

## “Multi-textuality of *Ch’unhyangjŏn* and Cultural Empowerment of the “*Ŏnmun*-public”

Choe Key-sook

(Yonsei University)

The Korean society recently experienced the cultural empowerment of public intelligence and collective emotion through a candlelight rally at the Kwanghwamun Square, as they have demonstrated their communicative and negotiating capacity with the government, powerbrokers, and the nation. This powerful show of public intelligence is not a phenomenon of the 21st century alone, but stems from a democratic manifestation originating in Korea’s traditional culture of public potentialities. This paper focuses on the cultural productivity and cultural empowerment of the “*ŏnmun*-public” (the vernacular, unrefined masses) by investigating the narrative structure of *Ch’unhyangjŏn*. It will look into how the public collected, enforced, and enjoyed cultural competence while realizing cultural integration, and also how they repositioned the genre of fiction, a nonmainstream and sub-culture genre at that time, to a publicly integrated and magnanimous genre.

This paper aims to illustrate the cultural empowerment of the *ŏnmun*-public during the Chosŏn period (1392-1910) through an analysis of the multi-textuality of *Ch’unhyangjŏn*, a representative Korean classical text. *Hanmun*, Chinese characters, was the script of *yangban* (noble class) male literati and comprised the formal letters of the Chosŏn period, while *ŏnmun*, the Korean vernacular, constituted informal letters used by women, ordinary people, and the lower class. A representative genre written in *ŏnmun* called *iyagi ch’aek* (storybook) is currently referred to as *gososŏl* (old novel) in contemporary Korea. Ironically, male literati who claimed vernacular fiction ought not to be read, by virtue of their detailed criticisms inadvertently confessed to reading it themselves. The implied readership, then, includes not only women and commoners, but also the male *yangban* class. This suggests that old novels reflected the knowledge, emotions, and views of the world of the *ŏnmun*-public and, implicitly, also those of the *yangban* class, literati, and men. This supports the idea put forward by Bakhtin that fiction is a polyphonic genre. *Ch’unhyangjŏn*, a *p’ansorigye sosŏl* (*p’ansori* is a traditional Korean performance by a single artist accompanied by a drummer, in which a story is told through songs and narrations; *sosŏl* means fiction; *gye* means genealogy, and thus, *p’ansorigye sosŏl* indicates the novelization of a *p’ansori*) achieves multi-textuality and maximizes pleasantness,

informatively, and cultural refinement.

The multi-textuality of *Ch'unhyangjŏn* can be explained on the following five levels.

First, the structure of the text contains several genres of historical literature: poems written in *hanmun*, poems for passing the state examination, letters of appeal, policy writings, written prayers, funeral orations, epitaphs, records on demeanor, letters, last wills, *sijo* (a traditional Korean three-verse poem), *chapgga* (popular songs of the Chosŏn period), *sosŏl ch'aek* (old fiction), historical anecdotes, scriptures, *sŏdang* (Chosŏn village schools) textbooks, lessons for woman, cultured knowledge and information, proverbs, information on the customs of folk beliefs, popular expressions, rumors, and legends.

Second, in terms of locality, *Ch'unhyangjŏn* contains much literary, historical, and cultural information about Chosŏn as the home region and China as the broader world. Third, from the perspective of status and gender, the story represents multi-layered daily lives, including the culture and knowledge of the upper class, and the experiential knowledge, living culture, and emotions of the lower class, spanning genders and generations. Fourth, in terms of information, when the public read *Ch'unhyangjŏn*, they understood the encyclopedic natural history therein and enjoyed it as they would an informative magazine. The public could learn about the upper classes' culture and knowledge from the text, and *yangban* could empathize with the public sentiment and emotions. Fifth, although the script itself is solely composed of *ŏnmun*, the story extensively references *hanmun* texts familiar to the elite literati. By using *ŏnmun* exclusively, *Ch'unhyangjŏn* demonstrates the public's cultural capacity.

In sum, the multi-textuality of *Ch'unhyangjŏn* testifies the cultural empowerment of its contemporary *ŏnmun*-public. Inside the text, status, gender, society, and the world exist harmoniously rather than hierarchically, and although they may at times struggle and clash with one another, they experience a process of empathy and communicate humorously. The text of *Ch'unhyangjŏn* juxtaposes every poem and cited sentence originally written in *hanmun* with dialogue and descriptions in *ŏnmun*. In this process, the audience and readers of *Ch'unhyangjŏn* un/intentionally and un/consciously make reversals, repositioning as equals classic and contemporaneous, Chosŏn and China, upper class and lower class. As a result, the audience or reader can experiment with interactive communication between every pair. This strategic script system attests to the enjoyment and empowerment of the *ŏnmun*-public by locating fiction written in *ŏnmun* within both the literature of the secular culture (popular culture) and the literature of the male literati, the classical canon.

Bio:

Choe Key-Sook is Associate Professor in the Institute of Korean Studies at Yonsei University, South Korea. She holds a Ph.D in Korean Literature from Yonsei University. Her main research field is Korean classical narrative, Korean printed books during early modern period, gender studies, and affective studies. Her recent publications include, “The meeting of *Ch’anggŭk* and Greek Tragedy: Transcultural and Transhistorical Practice of Korean *P’ansori-ch’anggŭk* and the Case of Media,” *Korea Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2016; “Chisok kanŭngha ‘kamsŏng-sŏngch’al’ chawŏn kuch’uk ūl wihan han’guk ‘kojŏn/chŏnt’ong’ chawŏn ūi chaemaengrakhwa” [Re-contextualization of the Korean ‘Tradition Classical Literature’ for ‘Re-building Sustainable Affective/Reflective’ Resource], *Tongbanghakji* 175, 2016; and “Kyemong ūi imyŏn, musiwa hyomo ūi kamsŏng chŏngch’i” [The Hidden Side of Enlightenment, Affective Politics of Ignorance, and Aversion], *Han’guk kojŏn yŏsŏng munhak yŏn’gu* 31, 2015.