The Moral contours of Reform: Educating Children’s Emotion through Poetry in Colonial Korea

The appearance of the magazine Ŭrini in 1923 marked the beginning of a new era of literary publications in Korea, one designed specifically for an audience of young readers. Ŭrini’s content reflects the convictions of its editors, contributors, and children’s rights activists about the connection between literature and children’s emotional development. Children’s emotions were seen as a central target of reform in this period, and literature, particularly children’s poetry (called tongyo and tongsi), was considered a powerful conduit of this reform. In this paper, I draw links between the discourse around kamjŏng kyoyuk (emotional education) that circulated in print media of the time and the poetry that was supposed to facilitate this so-called emotional reform. The discourse around the modernizing force of emotional education through literature brings to light the transnational aspects of the interest in children’s emotions in this period. At the same time, this paper explores the competing stakes in emotional reform on the Korean peninsula, particularly coming from the Ch’ŏndogyo, Buddhist, and Christian institutions, to uncover the moral underpinnings of children’s literature in the early twentieth century.

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