

Locating *Kūmo sinhwa* within the History of
World Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines *Kūmo sinhwa*, the collection of stories by the fifteenth-century Chosŏn philosopher and writer Kim Sisŭp (1435–1493) within the history of world literature by focusing on its unique contribution as one of the earliest forms of prose fiction and wider impact on the literary tradition of other countries. Kim's *Kūmo sinhwa* was a work of prose fiction that appeared at a relatively early period in history and an important work that reflects the principles and development of the literary tradition in Chosŏn. The stories in *Kūmo sinhwa*, descriptive of the tendencies and aims of its people and filled with trenchant criticisms of social problems, hold their rightful place in the canon of fifteenth-century world literature. *Kūmo sinhwa* is also notable in the influence that it has exercised on foreign literary traditions. Kim's stories attracted a devoted readership in Japan, and they played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Japanese story collection *Otogibōko*.

Keywords: *Kūmo sinhwa*, Kim Sisŭp, literary tradition, Chosŏn, world literature, prose fiction

Having occupied the same land since time immemorial and united by blood and language, the Korean people have nurtured through the ages a vibrant indigenous culture and made numerous contributions to literary history. Among these is *Kūmo sinhwa*, the collection of stories by the fifteenth-century Chosŏn philosopher and writer Kim Sisŭp (1435–1493). Although there has been considerable research devoted to this work, these efforts cannot be said to have done it justice.

This paper aims to reevaluate the place of fifteenth-century Chosŏn fiction in world literature by examining *Kūmo sinhwa* from a literary point of view. Firstly, Kim's *Kūmo sinhwa* is notable for being a work of prose fiction that appeared at a relatively early period in history. Although the novel is considered to have developed later than poetry and drama, its history is nevertheless a long one. By the fifteenth century, there was prose fiction being produced in Chosŏn, China, and Japan in East Asia, and in present-day Italy and other Western European countries. Nevertheless, the list of countries that have a history of producing prose fiction is short, and when it comes to collections of short fiction, there are not many countries apart from Chosŏn, China, and Italy.

In Chosŏn, short fiction was being produced as early as the eleventh century: there is evidence that Pak Inryang's *Suijŏn* was the first ever collection of prose fiction, but regrettably its history has not been fully accounted for. In the Ming Dynasty, *Jiandeng Xinhua* by Qu You was published, and fourteenth-century Florence saw the emergence of Boccaccio's Decameron, widely considered the progenitor of the short story collection.

In general, short fiction addresses the human experience through the treatment of a limited number of characters and events under a unified theme, and among its characteristics can be counted allusiveness and brevity of expression. As a compilation of stories recognized for their intellectual and artistic merit, the short story collection serves as a reflection of its milieu, and highlights in particular its literary culture and the principles and exigencies of literary development in a given time period.

For all its brevity, the short story collection can therefore assume greater importance than novels and novellas and can exercise considerable influence on subsequent literary culture: the pride of place held by Boccaccio's *Decameron* in European literature and *Kūmo sinhwa*'s influence on Chosŏn prose fiction both bear witness to the importance of short fiction in literary history.

Published in 1464, *Kūmo sinhwa* was the first collection of prose fiction in Chosŏn history to be attributed to a single author. Featuring all the genre characteristics of a novel, it paved the way for the further development of the novel in fifteenth-century Chosŏn. *Kūmo sinhwa* is comprised of five separate stories, but judging from the fact that the last story is marked volume one, it seems that it was intended to be a multi-volume work, as borne out by Yu Hūiryŏng's statement in *Taedong yŏnju shigyŏk* that "Kim wrote multiple books for *Kūmo sinhwa* and kept adding poems to it."

The fifteenth century in Europe saw the rise and proliferation of humanist literature. This literature developed in Western Europe, with Florence, France, and England leading the way. Of all the countries in Western Europe, the Italian city states—with their flourishing mercantile culture—were the first to give rise to this literary revival. Along with Dante and Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio is a foundational figure in Italian literature who laid the groundwork for a Golden Age of Italian literature in the latter half of the fourteenth century.

Where Dante and Petrarch made their mark in epic and lyric verse respectively, Boccaccio succeeded in establishing the intellectual and artistic merit of prose fiction in works like the *Decameron* and *The Elegy of Lady Fiametta*. It is because of his role in legitimizing prose in the verse-centric literary culture of Italy and Europe that Boccaccio is referred to as the "father of prose fiction."

