

**SOAS-AKS**  
**Working Papers in Korean Studies**

*No. 14*

**TANG STYLE POEMS IN THE MID-JOSEON PERIOD:  
*BEYOND THE LATE-TANG STYLE***

Jo Yoong-hee

December 2009

<http://www.soas.ac.uk/japankorea/research/soas-aks-papers/>



**Tang Style Poems in the Mid-Joseon Period:  
*Beyond the Late-Tang Style***

**Jo Yoong-hee**

The Academy of Korean Studies, Korea

© 2009

**I.**

In the early seventeenth century, poetic criticism was widespread with the full-fledged *sihwa* collections such as *Seongsu sihwa*, which was related to the increasing number of Tang style poems gained in popularity during King Seonjo's reign (r. 1567-1608) in the sixteenth century. Heo Gyun (1569-1618), one of the famous critics in his days, thought that the Tang dynasty style had more positive influence on the poets' search for the principle of poetry than the Song dynasty style. Considering that it was important for poets to use appropriate expressions that could leave lasting impressions on readers, he stated that such expressions were better found in the Tang style than the Song style. Despite critics' overall positive assessment of Tang style poems in the Mid-Joseon period, they did not ignore the problems raised by those poems. The increasing number of poems written in the sixteenth century contributed to the boom in poetry criticism in the early seventeenth century, and this criticism in turn led to new alternatives for improvements in the writing of poetry.

Critics in those days appreciated the efforts made by poets in the late sixteenth century, who tried to overcome the technique-centered Jiangxi style or the suppressed expression of feelings in the Sarim style. However, at the same time, they did not hesitate to criticize those poets for imitating Tang dynasty poems and for being inclined to follow the poetic style of the Late-Tang.

Yi Su-gwang (1563-1628), for instance, criticized the Tang style, which was pursued by Choi Gyeong-chang (1539-1583) and Baek Gwang-hun (1537-1582) who, he claimed, did not reach the High-Tang style but stopped instead at the Late-Tang style (Yi S. 1614). Sin Heum (1566-1628) pointed out that poets sometimes even lost their own poetic characteristics while following the Tang style and insisted that poets should establish their independent poetic world without regard to the contemporary fashion (Sin 1618).

In this paper, some important traits of Tang style poems in the Mid-Joseon period are examined based on analyses of the features of both the Late-Tang and the High-Tang styles.

**II.**

Choe Gyeong-chang's poem, "On a Monk's Scroll of Poems at Bongeunsa Temple," can be viewed as an example of Late-Tang style trends and imitations of the extant Tang poems.

*In Gwangneung in March, the hills are full of flowers;  
On the way home, clear river water amidst white clouds.  
In Bongeunsa temple seen from the back of the boat,  
Listening to the Chinese cuckoo's cries, the monk closes the gate.*

Choe wrote this poem while leaving Bongeunsa temple on a day in March when the flowers were in bloom. On his way back from meeting with a monk, a hillside covered in flowers caught his eye. The “way home” mentioned in the poem is the Hangang river. White clouds were drifting above the river. In the first two lines, the poet is observing the natural setting that greets him on his way home and giving expression to the spring ambience. Then, as he looks back toward Bongeunsa temple, he sees a monk closing the gate and hears the cries of the Chinese cuckoo. The cuckoo’s cries reflect the “poet’s feeling of sadness as spring fades away” (Yi J. 1995, 234). The phrases, “March,” “flower-covered mountain,” “clear river,” “white clouds,” and “Chinese cuckoo,” describe a flamboyant and mystical spring. But the splendor of spring is tinged with sorrow. Here, “Gwangneung” refers to Gwangjin or Gwangnaru on the Hangang river of Seoul. Choe changed the name “Gwangjin” or “Gwangnaru” to “Gwangneung” in order to remind readers of Guangling (Gwangneung in Korean) in China, which appears in a famous poem written by Wei Yingwu (734-804) of Tang dynasty: “When March comes, Guangling is full of flowers.” The tone and content of Wei’s poem is very similar to the first line of Choe’s. Heo Gyun evaluated Choe’s poem as an example of the Late-Tang style, because despite the splendor of the poem, it did not capture the poet’s strong spirit. Furthermore, this poem was a good imitation of the line from the aforementioned Chinese poem.

