

Wiebke Dnecke

“Towards Comparative Studies of the Sinographic Sphere: The Poetics of Literary Beginnings in Korea and Japan”

SHORT ABSTRACT:

Although the term “East Asia” refers unambiguously to a geographical area on the Eastern end of the Eurasian continent it is far from clear how to grasp “East Asia” as a particular cultural region. What is distinctive about premodern East Asia in comparison to other cultural regions such as Ancient and Medieval Europe, the Middle East, or, what Sheldon Pollock has recently called the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis” of South Asia? And what kind of distinctive literary cultures did East Asia’s “Sinographic Sphere” engender and sustain? What can the study of Korea contribute to our understanding of premodern East Asia?

This talk proposes directions for the comparative study of premodern East Asia’s cultural heritage. On the example of episodes from Japan’s and Korea’s earliest historical chronicles that try to pinpoint and explain the beginnings of literature the talk shows how early states both in Japan and Korea built their textual traditions on Chinese precedents. But it also sketches how the attribution of cosmological and historical origins of poetry, the ideological agendas of the compilers of the chronicles and the relation between Chinese-style and vernacular textual production show significant divergences that were to launch Korean and Japanese cultural histories on different paths within the Sinographic Sphere. The talk aims to inspire conceptual comparisons between the various sub-regions of the Sinographic Sphere that can ultimately enable us to envision East Asia’s cultural significance within world history.

Yongbiŏch'ŏn ka and the Korean Humanities

Young-Key Kim-Renaud, GWU

Abstract

For more than a thousand years before the invention of the Korean alphabet in 1443, Koreans wrote in Chinese characters or some modified forms of them to express themselves in writing. With Chinese characters came Chinese arts, literature, linguistics, philosophy, thought systems, social customs, and government structures. Koreans continued to use Chinese, as they revered the Sinitic civilization and were proud of being part of it. Koreans thus lived in a special kind of diglossia, where people spoke one language and wrote another language they didn't speak. The Korean people lived in a bilingual and bicultural environment, where their elites used a foreign writing and culture as instruments to keep their power: Their native language and culture were regarded as inferior to imported ones in their own homeland, as if the whole population were living in some diaspora.

King Sejong's invention of the Korean alphabet was a revolutionary break from the unnatural and disadvantageous dominance of Chinese characters. The king regarded it as denial of basic human rights for all Koreans not to be able to express themselves freely and fully in official transactions and in private communications. This paper examines the first monumental and bold project to field-test the new writing system as well as prove its power, goodness, and beauty, *Yongbiŏch'ŏn ka* (Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven), an epic poem, eulogizing his ancestors and founders of the new Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910), which is one of the longest lasting dynasties in human history. This work is an ultimate example of Confucian art form, where literature, music, dance, historiography, philosophy, and education converge. At the same time it is one where the Korean consciousness prevails in all its dignity and beauty. The king hoped the powerful court officials, who were the main audience of the work, would be persuaded and support his historical, humanistic, and humane enterprise.

Sookja Cho
Arizona State University
Sookja.Cho@asu.edu

Rhapsody for Humanity: Expanding Self and Space in the Borderlands of Seventeenth-Century Korean War Narratives

This paper explores seventeenth-century war narratives to complicate our discussion of the relation between war and humanity—precisely, between social reality and the literary landscape—and its role in the evolution of Korean literature. In the seventeenth century, Korea was engulfed by political turmoil and consecutive wars (the Japanese and Manchurian invasions). The ensuing increased mobility across social classes, regions, and ethnic groups placed individual Koreans within an extended geography and at the intersection of various socio-cultural identities. By investigating stories of displaced Koreans, particularly their diverse encounters with foreigners as refugees, wanderers, and captives, this study sheds light both on Koreans' enhanced awareness of marginality within this extended geography and on their painstaking efforts to reconfigure the relation between the self and others, and between native and foreign places. In the realm of literature, this shift, I argue, ignited a narrowed or neutralized sense of physical and ethnic differences between Koreans and non-Koreans, and built inter-communicative, conceptual, and emotional borderlands based on shared humane, ethical values. This broadened awareness of the self and others in seventeenth-century war narratives, combined with the intellectual quest to know more about the outer world and the utopian desire to build a better society, engendered a new literary and cultural epoch that further enhanced Koreans' mimetic drive and intellectual curiosity, inspiring literary evolution.

Writing Women in Pre-modern Korea

Michael J. Pettid

Binghamton University

Abstract

The question of literacy and women in the Chosŏn period is one that is obfuscated by not only the traditions of that time, but also by many preconceived assumptions about what life for women was actually like during that time period. By traditions, I specifically want to indicate the practice of not signing works by many writers. This has created a situation where some works are simply thought to be written by males without any real proof that this is in fact the truth. By assumptions about Chosŏn women, I want to stress that the history of Chosŏn was largely written by males in the twentieth century, and many of the 'facts' that they created are just that: creations that match either their own biases concerning the period or a plain oversight of what was during that time.

This brief talk will focus on some aspects of writing and women in Chosŏn. Of course we cannot speak of women as being singular any more than we can write of culture in Chosŏn being of any constant thread. Rather, it is diversity of experience, place, time and socio-economic backdrop in which this discussion must be painted. In that light, I will examine a few cases where we can see that women contributed greatly to the literary and cultural environment of Chosŏn.

