

SEOPYEONJE
THE
SOUTHERNERS'
SONGS

YI CHUNG-JUN

Translated by Ok Young Kim Chang

With a foreword by Michael J. Pettid



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FOREWORD

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KOREA HAS AN old and deep literary tradition, with written works perhaps dating back some 1,800 years or more. As with any ancient literature, the earliest works are not easily dated or even identified with a particular writer. While the passage of time has thus made it difficult to clarify an absolute beginning, we know that writing and works of literature became an important focus of the upper levels of society from a very early point in Korean history – in particular, writing systems were adopted from Chinese states no later than the late Three Kingdoms period (c. the fifth century CE) and most likely much earlier. The transmission of ideological systems such as Buddhism and Confucianism from China in the fourth century CE certainly hastened this process. In fact, the quest for knowledge became an important component in expanding literary activities in Korea. By the late eighth century a government-service examination based on knowledge of Confucianism was implemented in the Silla Kingdom (57BCE–935CE), and, with few pauses, such examinations remained the means for selecting government officials until the late nineteenth century. This system that stressed education fostered the growth of literature and helped place it at the pinnacle of pre-modern Korean societies.

An interesting aspect of Korean literature is that while Koreans certainly speak a language that is distinct from their Chinese neighbours, for centuries Koreans used Chinese as their written language. Such a situation was certainly not

unique in Asia, as the peoples of Japan and Vietnam followed a similar pattern. Even after the Korean script, known as hangeul, was created in the early fifteenth century, literary forms written in Chinese characters were given a higher status than those written in the vernacular script. Thus we have a situation where the great bulk of pre-modern written literature was written in a language other than that spoken by the Korean people. This naturally created a hierarchy not only of literary forms – where those written in Chinese characters were given more value – but created a division of readership between those who could read the Chinese texts and those who could not.

Adding to the preference given to texts written in Chinese was the hegemonic position given to Confucianism and the Confucian canon in Korea. Confucianism was crucial to the administration of Korean states – especially from the fifteenth century onwards – and the focus on examination systems based on this ideology had great effect on literature, if for no other reason than that the educated elite had spent their lives studying Confucian texts. Consequently, pre-modern literature in Korea was heavily influenced by Confucian thought and orthodoxy, often to the exclusion of forms that did not follow the strict accords of Confucian morality. This backdrop led to poetic forms – especially those in Chinese characters – being given much higher status than fictional forms of prose.

Elites naturally favoured forms that reflected the world in which they lived. They favoured poetic styles that were similar to those of China, as were the various forms of prose they used. On the other hand, those not educated in Chinese had no choice but to use different means to share literature. Before the creation of hangeul these were exclusively oral forms. The art of performing literature as a means of transmission became finely tuned as a result, and many folk songs, poem-songs and

shaman's songs were passed from generation to generation for centuries before being written down.

It is certainly possible to view these all as these various forms of literature as being distinct, and, indeed, they can stand alone and be examined or appreciated for their various qualities and for their beauty. Yet the complexity and the depth of Korean literature is best appreciated when we look at the amalgamation of these various styles, forms and genres in the singular style of pansori, a type of one-person dramatic storytelling.

How can we best locate pansori in pre-modern Korean literature? To begin, we need to understand how literature was viewed in pre-modern Korea, particularly in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). For the upper-class elites of Joseon, literature was not so much an entertainment as a moral exercise in which a man could, through the composition of poetry, demonstrate his understanding of Confucian morality and self-reflection. The creation of literature was seen as an exercise that helped one reach a higher plateau of ethical purity. Consider this brief poem by Yun Seon-do (1587–1671) who is counted among the best poets of the Joseon era. Entitled 'Ou-ga' ('The Song of the Five Friends'), the first verse reads:

How many friends have I? There are water, stone,
pine and bamboo.

As the moon rises over the eastern mountain,
I am all the more delighted.

Ah, with these five friends, what need do I have of more?

The sentiments of the poem are both simple and profound and reflect the quest by elites in this period to take in the beauty of nature while reflecting on improving oneself. Isolation

from the mundane matters of the world was the norm in these poems as was viewing nature as a type of perfected morality. But this is a decidedly rarefied poem and world view, the work of a writer far removed from everyday matters such as farming and the daily hardships of life. A poem such as this one could only have been created by someone who had transcended such mundane matters as earning a living or toiling in fields.

However, Joseon, like perhaps all societies, had different social codes depending upon time and place. Thus the Confucianist who sought to improve himself in one poem might have also found time to share poems and wine with others. Furthermore, prose works offered a place to tell stories and had a definite entertainment element lacking in many poems. So, even among those of the highest class, literature was multifaceted and did not adhere only to the strict ideals of Confucianism.

Making the picture even more unclear was the wave of literature that followed the creation of the Korean script *hangeul*, in the early fifteenth century. While this writing system was primarily created as a means to educate the masses in Confucian ideology, it soon took on a life of its own, as the easily mastered phonetic writing system was ideal for those of lower status – commoners, and the low-born, along with women who were not often trained in Chinese characters – to write their own stories. The common classes and women had always had oral literature, but now they had a means to write down their stories, songs and poems. This was nothing short of a revolution in Korean literature, and an explosion of literary creations ensued from the sixteenth century onwards.

While poetry continued to be upheld as the highest form of literature by those of the upper ranks of society, in the second half of Joseon we see the blossoming of other forms. New and

longer poetic styles came into vogue that allowed the greater development of themes and the experiences of the writers. These forms also matched with performed literature such as the folk songs that had long been popular among the common folk as work songs and as a means to pass on colourful tales. The expansion of the group creating literature to include those from nearly all social strata permitted an even greater range of voices, life experiences and emotions to be expressed in literary form. It was no longer just the domain of the elite but had now shifted to the masses.

Works of fiction also blossomed in the time after the creation of *hangeul*. Fiction was in general held in disdain by the ruling classes, even to the point of periodically attempting to restrict the creation of such works. None the less, forms such as the novel proved to be highly popular among many groups of people and perhaps most among women. Novels provided an expanded space to tell stories and fully develop characters and their lives. Various genres, including heroic novels, romances and allegorical works became prominent from the seventeenth century onwards and enjoyed large readerships. The fictional spaces served many functions in society such as creating alternative realities where those of lower social groups could experience better lives for themselves. The novel as a tool for social criticism is clearly seen in the works of this time, and no doubt was a key factor in its popularity.