“No Title” is another example of the Late-Tang style in that Choe Gyeong-chang shows his melancholic sentiment in a description of love. This poem also delivers an exotic atmosphere borrowing a melancholic melody from Chinese tradition.

*My love is in the capital, and I'm in Yangzhou.  
Day by day ascending the Jade Pavilion, longing for the lover.  
Willow leaves fade away while flowers and grasses become thicker.  
Only flowing river in my eyes in the setting sun.*

The lady in this poem just goes up to the pavilion everyday to gaze at the direction where her lover would stay. She feels nothing but emptiness and loneliness for willow leaves wither away near the pavilion. Willow leaves are a symbol for a woman to show affection to her lover. Those leaves do not play the proper role between the couple because of the absence of their meeting. Moreover, we can find the increase of her loneliness from juxtaposition between her and the river, which might flow to her lover. With many love poems such as Li Shang-yin’s in the Late-Tang period, this poem shares the same title of “No Title” in describing love and longing. Through this poem, readers feel some sentiments separated from the world where we live with a strong will to overcome hardships. In contrast to nature, the female persona in this

poem shows her disappointment and frailness, which defines the poem as the Late-Tang style.

While the critics in the Mid-Joseon period put more theoretical emphasis on Tang style poetry than on Song style, the poetic style of the Late-Tang period was also criticized due to relatively full expression of sorrow or mere imitation of famous Chinese poems.

### III.

Critics like Heo Gyun regarded the High-Tang style as more of an ideal model than the Late-Tang style. For this reason, when Heo Gyun appraised a well-written poem, he used such expressions as “This poem is written in the High-Tang style,” “The style of this poem is similar to the High-Tang style,” and “This poem deserves to be compared with the High-Tang style poems.”

Among the poets who wrote in the High-Tang style, Yi Ju (1468-1504) was considered one of the best. Heo Gyun selected a couplet from one of Yi Ju’s poems, “Manghaesa Temple.”

*The morning sun rises out of Balhae Sea, spilling its red rays.  
White clouds rise out of Mt. Wulu, drawing their white vapor.*

Heo Gyun appraised this couplet by saying that it was “very full of energy.” He believed that Yi Ju’s poetry was representative of the quality of “firmness and self-possession” (*chimchak*), which was also considered part of the High-Tang style. According to him, the couplet’s dynamic power reflects its use of *chimchak*. The term *chimchak* indicates a strong, solemn and transcendent quality. The fresh images of “morning sun” and “white clouds” are often found in Tang style poems. Moreover, expressions like “spilling its red rays” and “drawing their white vapor” add to the mysterious mood of the poem. Dynamic expressions, like “rises out of the Balhae Sea” and “rise out of Mt. Wulu,” work well together to give this couplet its power and energy. With the combination of fresh, mystical images embedded in the dynamic structure of the poem, the poem goes beyond the typical Tang style, which stops short at describing fresh images, and takes on the energetic *chimchak* style, associated with the High-Tang style.

Heo Gyun also left positive comments on Kim Jeong (1486-1521)’s poem.

*The Sun setting over the wasteland,  
Crows perching on the village in the evening.  
With few chilly smokes in empty woods,  
A thatched house left closed.*

With wasteland, crows, and chilly smokes, this poem delivers a quiet atmosphere of autumn in a mountain village. In addition, empty woods and closed house make the surroundings calmer. This poem contains loneliness to some extent. However, this loneliness does not cause readers to feel a melancholic emotion but lead them to a rather stable meditation in rural area.

Therefore, the images of this poem can be said to be structured by the poetic trend different from the Late-Tang style which is observed at Choe Gyeong-chang's poems above though an analysis tries to capture the Late-Tang style from this poem (Jeong 1996, 213).

Heo Gyun's comment on Kim In-hu's "On the Chwidae Pavilion" also demonstrated the characteristics of the High-Tang style that were emphasized in poetry criticism in the Mid-Joseon period.