The hundred-some stories in the *Decameron* constitute the origin of prose fiction and especially short fiction in Europe, whose literary culture had hitherto prioritized verse at the expense of prose. Italy was the only European nation at the time to have turned out a notable work of prose, and the *Decameron* is a work *sui generis* in the literature of the time.

The French works that arose as a result of France's proximity to the literary epicenter that was Florence—including Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron*—were all written a full century after *Kūmo sinhwa* was written and published. As such, it can be said that *Kūmo sinhwa*, written in fifteenth century Chosŏn, made a significant contribution to the coffers of world literature at an early stage in the development of short prose fiction.

In addition, the stories in *Kūmo sinhwa*, descriptive of the tendencies and aims of its people and filled with trenchant criticisms of social problems, hold their rightful place in the canon of fifteenth-century world literature. If it can be said that the aim of literature is to move readers and to educate them, what makes this possible is the expression of an ideological point of view, which then determines the form and characteristics of the work at hand.

The five stories in *Kūmo sinhwa* can be divided into two categories: stories such as “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch'oe Rang,” “A Game of *Yut* at Manbok Temple,” and “Enjoying the Moon at Pubyŏk Pavilion” delineate the struggles of young lovers struggling against the strictures of their feudal Confucian society; other stories such as “Namyŏmbuju Story” and “Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King” are dreamlike tales that serve as a symbolic expression of the author's sociopolitical musings.

The stories that treat of young love and its moral implications portray the young lovers as sympathetic characters whose quest for pure love runs up against the selfishness and materialism of their parents, who would force their children into traditional feudal marriages that they deem proper.

In such works, the author addresses the struggle to break free of the strictures of feudalism and Confucianism, and succeeds admirably in portraying the thoughts and actions of individuals caught up in this conflict. These works take as their subject the liberation of the will: by portraying characters who take it upon themselves throw off the shackles of Confucian morals and determine their own destiny, these

stories transmit a truth and a message far more serious than those of their predecessors.

In contrast, stories such as “Namyŏmbuju Story” and “Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King” juxtapose utopias against the harsh realities of feudalism and Confucianism, and reflect the author’s critical stance on King Sejo’s rule. In particular, “Namyŏmbuju Story” employs dialogue between its characters as a conduit for the author’s thoughts, ranging from the sociopolitical to the philosophical. In the story, Pak Saeng travels in a dream to an island nation called Namyŏmbuju and meets its potentate, who discusses with Pak Saeng a wide variety of issues—Confucianism, Buddhism, the spirit world, the rise and fall of dynasties—and ultimately decrees that he will cede his throne to Pak Saeng. Through this dialogue, the author expresses his atheistic, humanist world view, and criticizes King Sejo for his usurpation and for the ruthless exploitation of his subjects.

In “Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King,” the author employs the folk legend of the Pagyŏn Falls and the dragon’s underwater palace to contrast his desire for an ideal world with the senselessness and disorder of his society. As the earliest examples of stories in Chosŏn literature that center on utopian societies that provide refuge from exploitation and oppression, “Namyŏmbuju Story” and “Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King” exercised considerable influence on the materialization of the ideal world in later works such as Sim Ŭi’s *Kimong* in the sixteen century, *Tongsŏn Chŏn*, whose author is unknown, and Hŏ Kyun’s *Hong Kiltong Chŏn* in the seventeenth century, and Pak Chiwon’s *Hŏsaeng Chŏn* in the eighteenth century.

It also bears noting that the stories in *Kŭmo sinhwa* are significant works in the context of world literature insofar as they exemplify the characteristics of the short story form. Kim Sisŭp’s stories chart the shift in Chosŏn literary history from a simpler narrative approach to a more descriptive one. Especially memorable is the character of Ch’oe Rang, who defies her parents’ absolute adherence to the Confucian ideal

that would keep women in the boudoir and takes matters into her own hands in her pursuit of love.

Her courage in meeting her fate when she is found out; her resolve that she will not be married off to another suitor; her dignity in the face of her enemies and her strength of character in pursuing her resistance to the death: these characteristics are conveyed not just through simple narration, but through detailed description of Ch'oe's inner world as well as her actions themselves, which testify not just to her courage but to her suffering as well.