From this milieu arose *pansori*. While storytelling and travelling entertainers had long been a feature of Korean culture, the advent of this genre is relatively recent when one considers it in the context of Korean literature. The first records of *pansori* are in the seventeenth century, but the oral tradition from which it arose dates to the earliest Korean societies. The penchant of Koreans for song and dance is recorded

in some of the earliest historical records about the people of the Korean peninsula, and such a love continues to the present day. Pansori is the maturation of such a cultural trait, and these songs harvest content from both long-standing folk traditions, including masked-dance dramas, shaman songs and folk tales, together with written literary forms such as the novel to create compelling narratives that are able to grasp the attention of audiences and tap into a wealth of deep-seated emotions. While the basic narratives are well known to nearly all Koreans, it is the performance aspect of the songs that keeps audiences returning. The successful pansori singer is one who can convey the emotions and energy of a song and impart this to his or her audience. Much like the acclaimed opera singers of Western tradition, the singers of pansori became famous through their ability to draw audiences with their storytelling talents.

Initially it was the strong bond with everyday life that made pansori so popular among the lower-born groups that first followed these songs. The elements of the songs were borrowed liberally from folk tales and legends, which were the literary creations of the masses. Hence audiences saw their own lives reflected in the songs and felt strong bonds with the hardships and triumphs of the protagonists. Moreover, like many oral genres, the songs were at times highly critical of the upper levels of society, so this social criticism was also reflective of the minds of the people who frequented these performances. The singers of the songs were also of the people. Entertainers were considered a low-born class in Joseon, so the hardships of which they sung reflected their own lives as well as that of their audience.

The performers of pansori were part of a group of entertainers known as *gwangdae*. In general, singing or entertainment was their only livelihood, and they learned their craft from

their families, as this was mostly a hereditary occupation. The successful singer was one who could quickly read his or her audience and change the performance to match a particular crowd. We could expect that in a marketplace performance mostly watched by commoners the critique of the ruling class would have been more prominent than in a performance held at the home of a wealthy person. Such interaction determined a successful singer.

Simplicity was the rule for pansori. To perform, a singer needed just the accompaniment of a drummer. The stage could be anywhere, and no props were required. In performance, pansori singers use a mixture of spoken and sung passages together with asides to the drummer and the audience. The drummer, in addition to beating out rhythm on a barrel-drum, shouts encouragement to the singer during the performance. Singers also use gesture and movement to increase the entertainment value of their story. This mixture of spoken and sung passages, together with dramatic gestures and audience interaction, creates a performance with a varied pace and allows the singer respite from the difficulties of singing for prolonged periods of time.

The number of pansori performed was never great: it seems that there were twelve songs performed by the nineteenth century, but this number diminished to just five by the beginning of the twentieth century. Within the narrative of the present volume four are mentioned: *The Song of Sim Cheong*, *The Song of Chunhyang*, *The Song of the Water Palace* and *The Song of Hongbo and Nolbu*. A short description of these songs might give a better understanding of the contents and the social functions that led these to be popular.

The Song of Chunhyang remains a favourite narrative for Koreans even today. The song has been made into films

numerous times and still draws good audiences when shown on television. The narrative is a rather typical story of good versus evil, a mismatched love affair and perseverance in the face of adversity. The main characters of this narrative are Chunhyang, the daughter of a female entertainer (a low-born character), and Yi Mong-ryong, the son of the Magistrate of Namwon (a member of the elite). The two meet, fall in love and are separated when Yi's family returns to the capital. A new magistrate is appointed to the city of Namwon who desires the beautiful Chunhyang, but she spurns his advances. Consequently, she is imprisoned, flogged and approaches death in her steadfast refusal of the magistrate's sexual advances. In the end she is rescued by Mong-ryong, who, after passing the government-service examination, is appointed as a secret royal inspector and returns to Namwon where he arrests the evil magistrate. Chunhyang is then reunited with her love, and they live happily together to a ripe old age.

What sort of message did this song hold for audiences in Joseon Korea? First, we can see the desire for freedom of choice in marriage. Joseon was not an egalitarian society, and marriage practices reflected this division of classes. The love affair described was certainly not permissible, especially from the standpoint of the elite. Second, we can note that there is a distinct discontent with the corruption and abuse of power by some government officials. The likes of Chunhyang would have had no means of opposing such a person. One could only hope that an honourable official would ride into town and save the day, although this would have been an unlikely event. Third, there is the issue of Chunhyang's fidelity, which would have been very important to the highest-status groups of Joseon, as Confucian dictates the importance of female chastity. Thus there is a blend of ideals in this song that would

have touched the audience on many levels. The commoners in the audience would have shared the pain of Chunhyang in not realizing her love and also the inappropriate actions of the new magistrate. Upper-status people would have enjoyed the steadfast heart of Chunhyang in not yielding to the magistrate – and perhaps they, too, would have longed for freedom of choice in matters of the heart. Perhaps all listeners would have felt sympathy for the pain of the young woman suffering in her lover's absence.

The Song of Sim Cheong has a similar blend of upper- and lower-class values. The narrative tells of a blind and poor widower who struggles to raise his daughter Sim Cheong. She grows up to be a beautiful and devoted daughter, and when her father foolishly pledges three hundred sacks of rice to the Buddha to regain his eyesight she secretly sells herself for the same price to a group of sailors who wish to buy a young maiden to sacrifice at sea. After her sacrifice Sim Cheong is rescued by the jade Emperor and eventually brought to the Emperor of China as a present. She ultimately becomes his empress and is reunited with her father who regains his eyesight at hearing the sound of her voice.

This song promotes a strong Confucian morality theme of devotion to one's parents. Sim Cheong embodies these ideals of filial piety, even going to the extent of sacrificing her life for that of her father. In Joseon, however, women did not enjoy the same rights as men and were greatly devalued by society. But audience members would have heard of a most capable woman, one who actually came back from the dead. This would have been greatly moving for the women in the audience, who no doubt suffered from the general repression of females at that time. The narrative also criticizes corrupt monks and features a common element in pre-modern Korean literature, the

notion of supernatural intervention on behalf of the righteous. This, too, would have struck a chord with many in the audience who had their own hardships to endure and overcome. And, certainly, the happy ending of the story would have pleased the audience and aroused a desire in them for a similar outcome in their own lives, despite the overwhelming odds against attaining this.