*Where King Yang used to sing and dance,  
Today, a traveler climbs up and looks down.  
This feeling surpasses even the clouds,  
Mourning the past.  
In a far-off plain, a great wind is rising.  
The bright sun hides behind mountain peaks.  
The glory of days long past,  
Where can it be found again?*

Regarding this poem, Heo Gyun evaluated it as being "so characteristic of *chimchak* and so full of energy that the fragile, delicate tone is completely erased." In his *Gukjo sisan*, a compilation of poems from the early- and mid-Joseon period, he pointed out that the third couplet of this poem in particular possessed the quality of *chimchak*. As seen in Yi Ju's poem, *chimchak* refers to a poetry style characterized by fresh, new images and dynamic energy. The first four lines, wherein the poet describes a place that was once full of glory, express transience. In the fifth and sixth lines, the poet energizes the poem by describing the wind rising from the vast plains and the bright sun hiding behind mountaintops. The wind symbolizes the sweeping away of past glory, and the sun, which represents that glory, has already disappeared beyond the mountains. Although there is a futile regret for past glory that is expressed in this poem, in the last two lines the poet ends with the calm realization of the rise and fall of all things. This earned the poem a positive evaluation as overcoming weakness and avoiding excessive sorrow, even while reflecting on the glory of a past era. Because of this, Heo Gyun recognized this poem, along with Yi Ju's poetry, as one of the best poems written in the High-Tang style.

To sum up, in order to achieve an optimum standard of poetry in the Mid-Joseon period, it was necessary to eliminate the frail style of Late-Tang poetry. Therefore, the High-Tang style with its quality of *chimchak* could be highly valued in those days.

## Bibliography

- Heo, Gyun. 1611. *Seongsu sihwa*. In *Seongso bubugo, gwon 25. Hanguk munjip chonggan* (Korean Collected Works), vol. 74. Seoul: Korean Classics Research Institute.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1697/1934. *Gukjo sisan*. Repr. *Cheonggu pungu, Gukjo sisan*. Seoul: Asea

Munhwasa.

Jeong, Min. 1996. "Simnyuk-chil segi hakdangpung-ui seonggyeok-gwa geu pungjeong" (Characteristics and Circumstances of the Tang Style in the 16th and 17th Century). *Hanguk hanmunhak yeongu* (Journal of Korean Literature in Hanmun) 19: 189-222.

Owen, Stephen. 1992. *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University.

Peng, Huizi, ed. 1991. *Jungguo meixue cidian* (Chinese Aesthetic Dictionary). Guangxi: Guangxi Jiaoyu Chubanshe.

Sin, Heum. 1618. *Cheongchang yeondam*. In *Sangchon-go*, gwon 50 and 51. *Hanguk munjip chonggan* (Korean Collected Works), vol. 72. Seoul: Korean Classics Research Institute.

Yi, Jong-muk. 1995. "Joseon jeon-gi hansui dangpung-e daehayeo" (Regarding Tang Style Poetry in the Early Joseon Period). *Hanguk hanmunhak yeongu* (Journal of Korean Literature in Hanmun) 18: 207-238.

Yi, Su-gwang. 1614. *Jibong yuseol*. Translated by Nam Man-seong. Seoul: Eul Yoo Publishing Co.

Yoshikawa, Kojiro. 1967. *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*. Translated by Burton Watson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

## Glossary

|                                 |                           |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Balhae 渤海                       | Li Shang-yin (Ch.) 李商隱    |
| <i>Cheongchang yeondam</i> 晴窓軟談 | Manghaesa 望海寺             |
| <i>chimchak</i> 沈着              | Sarim 士林                  |
| Guangling (Ch.) 廣陵              | <i>Seongsu sihwa</i> 惺叟詩話 |
| <i>Gukjo sisan</i> 國朝詩刪         | <i>sihwa</i> 詩話           |
| Gwangjin 廣津                     | Wei Yingwu (Ch.) 韋應物      |
| Gwangnaru 廣那魯                   | Wulu (Mt.) (Ch.) 霧麗山      |
| Jiangxi (Ch.) 江西                |                           |