically changed the course of development of Korean literature, ideology is clearly a constituent aspect of its literary history. By ideology I mean a system of ideas, beliefs, and assumptions characteristic of a particular group or class by which it seeks to defend and promote itself.⁷ The ideal of the literati was ostensibly a benevolent government that rules by virtue and example in order to maintain a hierarchical and harmonious society. To maintain the order considered vital to the preservation of society, they used ideology to veil repression. The same ideology found expression in literary forms, content, and style, in acts of canonization, and much else. Gramsci's notion of ideological hegemony as a totality “which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent” that it “even constitutes the limit of common sense for most people under its sway”⁸ might apply here.

To be sure, some Korean writers wrote in both Chinese and Korean. They knew that vernacular poetry or prose seldom brought prestige. They also knew that such pieces might not be included in their collected works. In fact, only a handful of their collected works include vernacular poetry, usually as an appendix. The reason is simple: as in the primary canon, poetry was the highest of native literary types, but was not part of the official curriculum and education. Some writers, including kings, wrote in Korean, but no one was censured for doing so. The place of prose fiction in the native canon was humble. As in Japan, vernacular fiction was considered primarily as recreational writing for women, although it enjoyed popularity from the eighteenth century among the literati and women of upper and middle classes. Korea had mask and puppet plays, but actors – as in China and Japan – occupied the lowest of the lower social strata.

The difference between Japan and Korea in the early development of vernacular poetry is that in Japan the court, which espoused the value system of China, also came to be associated with native poetry. The new canon

⁷ For a convenient bibliography on ideology see Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 443–446.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

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of native poetry as culturally esteemed and the compilation of twenty-one anthologies of the 31-syllable *waka* is exceptional.⁹ Yet the reigning monarchs and noble houses that were responsible for the growth of the *waka* did not accord the same patronage to prose fiction and drama. In Japan and Korea, therefore, poetry was the highest genre regardless of the linguistic medium used. All other writings except for Chinese prose and history, again regardless of the linguistic medium, remained low in status. Saikaku (1642–1693) and Bashō (1644–1694), for example, now considered great masters of Japanese vernacular literature, were rated lower than Rai Sanyō (1780–1832), a writer of history and poetry in Chinese in the Tokugawa period when Chinese was the official written language. One Chinese prince was a playwright;¹⁰ a Korean king was the inventor of the Korean alphabet and a writer of vernacular poetry. Neither, however, could effect a lasting change in the tastes of the entrenched literati or combat the official ideology, “an instrument of class domination, legitimation, and social mystification.”¹¹

We can guess what happened in modern Japan and Korea to the prestige and power associated with the ruling class and China and the literature written in Chinese. The desire for the recovery of popular literature as embodying national identity brought about a reactionary movement to belittle all writings in Chinese, which in Korea comprised more than two-thirds of the extant literature and in Japan less than one-third. It is in the nature of the canon to change, as it is in the nature of literature and knowledge. It is also in the nature of the canon to resurrect neglected works, including underground and X-rated writings, if not to confer immortality on them. Today a new canon governs literary study and instruction not only in Japan and South Korea but in the West as well.

THE TASK OF A NEW LITERARY HISTORY

There is now a powerful literary-historical consensus that a new history of Korean literature should accord priority to the vernacular literature

⁹ Earl Miner, “The Collective and the Individual: Literary Practice and Its Social Implications,” in *Principles of Classical Japanese Literature*, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 17–62.

¹⁰ Zhu Yudun (1379–1439), the eldest son of Zhu Su, the fifth son of the founder of Ming. He wrote thirty-one *zaju*. See Yagisawa Hajime, *Mindai gekisakka kenkyū*, pp. 50–108; see also William H. Nienhauser, Jr., ed., *Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 344–346.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 282.

that constitutes a distinct tradition – distinct, some argue, because it is a repository of native beliefs and values that speaks for the common people, as contrasted to elite literature in Chinese devoid of popular concerns. Dichotomy can be multiplied to include language, class, gender, and the nature and function of literature. The ideology of a new canon and new history is not always so simplistically presented, but there is an inherent danger of conceiving it as an ideological project from an adversarial standpoint. The historian's task is to evaluate not only native (and popular) works neglected in the past but also to examine works in Chinese once considered canonical but now neglected. The historian must consider both text and context, author and cultural history, because it was the business of literature in China and Korea to engage society and culture at all points. Literature can, it was believed, change the world. No work was considered autonomous or intransitive; literature refracts, not supplants, historical reality. Every work of worth is inscribed by historical and cultural forces. Artistic consciousness, however, was not incompatible with political and social participation.

Modern literary historians deploy an array of strategies to resurrect and reevaluate neglected areas in a traditional canon: a systematic study of Korean myths, legends, and other forms of prose narrative; a study of popular literary genres of folk origin; and a reevaluation of dissent literature. Shamanist beliefs and popular customs of ancient Korea were first written down when they were viewed by the ruling class as no longer functional. Therefore, old myth forms were emptied of their primal grandeur and colored by Confucian and Buddhist worldviews of later times. Yet, in the portrayal of heroes in history and literature, both official and unofficial, we discern a set of motifs and patterns: the same categories and elements found in myths and folklore elsewhere. The extent of expurgation of the more primitive aspects in these tales may be difficult to assess, but older materials may still remain embedded in them. In the study of archetypal patterns and symbols in traditional narrative, official history and gazetteers have been ransacked to cull folk narrative embedded in foundation myths, tales of heroes and heroines, mythological and historical materials, local traditions, etiological stories, animal tales, and the like. Heroes tend to share common biographical patterns and conform to certain types. Structural analyses of narrative have been undertaken – including folkloristic structure as the underlying framework of narrative discourse. Such recurring heroes and heroines in popular tales as the loyal minister, the filial son and daughter, the chaste wife, and the honest younger brother embody the official Confucian virtues and exemplify the society's values in a subtle way.