The Song of the Water Palace stands alone among the existing pansori repertory in that it uses animals as its protagonists and personifies various human shortcomings in these creatures. The story begins with a description of the Dragon King of the sea, who becomes ill as a result of his libertine lifestyle. The royal doctor informs him that the only way he will survive is to eat the liver of a rabbit. The king calls together his court and asks of his many ministers which one of them will go to the terrestrial world and bring back a rabbit. Only one steps forward, a terrapin. The terrapin finds a rabbit and tricks him with promises of a high position, wealth and beautiful women to come to the underwater palace, but once there the rabbit understands that he has been lied to. Quick-witted, he concocts a story that he has left his liver onshore and that if he is allowed to return he will retrieve it and bring it to the Dragon King. However, once on land the rabbit flees, leaving behind the tricked terrapin.

This story has a long and far-flung history, having been transmitted to Korea from India via China. Originally, this was a Buddhist allegory that featured a monkey and crocodile, but these characters changed to meet local circumstances as the narrative moved eastwards. While this tale was originally a religious one, the pansori rendition is very much secular. This depiction of the dissolute lifestyle of the Dragon King and his self-serving ministers reveals the common people's perception

of the royal court and ministers of Joseon. The rabbit, representing the governed classes, seeks to escape his difficult and dangerous life and is thus easily deceived by the promises of the terrapin. In the end, however, the rabbit outwits his captors and returns to his life on the land. Such a conclusion seems to indicate popular sentiments about the governing class.

The Song of Hongbo and Nolbu features two brothers, the elder Nolbu and younger Hongbo. After the death of their parents, Nolbu takes all their property and drives off his younger sibling. Hongbo, honest and kind-hearted, attempts to scratch out a living by some means, but his family struggles in terrible poverty. When he asks Nolbu for help, he is beaten and chased away. However, the kindly Hongbo stumbles upon an injured swallow. He mends its leg, and in the following year he is rewarded by the bird with a gourd seed that sprouts into a vine bearing riches of every sort. The Heavens have been kind to Hongbo, and he becomes a very wealthy man. Nolbu hears of this and intentionally injures a swallow in order to help it recover in the hope of becoming even wealthier. His reward is also a gourd seed, but from this spring forth evil creatures that ruin his home. Hongbo, hearing of this misfortune, shares half his wealth with his now repentant elder brother.

We can note common folk-tale storylines here such as the reward of good and punishment of evil by supernatural powers, repayment of good by animals, the harsh lives of farming families and the need for good relations among siblings. All of these would have resonated clearly with audiences, as they, too, would have undoubtedly been involved in situations in which they needed help. Certainly, the desire for a life of wealth was one that many in the audience would have found appealing, and this no doubt helped keep this song a popular one in the pansori repertoire. The hardships and suffering of

Hongbo were universal themes that common folk would have related to closely, and we can imagine their elation when the kind-hearted Hongbo is rewarded.

As the nineteenth century progressed, pansori became increasingly focused on the upper classes of Joseon, and singers could become quite wealthy as a result of the patronage of these aficionados. Thus critical elements and the view of commoners became less prominent and were replaced by allusions to classical literature and other interests of elite society. Furthermore, the singing styles of pansori separated into two main schools: the Eastern School (Dongpyeonje) and the Western School (Seopyeonje). The main difference between these two was emphasis on tradition versus ongoing efforts to refine and polish singing styles. The Western School sought to improve singing styles, and the singers of this school worked towards improving their techniques and the aesthetics of their songs. The result of this was growth and increased depth in singing styles and refinement of the beauty of pansori performances.

As with all things in Korea, pansori experienced great turmoil and change at the start of the twentieth century. The fall of the Joseon dynasty and the advent of the colonial period under Japan resulted in tremendous changes in nearly every aspect of society. New literary and musical styles entered Korea, and these were soon to have an adverse effect on the popularity of pansori. Many of the new singing styles reflected trends from the West, and these became widely popular. Against this backdrop pansori singers and their performances fell on hard times. This difficult situation continued throughout most of the twentieth century and is well reflected in the hard and itinerant life of the singer in this novel. From the apex of high culture in the late nineteenth century, by the second

half of the twentieth century pansori had deteriorated to the status of a dusty remnant of a long-gone time that few Koreans cared to revisit.

By the mid-to-late 1980s some very important changes happened in South Korean society. Hand in hand with the democracy movement vigorously fought for and eventually won by college students and others was a quest for understanding 'authentic' Korean culture. The period after the Korean War (1950-53) was one of great economic growth and modernization in the South, but in the process many aspects of traditional culture were forgotten or pushed aside as backward or old-fashioned. Western classical music was popular among educated elites and jazz or rock music with others. Korean musical styles now mimicked those of the West, and traditional forms were rarely heard. However, in the pursuit of authentic culture, pansori, together with other traditional arts such as the masked-dance dramas, was rediscovered. While slow and never at the levels of the previous century, a resurgence occurred in pansori and helped usher in a new era of popularity and development of the art of storytelling.

The author of *Seopyeonje*, Yi Chung-jun, no doubt helped this revival. When the individual linked stories were collected and published as a novel in 1993 it had the effect of helping to awaken a desire among many to see this art form thrive once more and to experience a performance that was uniquely Korean. The popularity greatly increased with the release of the movie version of the novel, also entitled *Seopyeonje*, in 1993. Directed by Im Kwon Taek, the film won awards and was a box-office hit, and it brought pansori singing to a new and appreciative audience. This was an important milestone in the rebirth of the art form, and it has remained in the public eye ever since that time.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The present translation of Yi Chung-jun's novel captures much of the flavour and emotion of the Korean text. In the descriptions of remote villages in south-western Korea we can find glimpses of a time – forty or so years ago – that has long past and seems nearly remote as Joseon Korea. The author's style is purposefully disjointed and at times overly foreboding but none the less draws the reader into the psyche of his characters and their personal tribulations. The pilgrimage of the brother to find an 'answer' or some meaning in his life resembles a Buddhist quest for enlightenment in past times, especially in that the 'answer' he finds is not at all tangible. Brief and fleeting encounters, oddly matched pairings and surreal settings are all used to push the novel to a conclusion that is at the same time satisfying and perplexing. Much like the beauty of a pansori performance, the novel moves from the commonplace to the sublime and elicits emotions of both elation and sorrow, all the while keeping readers wondering what will happen next.

