

A LOCAL INTELLECTUAL'S PERCEPTION OF THE WEST AS VIEWED THROUGH THE *HAEYUGA*

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Introduction

The *Haeyuga* (海遊歌) is a rather lengthy travel *kasa* written by Kim Hanhong (1877–1943) during the Enlightenment era. This work, believed to have been compiled in or around 1908, was first introduced to scholars by Professor Pak Nojun in 1991. The areas covered by the author during his six-year trip are not limited to Korea, but also include Japan and the United States. To this end, there is a need to pay attention to the fact that this work represents the first travel *kasa* in which the American landscape is described. Given the circumstances that prevailed at that time, the mere fact that the author was able to make his way to the United States is nothing short of remarkable. Even more astounding in terms of the history of Korean literature is the fact that he recorded his experiences during this voyage in the traditional Korean vernacular verse form known as *kasa*. This period was a particularly dark one in the tragic history of Korea, a period marked by the growing encroachment of Japanese imperialism and subsequent usurpation of national sovereignty. To this end, the author's anguish and agony over these historical realities come across very clearly in this book. Kim Hanhong did not undertake this trip in the capacity of a royal envoy or armed with an official title or rank; rather, he was a simple *hyangch'on* (local village) intellectual who resided in the countryside. Therefore, his perceptions, which come across very clearly in his work, were rooted in a relative sense of freedom and subjectivity. The present study consists of a review of the general characteristics of the *Haeyuga* based on existing studies, and of an analysis of local intellectuals' perception of the West at the beginning of the 20th century carried out through a perusal of the aspects of the Western world reflected in the particular work.

Travel route and the direction of consciousness

Kim Hanhong was 31 years old when he compiled the *Haeyuga* in 1908, a work which he completed after a six-year voyage. His travel route can be broken down to

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the domestic portion of his trek (Seoul–Chinju–Pusan), his travel abroad (Pusan–Japan–Hawaii–San Francisco), and the return trip (San Francisco–Japan–Pusan–home). While his journey to Japan began in 1903, he then stayed in Hawaii for most of 1904–5, before spending three years in San Francisco. As such, the great majority of the entries found in the early sections of the work deal with scenes experienced by the author while travelling around his homeland. This journey across the country enabled Kim to form an in-depth perception of his motherland's devastated reality. To this end, his awareness of the state of ruin in which his country now found itself was accompanied by deep feelings of resentment and grief. These emotions, formed prior to the onset of his overseas journey, are continuously embedded throughout the breadth of this work. Resentment and hostility towards reality and a desire for a new world served as the motivation behind the narrator's decision to travel to the West. When a literary licentiate by the name of 'Ch'oe' whom he met during his trek within Korea recommended that he travel to the United States, Kim accepted his recommendation without hesitation, and headed for America. The significant amount of grief and resentment that had built up inside him as he traversed his native country were suddenly channelled into this desire to experience a new world. His trip within Korea was punctuated by his repetitive criticism of the state of affairs, and his great inspiration to 'participate in society'. Such a stance was possible because he perceived reality not from the standpoint of a government official, but rather from that of a contemporary intellectual. Thereafter, he arrived in the United States via the port of Pusan and Japan.

During the final period of the Taehan Empire, Western civilization began to be rapidly introduced into Chosŏn as part of the Enlightenment policy. To this end, the United States was regarded as having achieved a relatively more advanced civilization, and a remarkable one at that. Therefore, the main impressions of the West reflected in Kim Hanhong's eyes must be regarded as those of admiration and wonder. His experiences in the United States unfolded in Hawaii and San Francisco. However, having already been bowled over by the wonders of advanced civilization during his stop-over in Japan, his impressions and emotions while in Hawaii do not come across as strongly. His stay in Hawaii was further dampened by the heart-wrenching news of the signing of the Protectorate Treaty of 1905, a development which so engulfed him with grief that he decided to quit his job in Hawaii and move to San Francisco. The kind of descriptive attitude he employed can be regarded as reflecting his tolerant perception of Western civilization occasioned by his sorrow and grief at the ruin of his own country. In other words, his perception of the world was closely related to his concerns and worry for his motherland, thus revealing the sense of agony felt by a Chosŏn intellectual who perceived securing the basis of his existence as a greater priority than experiencing a new world.

