

Book Reviews

The Tale of Cho Ung: A Classic of Vengeance, Loyalty, and Romance. Translated by Sookja Cho. Columbia University Press, 2018. 240pp. (ISBN: 9780231186117) doi: 10.18399/acta.2020.23.1.008

Although *kundam sosŏl* (martial tales) was one of the most popular narrative genres of Chosŏn Korea, relatively few works have been translated. Sookja Cho's artful translation of *Cho Ung chŏn* (The Tale of Cho Ung) is a welcome addition to the field of Korean studies. The volume conveys the adventures, rivalries, and emotions of the source text in a way that is very accessible to those not familiar with Korean culture and literature.

In accordance with the structure of the source material, the work is divided into three sections. "Book 1" starts with the story surrounding the birth and early years of the protagonist, Cho Ung. During the reign of Emperor Mun of the Song Dynasty, Cho Ung's father (Cho Chŏngin) is a loyal minister falsely accused of treason by the evil subject, Yi Tubyŏng. Cho Chŏngin suffers great indignity and commits suicide, leaving behind his bereaved and pregnant wife, Lady Wang. Eventually, Lady Wang gives birth to a boy, Cho Ung, who soon shows himself to be extraordinarily gifted and mature beyond his years. Upon the demise of the emperor, Yi Tubyŏng and his sons try to usurp royal power by forcing the crown prince into exile. They also try to kill Cho Ung. The frightened Lady Wang and the eight-year-old Cho Ung flee their home. On their journey they are provided lodging and assistance by Master Wŏlgyŏng, who also trains Cho Ung. At the age of fifteen Cho Ung decides to depart on a journey to further hone his military skills and knowledge. Through encounters with Master Ch'ŏlgwan, Daoist Master Mount Hwa, and the ghost of the deceased General Hwang, Cho Ung is transformed into a wise and skillful warrior equipped with a magical sword, a horse, armor, and a helmet. While returning home to his mother, Cho Ung falls in love with by a noble maiden of the Chang family. After a midnight rendezvous, Cho Ung gives her a betrothal gift and then bids her farewell.

"Book 2" continues Cho Ung's adventure with a more profound account of his

conflict with other rulers. After the decline of imperial power, the state of Wi is at war with Söbön. Cho Ung helps the king of Wi to subdue Sobön's power. He foils the ruler of Sobön's repeated attempts to capture him. Cho Ung and the state of Wi then combine their efforts to rescue the crown prince from his execution at the hands of Yi Tubyöng. In the meantime, Maiden Chang is forced to marry the Kangho prefect, a widower attracted to her beauty. On Maiden Chang's betrothal day her deceased father appears in her dream and helps her escape. Coincidentally she ends up at the monastery where Master Wölgwan and Lady Wang reside.

"Book 3" highlights Cho Ung's performance as a loyal warrior. After reuniting with Maiden Chang and his mother, Cho Ung leaves to rescue the crown prince. Through magical powers and his excellence in martial arts, he successfully escorts the crown prince back to the capital. The plot reaches its climax in the scenes where Cho Ung and his right-hand man, Kang Paek, battle with Yi Tubyöng's warriors, Iltae, Idea, and Samdae. With the deaths of Yi Tubyöng and his retainers, Cho Ung revenges his father and helps restore the political order of the Song dynasty.

This happy ending reveals the Confucian worldview that accentuates the values of loyalty required to be a true hero. Yet, the tale also contains unusual qualities and elements that deserve our attention. First of all, the tale seems to emphasize the hereditary nature of characters' central motives: anger or desire for revenge is passed from father to son, most clearly in the case of Cho Chöngin and Cho Ung, but also in the case of Yi Tubyöng and his sons. The Song Emperor's favor to Cho Chöngin continues as a result of the crown prince entrusting himself to Cho Ung. Because of this pattern, Cho Ung's revenge for his father is justified and reinforced since his opponent is identified with the state's enemy, Yi Tubyöng.

The theme of revenge becomes a powerful tool for creating conflict among the characters, while rich emotions function to dramatize conflict. Specifically, warfare in the story often fails to heighten the tension, as Cho Ung's overwhelming physical prowess and superiority are unquestioned, and thus the outcome of each of his battles is decided in advance. Cho Ung's vulnerability is revealed, however, through his repeated separation from his beloved. The weeping of Lady Wang and Cho Ung features prominently throughout the text. In addition, Maiden Chang and Cho Ung's concubine, Kümnyön, are also agonized by their separation from their mothers. Although the story focuses on the development of a hero reflecting the androcentric and patriarchal dominance of society, maternal bonds are nevertheless important; the father character is rather weak, lost, or substituted by other male characters such as priests and masters. The plot seemingly concentrates on the state order restored and reclaimed by a hero, but maternal love and filial emotion are both powerful elements concerning theme and

characterization.