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PANSORI is OFTEN described as one-person folk opera in which the singer – usually accompanied by a drummer – executes dialogue and narration as well as acting and singing. Seopyeonje, the Western School – as distinct from Dongryeonje, the Eastern School – was developed in the region west of the Seomjingan River in Jeollanamdo Province, the southernmost province of the Korean Peninsula near the cities of Boseong, Naju and Yonggwang. The performance of a complete pansori takes anything from four to eight hours, and the texts are based on well-known legends that, traditionally, were transmitted orally. Originally pansori was performed by *gwangdae*, itinerant entertainers who were believed to be blood relations of the shaman and who usually occupied the lowest stratum in traditional Korean social structure. Pansori requires a heavy, hoarse vocal timbre, which is achieved through long training.

The Korean edition contains the following author's note: 'Some sections of "The Rebirth of Words", which concludes this cycle, are taken from another collection of linked stories entitled *An Introduction to the Sociology of Language*.'

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SEOPYEONJE

IN THE TAVERN the woman poured out her songs from early evening without stopping, oblivious to the pain in her throat, while the man accompanied her on his drum. His expression communicated an impression of strain in an effort to suppress a certain premonition stirred by the woman's songs. The sweat of labour had formed in clusters on the foreheads of both performers, the singer with her endless songs and the drummer mutely accompanying her.

The tavern stood on a quiet street corner on the outskirts of the town of Boseong, Jeolla-do Province, overlooking in the distance a group of hamlets on the left and a public burial ground on a steep hill on the right, where ancient graves were packed closely right to the edge of the street. The villagers called the secluded hilly passage that meandered through the cemetery the Song Pass, and everyone knew the name of the tavern, the Song Pass Tavern, a dust-coated thatched place that crouched like a clamshell at the entrance to the cemetery. No one suggested that it should be called anything else, since wailings and pallbearers' dirges filled the street, and the tavern stood guarding its entrance. Casual observers would have passed by without giving it any further thought. There was, however, something more to this passage and this tavern. Most villagers who understood what was what knew about it. Even strangers to the village, if they happened to stop at this tavern for a night of drinking, would soon learn of its significance. This was because of the songs the proprietress sang. She was

unmarried and barely managed to keep the tavern going without the help of a man. So extraordinary was her skill in singing the songs of the southern region that anyone who listened to her was deeply moved.

The traveller must have known about the woman and her songs and not wandered into the tavern that night by chance. In fact, he had come with a clear expectation. He had spent the previous night in another town, and the innkeeper there had told him about the Song Pass. Without bothering to listen to the end of the story he left the inn and set off, following the prompting of a premonition.

When he arrived the traveller felt an atmosphere of something beyond the ordinary at the tavern: the woman's inexpressible singing, which continued from early evening into the depths of the night. Behind the legend of the tavern were this woman's artistry – a woman barely thirty – and her proud, elegant rendition of the distinctive pansori songs from this southern region. As he listened his face betrayed an expression of discontent, as if his earlier ardent sense of anticipation had not been fully satisfied. The longer he listened, the more deeply he became lost in his thoughts. Moved to the depth of his soul by the sound of the songs, he did not notice the small table with wine that had been brought into the room. Finally, after the woman had sung a few scenes from *The Song of Chunhyang*,¹ he pushed aside the wine table and found himself asking for an instrument to accompany the woman.

'Fine, very fine indeed. Let us first wet our throats with this wine and continue,' he proposed.

After each scene had been sung he handed his wine cup to the woman, appreciating the need for liquid for the singer and the importance of urging her to continue. She executed a graceful rendition of *The Song of the Water Palace*.²

Eventually he could contain himself no longer. 'Tell me,' he asked at last, passing the cup once more to the woman to drink from, 'how long have you been singing – hiding yourself in a place like this?'

At first she looked puzzled, seeming not quite to have understood the meaning of the man's tentative enquiry, and remained silent, although her eyes were steadily fixed on him.

He continued, 'I came knowing that this place is called Song Pass and that your tavern is called the Song Pass Tavern. It must be because of the reputation of your songs. Isn't that so?'

Still she did not give him an answer, but this time her silence did not appear to suggest that she had misunderstood his question. Her mostly expressionless but gently probing eyes pursued him, trying to decipher his thoughts, then she slowly shook her head.

'Does this mean you are not the original cause of the legend of this place? Was there another before you?' the guest persisted impatiently. 'I take it then that there is another story that came before your songs?'

Only then did she move her head in acknowledgement. Her face began to cloud, and she spoke haltingly. 'You are right. The names of this pass and this tavern have nothing to do with my singing. I don't deserve them. There was one who could sing the real songs.'

'Who was that person? I ask you, who was that singer?' he demanded urgently, driven by foreboding.

'The one who is buried in the grave.'

'What grave?'

'At the top of this hill. We call it the "Song Grave". You have heard about the Song Pass and the Song Pass Tavern, yet you don't know the story of this man's grave. During his lifetime he knew nothing but songs, so the villagers filled his grave with

his songs. The rest of the story came after that: the Song Pass and Song Pass Tavern.'

She could not fend off the traveller's barrage of questions and began her story of long-ago events in a voice tinged with sighs. The story went like this.

At the end of the Korean War, as peace returned to the country, the villagers began the process of recovery. It was during the autumn of 1956 or 1957. When the proprietress was still a child she had worked as a servant girl for a prosperous family in town in order to feed herself. To this grand household came two strange boarders, a father and daughter, two itinerant pansori singers. One day the head of the household, who was past sixty, had gone to town, where he met the singers by chance, and when he returned home he brought them with him. The old master installed the singers in the *sarang* quarters and treated them as his guests. Their astounding artistry transported his spirit, and throughout the autumn he enjoyed listening to their songs.

The skills of the father and daughter were equally matched, but it was the daughter, barely fourteen, who did most of the singing, the father accompanying her on his drum. In the beginning the master preferred the voice of the father, a man over fifty who was growing old, sickly and weak, but soon the master was overcome in amazement by a very special quality in the daughter's proud yet plaintive timbre. All through the autumn the father and his daughter did nothing but sing. Meanwhile, winter was rapidly approaching, and the harsh winds caused the father's already frail health to worsen. Since the beginning of the season his coughs had become more frequent and more severe; finally he could no longer withstand them.