**Writing between Worlds:
Choi In-hun and Alternative Globalities in Korean Literature**

We Jung Yi (wuy3@psu.edu)

This paper aims to uncover the alternative globalities envisioned by Korean author Choi In-hun (b. 1936) in his groundbreaking novels of the 1960s–1970s. Firmly ensconced in the canon of South Korea’s “division literature,” Choi’s texts have long been considered an aesthetic critique of the political and social stalemate on the divided peninsula. Within the existing scholarship on Korean national literature, however, what is often neglected is Choi’s imagination of liminality, which traverses prescribed boundaries in terms of time and space. From *The Square (Gwangjang)*, the iconic novel of the 1960 April Revolution, to *The Tempest (Taepung)*, a postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare’s canon, being in a liminal space like Panmunjom or an uninhabited island serves for Choi’s protagonists as a moment when rebirth in a new world can be imagined. Choi’s spatial expansion beyond geographical and geopolitical confinements is further entwined with his attempt, through a methodology that he calls the “archaeology of consciousness,” to excavate other temporalities of modernity that are buried under national historiography. The result of such border-crossing movements is a new form of subjectivity: the world citizen (*segyein*) as a basis for transnational solidarity. Through the alternative globalities I detect in the works of Choi In-hun, I thus propose to refigure Korean literature as a vibrant site of trans-national invention, contestation, and negotiation.

The Return of the Real in Contemporary South Korean Fiction

Christopher P. Hanscom, UCLA

Abstract

This presentation will discuss the “return of the real” in contemporary South Korean fiction, focusing particularly on the representation of migrant labor in the globalizing city. Considering the rise and fall (and rise) of realism as a significant mode in Korean literary history, the paper aims to consider the roles of class, ethnicity, and culture in new fiction set in an increasingly multicultural Korean context.

The Spiritual Exile and (Post) Diasporic Identities of Korean American and Korean Writers: Don Lee and Han Kang

Kim Seong-Kon

Abstract

The term “diaspora” traditionally refers to the state of exile of dispersed Jewish peoples, but it is used in a broader sense today. For example, diaspora includes in its definition the spiritual exile of uprooted, displaced people in a colonial or postcolonial situation searching for a cultural identity in an environment where their indigenous cultures are invariably marginalized and suppressed.

Don Lee is radically different from other Korean American writers in the sense that his immediate concern is not so much immigrant narratives dealing with the issues of assimilation and acculturation as it is the agonies of Asian Americans who have been already acculturated, but encounter problems nonetheless, while living in American society as minorities, such as irreducible gaps and inevitable tensions which are often unnoticed by white Americans. Lee focuses on the lives of Asian Americans who perceive themselves as American rather than Asian, and who do not necessarily carry the complex weight of diaspora or of coming to the United States from another country.

Nevertheless, Don Lee’s protagonists are invariably uprooted and nomadic, drifting from one place to another, unable to settle down in American society where they often encounter subtle, inconspicuous racial prejudice. At the same time, Don Lee also criticizes Asian Americans who feel they are constantly victimized by racial discrimination in American society. Lee suggests that Asian Americans may have been victims not so much of racism as of their obsession with it. In that sense, Lee’s protagonists have more of a post-diasporic experience. Don Lee’s first collection of stories *Yellow* is a good example of this.

Han Kang, who won the Man-Booker International Prize in 2016, is based in Korea, her homeland. Yet in her prize-winning novel, *The Vegetarian*, Han presents a woman who is frustrated and alienated in a colonial and diasporic situation; she abstains from meat but finds herself surrounded by self-righteous, violent and carnivorous people who try to force her to eat meat. The protagonist is a spiritual exile who is uprooted and displaced in a colonial situation and who searches for a cultural identity in a hostile environment where her identity is hopelessly marginalized and suppressed. In that sense, Han’s protagonist, too, experiences a diasporic identity crisis.

디아스포라의 미래

(The Future of the Korean Diaspora)

문정희 (Moon Chung-hee)

시인은 영원한 디아스포라이다.

나는 젊은 날, 정치적으로 혼란한 한국을 떠나 한동안 뉴욕에 살며 고통과 외로움 속에

시를 썼다. 나중에 한국의 평론은 그 시편들을 “디아스포라의 시”라 했다.

그 중에 <타국에서(In Another country)>, <고독(Aloneness)>, <나의 집은 어디에(Where Is My Home?)>를 소개한다.

글로벌 시대의 디아스포라는 단순히 뿌리 뽑힌 존재, 추방된 존재가 아니다.

낯선 세계와 타인을 이해하고 적응하며 고통을 나눌 줄 아는

가장 인간적인 열린 존재이다.

The poet is an eternal diaspora.

As a young woman, I left the political chaos of South Korea and settled in New York for a time, composing poetry in my suffering and loneliness. Korean critics later called my poems from that period ‘diaspora poetry.’

Of these poems, I will be introducing ‘In Another Country,’ ‘Aloneness,’ and ‘Where Is My Home?’.

In today’s globalized world, diaspora are no longer simply those who have been uprooted, or those who have been exiled.

Diaspora are the most human, open beings—those who are able to understand unfamiliar worlds and people, come to terms with them, and share their pain.