The events in San Francisco are depicted in a manner that betrays a more profound

experiencing of Western civilization. For example, Kim praises the advanced civilization of the United States through detailed descriptions of facts such as the absence of a monarchical system and the relative equality of the people. However, whenever he ponders about his own native land, a strong sense of resentment begins to permeate his writing. These feelings of resentment and indignation become even more apparent following his return to his hometown via Japan. The sections of the *Haeyuga* written following his return to Korea are characterized by stinging criticism not only of the brutality and atrocity of Japan, but also of the incapability of the Chosŏn government and its officials. This particular situation can be explained by the augmented sense of grief and mourning which Kim must have felt when gazing upon the state of ruin into which his homeland had fallen following his return from his stay in the West. As such, his perception of the rapidly changing West at the outset of the 20th century is one which oscillates between astonishment and grief. Let us now take a closer look at how this intellectual's experiences and grief were expressed through the literary genre known as *kasa*.

Literary Mode of Expression

(a) *Realistic expression of experiences*

Much like the great majority of travel *kasa*, the *Haeyuga* is filled with detailed descriptions of Kim Hanhong's observations during his journey. While the domestic journey constitutes the main theme of the first part of the work, the author adopts a more formalized and detailed approach to his descriptions of his journey to Hawaii via Japan. Here, additional attention is paid to his perception of the West, and to the descriptive expressions of his perceptions, which constitute the main focus of this study.

The most in-depth descriptions of Kim's perceptions of Western civilization can be found in the section of the work dealing with his experiences in San Francisco. In that particular section, which appears in the latter part of the work, the author conducts what amounts to a 30-verse comparison of American civilization, institutions, customs, and traditions with those of his own homeland. The description of America as a new world betrays his strong sense of astonishment. His gaze upon the advanced nature of aspects of America such as philosophy and thought, culture, economics, education, and its institutions is one filled with a profound sense of envy. He also pays special attention to the actual features of the United States, which he regards as standing in stark contrast to the situation in his motherland during the final period of the Taehan Empire, such as the development of a democratic spirit, economic growth, the advent of strong military power, a modern education system, and the social welfare system, all of which he describes in a detailed manner.

All the classes are equal, easy for everyone to follow their own path in life/all laws are regulated in a manner which facilitates commercial activities
 ... even in the tall buildings rules are fairly applied/fairness, honesty, customs, and fairly applied laws
 ... carriages and freight cars are transported in an organized fashion,
 no wanderers in sight.

Looking at the above quotation we can see that the author describes how, unlike the situation in his homeland, the United States does not have the social status system known as the *sanong kongsang* (scholars, farmers, artisans and tradesmen), and how the transparent nature of the regulations related to commerce greatly facilitates the task of conducting economic activities. The author also describes how fair laws are employed even in tall buildings, and marvels at the organized manner in which the transportation system characterized by carriages and freight cars is operated. His sense of astonishment reaches a crescendo with his use of the expression that this kind of place cannot even be compared with imaginary spaces such as Yama Loka or Bodhisattva World. Thus, we can grasp the extent to which the horizons of Kim's perceptions were expanded as a result of the sense of freshness and incredulity which he felt when gazing at the Western world.

A subjective gaze that is based on a sense of grief for his own country has been incorporated in Kim Hanhong's perception of the West, a perception that is contrasted with the devastation afflicting his homeland. In other words, we can surmise that embedded in the author's evaluation is a sense of grief that unlike the United States, which has been able to achieve astonishing development, his own country never got such an opportunity because it lost its sovereignty just as it started to open its doors to the outside world. As such, we reach the conclusion that although on the surface the author's experiences are presented in a formalized and realistic manner, they are also inherently laden with a deeply engrained perception of the reality in his own country. This becomes even clearer when we analyse the section written following Kim's return home from his journey abroad, and the deep sense of grief he experiences when confronted by the reality of his homeland.