All of a sudden the father began saying that he must leave the household – he had a strange and obstinate insistence.

Because the master could not persuade his guests to stay he let them go, somehow intuiting the old man's intentions, and he said goodbye to the pair. They left the house and disappeared into a street where a fierce wintry wind raged.

Soon afterwards, a rumour reached the household that after wandering about all day the father and daughter had discovered an abandoned hut near the public cemetery and had installed themselves there. They were told that the father had become bedridden and was refusing both food and drink; however, after darkness fell he would sing throughout the night. On hearing these stories the master ordered his servant girl to carry food to the hut.

The proprietress, who was that servant girl, recalled the events clearly. When she reached the hut, carrying the provisions on her head for the pair, everything she saw bore out what she been told. As the villagers listened to the father sing at night they agreed that his songs conveyed feelings of bitter pain and deep despair. They were in accord that since the cemetery had first come into existence they had never heard such mournful tunes. However, no one was disturbed by the father's nightly singing nor did they complain about it. On the contrary, when the villagers looked at the father and daughter they would repress their sighs, the significance of which they themselves could not understand, and muse about the transience of their own lives.

Winter was ending, and it was one of the last days of the lunar year. The night-snow was falling, covering the entire village, hurrying to bury another passing year. During the night, the father sang his last songs in this world, and finally, towards daybreak, he coughed up blood with his final, painful breaths.

The following day the master received word of the death of the father. That evening he sent the servant girl to the hut

where the father and daughter had been living. But when the girl arrived she found the villagers returning from the cemetery where they had just buried the body.

After the death of her father, for reasons unknown to the servant girl, the daughter refused to leave the hut. The master wished to bring her once more into his household since she now had no one to look after her, but she stubbornly insisted on remaining there. Not only did she spurn the master's suggestion; she took her dead father's place and began singing his songs. The master was at his wit's end. Unable to persuade her, he sent his servant girl to live with the daughter. What was more, he offered to convert the hut into a small tavern and hired a man to help the two of them run it.

The proprietress continued, 'As a young girl, I had no ear for really fine singing, but I, too, was fascinated by the daughter and her songs. I was most grateful for my master's command and moved in willingly – and that was how I learned to sing. The daughter could no longer refuse the master's kindness, and for a few years she sang for the tavern customers. She did this with great devotion. On the days when there were no customers she would teach me to sing, sometimes late into the night. We lived like that for about three years.' The tavern owner gave the impression that she had just emerged from the haze of a reverie. Slowly and carefully, she continued with her tale.

On the anniversary of her father's death the daughter would prepare fresh purified wine instead of an offering of food as dictated by custom. She placed the wine at the altar of the deceased and sang through the night. One winter's night she sang, this time without the ritual offering of wine, and on the morning after that night of singing she disappeared with the dawn. And she was to be seen no more. It was the third anniversary of her father's death.

The villagers began to talk about the songs that emanated from the tavern. After the father had been buried the daughter had continued his songs, and after her departure the servant girl, now the proprietress, took her place as singer. The villagers refused to believe that the voice they heard belonged to the daughter or to the servant girl. They insisted that it must be that of the long-dead old man; they had no doubt that the soul of his songs, entombed in the grave, was enabling the women to continue to sing in this fashion. To them it did not matter who was the actual singer, the daughter who had disappeared or the servant girl who had taken over the tavern and the songs. The villagers found pleasure in talking about the old man's songs and in confirming their belief in his influence.

'That's how the father's grave came to be called the Song Grave, and the names Song Pass and Song Pass Tavern were coined shortly after this. As for me, I am but a maintainer of his grave. I bear no resentment for my fate, nor do I desire to leave this place. As humble as I am, I have inherited the old man's songs. And as I sing them I wait for the day when someone of his bloodline will pass through this place again. I am truly grateful, for I owe my livelihood to his songs.'

The tavern owner finished her story, her voice punctuated with sighs, and resumed her singing. This time it was a passage from *Hongbo and Nolbu*.⁴ She began with *Hongbo* lamenting his wretched life as a peddler.

At her abrupt opening the man hastily drew the drum towards his breast and, after a few moments' delay, began to accompany her. This time, however, his accompaniment was slow to match the song's enchantment. His face still bore an expression of impatience; the woman's story had left him unsatisfied, his demeanour indicating that he was more preoccupied in delving further into her story than with her music.

Paying no attention to him, she continued to sing, her voice gathering heat and emotion.

Finally, he became aware of a hot flush spreading through his hands and perspiration slowly forming in his palms. As if wandering in the burning valleys of memory, with its flame searing his heart, his eyes ignited with a strange fire while feeling the sun's burning heat. Whenever he listened to a pansori song, the summer sun, this flaming ball of fire, would appear, scorching his body. It was the sun of his childhood, the sun of his fate.

A hillside farm overlooked the sea, where the waves glistened like scales on fish, and sloped up the hill until it reached the border of a camellia grove. A child was tied from his waist to a post at the edge of the farm where an ancient unmarked grave lay near the farm. The farm was the only thing the boy's father had left to his young wife when he died. All summer the boy's mother did nothing but tend the plot of land. Each day, leashed like an animal, the boy endured the long summer's heat. Now and then he would look down at a sailboat gliding over the shimmering sea, breaking the fish-scale waves and disappearing behind an island. At other times he would lie under the searing sun and, feeling hungry, take a midday nap. All the while he would wait for his mother to emerge from the field after finishing her work for the day. Each summer the mother planted soya beans or a mixture of soya and sorghum, and, once inside the furrows of the field, she ignored her son's longing for her. He would see only his mother's bent figure moving in and out of the plants, reminding him of a buoy floating on the water. He would hear a strange voice emanating from her as she worked, a nasal sing-song or moaning

sound. Her voice would slowly reach him and then recede into silence. This pattern went on throughout the day.

