



# Comparative Literature: East & West

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I would like to offer my perspectives on the development of comparative literature in Korea, a process which can be divided into three stages. Each is distinguished as a particular historical moment by the writing system used in Korea at the time, and by the set of cultural influences which informed and shaped literature. The first stage comprises the period before Western influence, the second the mid – nineteenth through mid – twentieth centuries, and the third the late twentieth and early twenty – first centuries.

At the beginning of the first period, Korean writers adopted Chinese characters for writing, a process which can be traced as far back as the 2nd or 3rd centuries BC. The use of Chinese characters was common during the Three Kingdoms era (3rd to 7th centuries), as is evinced by the large number of extant inscriptions on monument stones from each of the kingdoms—these being Silla, Koryeo, and Choseon. During this time, Koreans developed a system for recording the sounds of their own language with Chinese characters, rather than writing strictly in the Chinese language. In this system, called *idu*, one Chinese character was given a sound value, which represented one distinct Korean phoneme. The most important legacy of such writing in *idu* are the poems known as Hyang – ga, which constitute the most ancient writings in the Korean language.

While the significance of these works cannot be underestimated, the majority of Korean literature composed during the Unified Silla, Koryeo, and Choseon periods continued to be written in Chinese. This reflects the strong influence of the *gwageo*, the examination system

for government service, which was primarily a test of the student's ability to read and write Chinese. It was this institution through which Korea's elite was defined, and so the influence of classical Chinese literary models remained strong.

In 1443, King Sejong the Great proclaimed the *hunmin jeong-eum*, the 28 - letter Korean alphabet now commonly known as *hangul*. The new system was, however, regarded with skepticism by the ruling classes, who feared that they would lose their social position, based as it was largely on their command of Chinese. Although the alphabet could represent Korean sounds and grammar much more effectively than Chinese characters, it was never used for official documents and failed to win widespread respect. While some scholars wrote in Korean as a literary hobby, the new alphabet was used primarily by common people and women as a communication tool. And yet, ironically, it is precisely those traditional works composed in the Korean alphabet which have come to be most highly esteemed by later generations.

The second stage in the development of literature in Korea begins with our nation's so - called Enlightenment at the end of the nineteenth century. Exposed to Western civilization for the first time, young Korean writers began to turn toward this new source of literature. Coming initially through China and Japan, Western literary influences began to enter Korea directly. Classicism, romanticism, realism, and symbolism flooded into Korea simultaneously during the 1920s and 1930s, with Dadaism, cubism, surrealism, and other influences following shortly after. With these also came Western critical approaches to literature, which many Korean scholars wholeheartedly embraced. They argued that literature should be a universal medium with a common set of objectives and interpretative mechanisms, while others protested that Korean literature must maintain its own unique identity.

In any case, although Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the Korean War which followed shortly thereafter proved definitively that Korea could not remain isolated from larger regional and global developments. In the aftermath of the war, translations of

foreign literature abounded and Korean students developed insatiable appetites for world literature. The middle 1950s saw the growth of research in comparative literature and the establishment in 1959 of the Korean Comparative Literature Association (KCLA), organized along the lines of the ICLA. With this impetus, scholarly discussions of comparative literature became somewhat fashionable and numerous critical essays and books were published.

The growing impact of the mass media and the spread of information technology now bring us to the third stage in the development of Korean comparative literature. No longer can such new media as film and video, television, and the internet be ignored as having nothing to do with literature. Their influence on literature and literary thought grows daily, particularly among younger scholars. At the same time, interest continues to grow in the connections between literature and other arts, such as dance, music, and the visual arts. Indeed, comparative literature as a discipline is boundless in scope.

Although this is true in the abstract, comparative literature in Europe and the United States cannot be said to be as vital as it once was. The numbers of students in the discipline has dropped and many departments have been closed or merged with other academic fields. This reflects, on the one hand, the diffusion of the internet and the opening of access to information, and, on the other, the increasingly materialistic orientation of many students, who see no value in an enterprise which will not generate profits.

However, countries which have not been fully exposed to the world literary market, including Korea, are now poised to take up comparative literature as a means of promoting their literary works abroad. Such important honors as the Nobel Prize are rarely awarded to writers who do not use major world languages, such as English, French, German, or Spanish. In cases where they do, such as Oe Kenzaburo and Kawabata Yasunari in Japan, they are given based on the strength of the English translations of their works, something which has been aided tremendously by economic growth.

Korea is now in the midst of an unprecedented restructuring of the

government, business, schools, and other institutions, with the ultimate goal of globalizing the market, and indeed, the culture of Korea. At this moment in history, cross - cultural dialogue, including the discipline of comparative literature, will be indispensable for the success of this national restructuring. Without it, Koreans will not be able to define their place in the world or to clarify their relationship to other societies and peoples.

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