(b) Expression of subjective resentment

Another aspect of the *Haeyuga* which should be commented upon is the fact that there are several sections in which Kim Hanhong's experiences are formalized through the expression of subjective emotions. These, such as the sense of resentment he feels when faced with the grim reality of his own nation during his domestic travels; the sense of anguish he experiences during his journey to the United States because of his grave concern for his nation; the feelings of anger and hostility he senses building up within himself during his stop-over in Japan on the way home; and the

sensations of disillusionment and condemnation which he feels towards domestic politics following his return home, are expressed in a detailed manner throughout the ebb and flow of the journey. One example includes:

Vexatious, the loss of national sovereignty in the year of Ŭlsa/abolition of diplomatic legations
 Whom can I appeal to/overcome with deep grief and resentment
 In a hurry to pack my luggage/must board at night and reach my next destination.

This section describes the author's feelings while in Hawaii upon hearing that his country's national sovereignty has been usurped. His inability to overcome the deep sense of grief and resentment that has welled up inside him is expressed in a most desperate fashion. His sense of utter helplessness occasioned by an inability to find a place to appeal to over his nation's situation, and the profound resentment created by such a void, are described in the most vivid of fashions, as is his decision to pack up and leave for San Francisco. What's more, upon his return to Chosŏn, he laments the reality of his nation's ruin, while contemplating the question of, 'how did we wind up in this situation'. Furthermore, the expression, 'what have the government officials done to cause this situation' symbolizes the sense of indignation which Kim feels towards the incompetent government officials whom he blames for having caused the downfall of his nation. Thus, such feelings of resentment and grief permeate the *Haeyuga* in its entirety. The fact that the early and latter sections of the work are connected by these feelings of resentment and grief at the domestic reality only serves to further heighten its literary completeness. Of course, Kim Hanhong did not suggest any measures which could be used to resolve these problems; rather, his work can be regarded as a literary critique of contemporary reality which formalizes its grim aspects through the use of subjective space.

Conclusion

Travel *kasa* have been an integral element of Korean classical literature since the 16th century. While the majority of these works have been related to domestic travels, new civilizations and journeys, as well as cultural experiences, emerged as important elements of such literary works from the 20th century onwards. Viewed from this standpoint, although the *Haeyuga* was created within the traditions of existing travel *kasa*, the combined presence of the author's experiences pertaining to foreign civilizations and cultures, and his perception of historical realities, can be regarded as marking an expansion of the width and depth of the traditional travel *kasa* genre. The *Haeyuga* was created at a time of great turmoil in Korea, a period marked by the growing spectre of Japanese imperialism over the Korean peninsula and the Enlightenment policy. The significance of the formalization in *kasa* of the

experiences encountered in the United States and Japan can be perceived as lying not only in the broadening of the author's own perceptions, but also in his subjective analysis of the domestic situation. Most travel *kasa* related to the Western world came in the form of *sahaeng kasa*, which were essentially formal accounts of the experiences of royal envoys during their journeys to other countries to conduct official duties, rendered in a literary style. However, as the goals and motivations for the *Haeyuga* were very personal, Kim's gaze at the West and his own nation is in many ways relatively freer than those of his predecessors. Such a process has also made it possible to subjectively describe the resentment felt at the ruin of the nation, and to criticize this most unfortunate of realities. Given the volume of this particular literary work, the results of the present study can be regarded as being relatively minor. To this end, attempts should be made in the future through the use of more detailed and thorough analyses, as well as comparisons with other travel *kasa*, to identify the characteristics of the *Haeyuga* which render it a uniquely 20th-century travel *kasa*.

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