Then, one day, a peculiar singing voice came from the sloping path overlooking the sea that led from the farm into the mountains. The song it sang was the kind that fuel-woodcutters would sing while crossing a mountain path. But that day no woodcutter could be seen on his way into the mountains, and no one saw the singer. All day the voice came from somewhere in the green shade of the mountains. The villagers later discovered that it was the voice of an itinerant songman who was passing by the village for the first time. The disembodied voice resounded from the forest until sunset. Meanwhile, as she worked in the furrows under the burning sun, the mother's odd moaning, sobbing voice grew more intense and clear and reached out as if in response to the one coming from the mountain path. Finally, the sun began to set behind the mountain peaks, and the opaque shadow of dusk spread itself over the foot of the mountains. It was then that the singing voice made its stealthy descent from the green-shrouded mountains and overcame the boy's mother, still working in between the furrows, like a snake devouring its prey.

The following day the man with the voice entered the village and took up residence in the room next to the gate of the boy's house. Every morning at dawn the songman would return to the mountains, and all day long the villagers would hear him sing, his voice booming like a mountain quake from the depths of the forest. The villagers heard only songs, but in his songs they conjured up an image of the spirit of the forest, cowering, fearing to show its face. At the same time the mother's song grew even more frantic as the days went by. As he lay tied to the ground the child continued to endure the songman's

voice. Listening to the songs he would fall asleep, the sleep of hunger, and then he would be awakened by them. Asleep or awake, he could not escape the music swirling in his ears or the sun that hung above him, the flaming ball of fire.

The faceless voice implanted in the boy's memory a face more distinct than the flames of the burning summer sun and doomed him to wander in search of that sun, the face of his fate.

The summer of the songman's arrival had long passed, the new year had swiftly replaced the old, and it was summer again. Yet it was on the morning after his mother had suddenly died and her soul departed from this world that the boy's eyes finally and surely caught sight of the owner of that voice. An unforeseen calamitous event had struck her dead during the night. After suffering a long, horrific, earth-shattering pain, the mother dropped from her womb a bloody mass in the shape of a tiny baby girl. The following morning the mother closed her eyes for ever, and the boy saw the drooping figure of the songman enter the brush gate of their house.

But the boy did not believe that the songman's visage was the real face of the songs. It was the flaming ball of fire that was the true face of the songs, which remained with him even after he had grown into a man.

The death of the boy's mother changed the songman's circumstances, and he could not remain in the village. He was forced to drift from place to place, begging for food with the newborn infant and the boy in tow. Even when the boy accompanied his stepfather as they moved on, the true face of the songs remained the same – the sun.

Anguished and pained as the face was, he could not live without recollecting it. If he did not see the sun and feel its burning heat he felt certain that his flesh and soul would

languish, so to this day he was bound to journey interminably to seek his encounter with that flaming sun.

Now the traveller encountered that sun once again in the proprietress's songs and found himself still bearing the heat of his fate, pushing his endurance to the limit.

The woman stopped singing; the passage from the *Song of Hongbo and Nolbu* had come to an end. Yet on the man's face remained the same expression of pain, a pain of perseverance. Streaks of sweat surfaced on his brow and nose like a man exposed to the extreme heat of sun.

'So, am I to understand that you have never heard from her since she left this place?' he asked cautiously, waking from his deep reverie. He drained the wine from the cup to wet his throat and resumed his inquisition, still not quite satisfied with her story. 'Even though she never sent word of her whereabouts, don't you have any idea at all where she was heading?'

The proprietress showed no sign of interest in his continued probing – or, rather, having already fathomed his innermost thoughts, perhaps she was trying to stop herself from being indiscreet. To the questions he put to her she gave no clear response. 'I've already told you that I couldn't guess where she might have gone.'

It was obvious to the man that she was avoiding further conversation.

'If you really don't know, at least you must have heard her mention the name of the place where she and her father had lived before coming here.'

'Don't you see, these itinerant singers never remain in one place. As I understand it they travelled endlessly throughout this southern province.'

'Didn't they have any relatives? I mean, didn't she have any brothers or sisters?'

'We didn't even know where they were born. Do you suppose such people would open their hearts and tell you all about their family history? Even if she had a relative, how could she, a blind woman, attempt to look for that person?'

'No! You mean to say the woman was without sight? What happened? Presumably she wasn't born blind?' His expression became agitated, and he seemed in sudden turmoil.

She ignored his reaction to her careless words, but she continued in a more gentle tone. 'Didn't I mention to you that she was blind? Well, when we were living together, because she was always very orderly and well organized I often forgot that she couldn't see. I believe she was not born blind, as you have guessed.'

'Then how did she lose her sight? What did the people say about how she had become blind? Tell me everything you heard.' His voice trembled from an apprehension he was powerless to control.

'I don't really know the details for sure but ...' She hesitated, and her eyes showed fear, but she saw that he would not allow her to stop now.

It was none other than her own father who had blinded her. That was the astounding secret the proprietress imparted to him. One night, when the daughter was not yet quite ten years old, she awoke from her sleep in excruciating pain. She felt her face aflame, and her eyes burned like they were on fire. Her father had poured acid into them while she was sleeping next to him, and that was how she had lost her sight. Everyone in the village knew about it, and, as a servant girl, the proprietress had also heard adults talking about it. They said that if the sight were taken away the energy that enabled the eyes to see would be diverted to the ears and throat, empowering the voice to become extraordinary. When the proprietress was still young

she did not believe the horrible story. Later, unable to contain her curiosity, she confronted the daughter with her disbelief. The blind woman responded to her questions with deep prolonged sighs, which she understood to mean she should believe the unbelievable.

'But why are you, my dear guest, so interested in gossip such as this?' the proprietress asked the traveller irritably. 'From the beginning I could see that you were more impressed by her story than my songs. I wonder whether you have an especial reason for it,' she said with a hint of spite in her voice. The guest's demeanour grew rough and uncontrolled, betraying the impression that his long-suppressed premonition was about to become reality. The colouring of his face, too, began to assume a certain unpleasant pallor of indefinable menace. In response to the woman's query he shook his head convulsively.

'Then,' she continued, unaware of the turmoil in the traveller's mind, 'it seems you really believe every word I have said. As for me, I still can't be sure that if one is blinded one can sing better. Do you think it's possible?' she asked abstractedly. Becoming aware of the threatening flash in his eyes as he shook his head, she abruptly ceased talking. She was unable to figure out the nature of the murderous glint in his eyes nor why he shook his head so violently. She could not tell whether he disbelieved that when a person was blinded a voice sang sweeter songs or whether he mistrusted the story of the father-daughter pansori singers altogether. She lacked the insight to read his behaviour, to bore into his mind and comprehend his understanding that the father's true intent was not to endow the daughter with finer voice; rather, he had a motive even more obvious and more cruel. For a long time a deep silence hung heavy between the traveller and the proprietress.