Overall, this translation vividly conveys the fascinating story without sacrificing detail. It also offers an informative introduction to the story's origin, genre, and theme in a way that illuminates the cultural context. However, the introduction presents some claims which raise some questions and speculation. Firstly, regarding the authorship of the story, the translator contends that the author might have adjusted the tale to meet the expectations of a non-literati audience, particularly as Chinese allusions and the Sino-Korean text (xvii) attest to the author's high literacy and profound scholarship. This assertion is inclined to show how high literature affects and shapes popular literature. Yet, the statement invites the question of whether it would be possible to reverse the approach so as to see how vernacular versions of the text have been transformed to appeal to elite readers, for example, through insertion of the in-text translation and Chinese references.

Secondly, the discussion of the various editions helps to verify and understand the popularity of this tale in the Chosŏn society. However, it does not clarify why such a once-popular story subsequently lost its appeal and failed to gain readership at the turn of the twentieth century, when other stories of heroism became popular among modern readers. The translator indicates that this may have been due to a rise in the number of female readers, as they presumably had less interest in military discourse (xvii). But no justification is offered for present-day readers as to why the tale is still worthy of being told and translated.

Thirdly, the introduction deals with the question of why Chinese spatial settings are frequently employed throughout the story. It explains that such settings and landscapes, often fictive and imaginary, allow the author to build and project his or her own imaginations (xx). I believe that this explanation proves sufficient, however, it should be more nuanced and subtle. Chosŏn views of China changed over time, but I assume that the Chinese setting in the tale do not exactly represent "China" in the modern sense. The use of "Chinese" in the place of "Sino-" (*Chunghwa*) seems to prevent readers from understanding the extended worldview that Chosŏn writers and readers might have held.

In addition, the translator suggests that the frequent use of poems is an example of the influence of the practice of oral storytelling. I suggest that the story should be examined in relation to *chuanqi* (傳奇), characterized by the recurring poems that permeate the text, especially when describing courtship. Defining the intertextual relationship between *chuanqi* and vernacular stories might broaden the understanding of Chosŏn fictional genres.

Despite these questions, this book provides a rewarding experience for scholars

and readers interested in the Korean literary tradition. It would also be excellent material for classes on Korean literature. Although the rivalry between good and evil characters in the story appears to be simple and repetitive, the way in which the story shows how the morality of filial piety and loyalty become instruments of power to forge alliances and shape societies is interesting. Additionally, the way in which divinity and human will are entangled together in Cho Ung's life provides the reader with an engaging reading experience. The volume also uncovers the cultural values and practices of that time and conveys a resonating message for those interested in looking at the complex relationship between fate (*karma*) and the power of free will.

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Inside North Korea's Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-Thaek. By Ra Jong-yil. Translated by Jinna Park. New York: SUNY Press, 2019, 200 pp. (ISBN: 9781438473727)
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There is a saying in North Korea that the leader is like the sun: too close and you burn, too far and you freeze. *Inside North Korea's Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-Thaek* captures that delicate balance which Jang Song-Thaek (Chang Söngt'aek) struggled to maintain from the moment he met Kim Kyong-Hui (Kim Kyöngghüi)—the daughter of Kim Il Sung (Kim Ilsöng) and sister of Kim Jong Il (Kim Chöngil)—the woman he would later marry. However hard you may try to maintain this balance, the Kim family will dispose of you as soon as they see the need. Those who doubt this can look at how the North Korean government makes use of NGOs and aid agencies, or even friendly foreign travelers, and then ousts them on a whim. Such expulsions, or executions in this case, tell us more about the Kim family and the political structure of North Korea than about those it exterminates. Thus, the great value of this book – and perhaps the story of Jang Song-Thaek's life – is that it demonstrates how easily the power of the Kim family can turn against those who are close to it.

Over eight chapters author Ra Jong-yil (Ra Chongil), through the translation of Jinna Park, takes us on a chronological journey through the life of Jang, including his early education at Kim Il-Sung University and the Wonsan University of Economics. Chapter three describes the early one-sided relationship between Jang and Kim Kyung-