She slowly resumed her singing in a gesture to draw him out and soften the awkwardness in the air. This time, she began with a scene from *The Song of Sim Cheong*,⁵ a depiction of the blind man, Sim, on his way to the capital:

'O, how we go, o, how we go.
To the capital we go on a long journey.
Where shall we rest tonight?
Where will we sleep tomorrow night?'

The timbre of her voice was lingering, melancholic, in the manner characteristic of *jinyangjo* style of pansori singing. With his eyes half closed the guest accompanied the song. He trailed drowsily behind the woman's singing at times and then suddenly rushed his pace to meet hers. But he was no longer listening to her. On his head he once again felt the flanning summer sun of his childhood and listening to the songs of the songman of long ago, a father to the fatherless boy.

After the death of the boy's mother, the songman took the boy and the infant daughter with him as he moved aimlessly from village to village, peddling his songs in order to feed the half-siblings. In this way almost ten years had passed. All the while the songman had wanted nothing more than to teach the children to sing. The boy, however, had no desire to acquire the skill but went through the motions of learning. So the songman gave up on the boy and began to teach his daughter, while he taught his stepson to play the drum to accompany her. She was good at mimicking her father's songs, but she must also have been born with talent, for her voice was pleasing. When the father eventually allowed the young children to amuse an audience with their songs he saw that the listeners applauded the novices' fine artistry.

The songman's dearest wish was to train the children to be a brother-and-sister team, but the boy was secretly unwilling to go along with his stepfather's plans. On the contrary, believing it was this man's songs that had killed his mother, he was plotting a scheme to murder him – and his songs with him. He had lived in fear that sooner or later he, too, would be killed by the songman. He was terrified of his stepfather's silent gaze even more, for he had seldom seen him open his mouth except to sing. He longed to comfort his mother's spirit, to free her from the grudges that she had borne and the pain that she had suffered in this world. The boy vowed that he must get rid of his stepfather before his own life was threatened. It was because of this secret plot that the boy could not abandon his stepfather. When he was ordered by the man to play his drum, because he feared for his life he did so obediently, but all the while he waited for a suitable moment. When he listened to the songman's songs, his deliberate and lingering voice, the boy would find himself awake to thoughts of murder. What tormented him beyond endurance was the fireball of the summer sun that would surface in his mind, riding on the songman's chants.

Each time his stepfather sang, the boy felt he was getting closer to accomplishing his murderous plans. Sometimes he would watch the songman slip into a trance induced by his own songs, even when no one was listening. As they travelled on the mountain paths or rested on the empty *maru*⁶ of an abandoned hut the songman would slump to the ground and let loose his keening voice. When his singing reached its climax, one could imagine the echoes of his song bouncing off the mountain peaks and causing the birds in the valleys to stop their twittering. At such times the sun of the songman would flame even more fiercely, and uncontrollable thoughts

of murdering his stepfather would invade the boy's mind.

The songman's songs created another peculiar effect of sorcery on the child. They had the power simultaneously to stimulate his already treacherous intentions and to sap the energy required to execute them. This left him completely exhausted. No sooner would the boy come close to realizing his plot than the songman's songs would render him powerless, making him feel that the very nerve of his scheme was paralysed by the songs' venomous potion. The child would become lethargic, displaying the symptoms of a strange malaise. More peculiar still was the stepfather's behaviour towards the child. The stepson was quite sure that the songman had somehow divined those secrets he had long been harbouring, and this made him even more fearful of his stepfather. But the songman never betrayed any sign that he was aware of the boy's schemes, although he must surely have suspected them. Either he was oblivious to all else around him, engrossed only in his singing, or it was possible that he had already gauged what was going on in his stepson's mind and was aware of the strange and murderous glint in the boy's eyes whenever he sang. Perhaps it was with this knowledge that he went on singing even more frantically, goading the boy, his voice modulated in deep despair and resignation.

Finally, one autumn afternoon, everything became clear to the boy. The family of three singers was crossing a mountain path in an unfamiliar region. The party proceeded in a leisurely manner while the stepfather continued to sing. The children followed him, leaving in their wake the faint reverberations of their songs. When they reached the top of the mountain the songman stopped and crouched down to the ground, and he resumed his singing in full-throated bursts on this new stage. The mountains were ablaze with autumnal hues, and the

distant valleys were shrouded in an opaque, milky haze. The songman's lengthy rendition continued, and it was as though nature resonated with his songs in an expression of the *han*, a fateful, insoluble anguish – unremitting regret and unrequited grudges – that had been embedded in the soul of his people. Finally, exhausted by the emotional weight of his songs, he lay on a cushion of fallen leaves piled up by the wayside and appeared to fall asleep.

The boy had listened to his stepfather's songs of despair and again became affected by the same peculiar, languid sensation, the energy drained from his body. Deep sighs doubled him up, and he trembled. He could not bear it any longer. But then a strange sorrow pushed upwards from his heart, empowering him with an incomprehensible energy. He slowly collected his strength, shook himself out of his stupor and began to circle the songman.

But the man was not asleep. Claspings a large stone to his breast, the boy approached his stepfather. Not even his little half-sister had noticed his approach. The boy stood there for a long time, frozen by his own fear, wishing desperately for his stepfather to wake up and catch him in the act. At that very moment the songman raised his head and took a long look at his stepson.

'Why are you standing there like that?' he asked, his voice betraying a hint of irritation that suggested that he had been kept waiting for too long. But he left things at that and did not ask about the rock that he was holding. After challenging the boy the songman returned to his position of feigned sleep, almost taunting the boy, who was mystified by this behaviour.

He could not bear to be near the sleeping man any longer. The songman had ignored the child who had approached him

with a stone clutched to his chest. The songman must have read the youth's mind, but why had he assumed an ignorance of his intent? This question remained in the boy's mind, a riddle to which he could find no answer.

That afternoon the boy finally left his stepfather. He dropped the stone and started walking towards the woods, pretending he needed to urinate. He disappeared for ever from the sight of the father and the daughter. As the boy emerged out of the woods, far away from his kin, he could hear the songman calling him, his voice echoing from the distant valley. He pictured the songman racing about in search of him and hastened his step in the opposite direction. Since that day he could find no place on earth where he could escape from the songman's call. In every pansori song he heard, anywhere and at any time, his stepfather's calls pursued him.

Nothing had changed since that autumn day. Once again in the proprietress's song the traveller listened to the desperate shouts of his stepfather, and once again he heard his own laboured breathing as he ran from that cry.

'Why don't you stop for a while and rest your voice.' The traveller was exhausted by his own reverie, and when he interrupted the proprietress his suggestion was not just for the singer.

His face was completely drained of life. 'So what did the daughter tell you about the cruel father who blinded her?' he asked after downing a few cups of wine. His voice was calm again. 'She never talked about it.' The proprietress had become gentler in her manner, most likely realizing that there was nothing more to hide from him.

'Even if she said nothing, didn't you wonder whether she had forgiven her father – perhaps by watching how she behaved towards him?'

To fend off his persistent questions she was evasive in her response. 'Since she never talked about it and showed no resentment, I supposed she might have forgiven him. Those who know a thing or two about pansori tell me that what the father did was entirely just and even admirable.'

'You mean by blinding his daughter in order to improve her singing?'

'They say in order to train a singer to produce fine songs, the voice must experience indescribable pain.'

'Is that the reason why the father took sight from his own daughter's eyes, in order for her to experience in her heart this *han*?'

'So I have heard people say,' the proprietress assured the man.

'No, I don't believe it,' he replied. 'This *han* you talk about, this unremitting suffering, unavenged wrongs, this belief in an undeserved fate inflicted upon us – this can neither be taught nor passed on. Little by little, like dust, it accumulates throughout one's lifetime. Some people live to acquire this *han* and amass it in order to live. Perhaps it is disrespectful to the memory of the father who is no longer of this world – and I am sorry to have to say this – but I have a feeling it was not just for her songs that he blinded his daughter. I believe he did so to prevent her from running away from him.'

No words came from the woman. The traveller paid no attention. He no longer cared whether she understood what he was talking about. He rambled on in a hazy monologue that came from the depths of his meditation. 'Anyway, it was good that she forgave her father, for him and for her. If she had not been able to forgive him she would have been left only with vengeful hatred but never a *han* that would enhance her singing power. It is because of her redeeming

act of forgiveness that she was able to experience the depth of the *han*’.

‘I gather you feel at peace only if you so believe.’ She smiled for the first time. Finally trusting the traveller, she asked unabashedly, ‘So, now that you know the daughter was blinded will you keep on looking for your half-sister?’

He did not seem perturbed by her sudden revelation. ‘If I could yet hope, I wish to find her songs, even if only for a moment and from afar. But I wonder if such a day will ever come.’ He spoke in a calm, casual voice but wondered how she could have read his thoughts. A hint of curiosity flashed in his eyes as he looked at her.

She had already sensed what was in the traveller’s mind, but, betraying nothing, and with an air of innocence, she disclosed her last piece of information. ‘I remember her mentioning a brother who accompanied her on his drum as a child. Did I forget to tell you about him?’

THE LIGHT OF SONGS

THE TAVERN CROUCHED on the banks of a bend in the meandering Tamjingang River, about four kilometres from the town of Janghung. A tree-lined rural bus route linked Janghung and neighbouring Gangjin. From the river bend one could see the rocky mist-shrouded summit of Eokbulsan Mountain, known as a landmark, some four kilometres away. On either side of the bus route along the river a dozen or so thatched houses huddled together, and the tavern stood a little further down the road, closer to the river. It was a tavern in name only, for not many travellers frequented this rural road, and the owner could hardly make ends meet with only the occasional customer stopping by.

A man by the name of Cheon ran the tavern – the third generation of his family to do so – which did not even have a sign to indicate its business. The fish Cheon caught from the river were the main source of the tavern’s income. One day, when he was already past thirty, a young woman had strayed into his tavern, and they ended up spending the night together like a married couple on their wedding night. But the following morning this woman he had hoped would remain his bride for the rest of his life ran away with a bundle containing the contents of all his furniture drawers. From that day he remained unmarried until he was over fifty. In all seasons Cheon would go down to the river to fish, just as his forefathers had done before him. Then he would go into town and sell his fish to various bars there, which used them as

NOTES

- 1 *The Song of Chunhyang*, the tale of a faithful wife (see pages 13-15 for a more detailed description of this pansori).
- 2 From *The Song of the Water Palace*, a cautionary tale of foolishness (see pages 16-17 for a more detailed description of this pansori).
- 3 *Sarang* quarters are separate quarters for the man of the house where he receives and entertains his guests.
- 4 Based on *The Song of Hongbo and Nolbu* (see pages 17-18 for a more detailed description of this pansori), a traditional tale of brotherly love.
- 5 Based on the legend of Sim Cheong, a tale of a daughter's filial piety.
- 6 The floor plan of a modest traditional Korean house is L-shaped, and the essential components are a kitchen, a *maru* - a hardwood-floored room - and a bedroom. The living quarters are elevated, and a stepping stone provides entry to the *maru*, which serves as the place in which the family takes informal meals, when weather permits, and receives guests.
- 7 Before a pansori performance the singer usually warms up and establishes the musical mood by performing a *tun-gu* or short epic song which requires the same kind of vocal techniques as pansori and contains similar melodic themes but is easier to sing because of its non-dramatic nature.
- 8 The extant pansori repertoire is limited to a few songs, the most common among them being *The Song of Chunhyang*, *The Song of Sim Cheong* (see pages 15-16 for a more detailed description of

this pansori) and *The Song of Hongbo and Nolbu*. Singers learn by closely following the styles of master singers.

9 A health drink.

10 Letters from the Korean alphabet, hangeul.

11 A primer for learning Chinese characters.

12 Before the invention of the Korean alphabet, hangeul, in 1446 Koreans wrote in Chinese; however, most scholarly writings and official documents continued to be written in Chinese until the early twentieth century.

13 Seon is a Buddhist sect known better in the West as Chan Buddhism (China) or Zen Buddhism (Japan).

14 So-chi was the pen name of Heo Ryeon (1809-1892), who was renowned for his poetry, paintings and calligraphy.