In the story, Yi Saeng and Ch'oe Rang are reunited as a result of a foreign invasion. The following passage outlines Yi's inner state with brevity and precision:

Yi Saeng returned to Ch'oe Rang's natal home. The rooms were empty and all he could hear was the skittering of mice and the cries of birds. A wave of grief swept over him. As he walked through, he could do little more than weep and sigh, and soon day grew into night. Sitting in the dark by himself and thinking over everything, he felt that he had dreamt it all. At about the time of the second night watch, something broke the silence and he heard someone coming toward him: it was Ch'oe Rang.

In this story, the author employs various techniques to convey the psychology of the characters: descriptions of nature and the environs are coupled with allusions to custom and descriptions of the characters' actions to convey the inner experience of the people involved. The lyricism that suffuses the whole work is especially salient in the poems that the two characters write to each other, which serve to delineate the setting, the characters, and their psychology.

Succinct yet vivid descriptions ("They spent the next few days exchanging intimate words"; "Not a day passed without Yi Saeng scaling Ch'oe Rang's wall"), memorable details ("The dog pawed the seat of the swing expectantly"), allusions to the inner states of the characters ("The peach blossoms are in full flower and the moonlight shines bright on the marital pillow" "Secret as their love was, the fear of being found out was enough to make their hair stand on end" "The rain and the wind are in

constant sorrow over the news that spring brings”)—all these devices serve to highlight Ch’oe Rang’s boldness and courage on the one hand, and Yi Saeng’s caution and indecisiveness on the other.

The vivid descriptions of the characters’ actions and psychology serve to individuate the characters further. The various descriptive techniques used by the author are of a sophistication unmatched by other works of the time period and can be said to have played a part in broadening the scope of descriptive literature in its nascent phase.

Kim Sisŭp’s work also distinguishes itself in terms of structure, which is characteristic of the story form. In examining its structural features, it is instructive to compare the “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” with a contemporary Chinese work Kim is said to have drawn inspiration from, “Wei tang qi yu ji” from the Ming Dynasty short story collection *Jiandeng Xinhua* by Qu You. The two works are markedly different in structure, and in numerous respects “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” shows itself to be the far more sophisticated work.

First, *Kŭmo sinhwa* embodies the structural characteristics of the short story form. In contrast, the storyline of “Wei tang qi yu ji” consists entirely of simple episodes, e.g., an encounter with a maiden on the way back from a harvest, a dream the protagonist has after returning home, another fateful encounter with the same maiden a year later, their marriage and the domestic happiness that follows.

As for characters in “Wei tang qi yu ji,” there are only three: the protagonist, the maiden and the maiden’s father. There are no interpolations of lyric verse as in the love poems exchanged by Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang, and the coming together of the two characters is handled in two straightforward sequences. The maiden’s father’s character remains vague, and there is nothing comparable to the backstory in “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” of the father’s sitting and passing the civil service examination, for example, nor is there an element of incorporated history as in the separation brought on by a foreign invasion.

In contrast, “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” takes as its point of departure a scene in which Yi Saeng scales

Ch'oe Rang's wall upon hearing her recite a poem, and charts their separation and reunion through three stages. The story also provides a wealth of detail on the forces that thwart them—stultified feudal-Confucian mores, a foreign invasion and eventually Ch'oe Rang's death. By delving into the lives of the two families and incorporating the history of the Red Turban Rebellion, the author adds another dimension to his characterization of the ill-fated couple.

The human relationships of the characters—not just Yi Saeng and Ch'oe Rang but also Ch'oe's parents, Yi's father, the lady-in waiting, the matchmaker, the Red Turbans—are more complex than those in earlier works, but these relationships contribute to the characterization of the two protagonists as well as providing a source of conflict that drives the story forward. And despite this structural complexity, the author's anti-feudal and patriotic sentiments are clear throughout. As Chosŏn-era works that feature all characteristics of the modern novel and short story, Kim's stories are groundbreaking works in the history of Chosŏn literature.

Kūmo sinhwa is also notable in the influence that it has exercised on foreign literary traditions. Kim's stories attracted a devoted readership in Japan, and they played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Japanese story collection *Otogibōko*. Having been introduced to Japan during the Edo period, *Kūmo sinhwa* was published in three stages over the course of twenty years: in 1653, 1660, and 1673.

The third publication (1673) in particular is notable for bearing the imprimatur of the scholar Hayashi Razan. Hayashi was a renowned thinker and politician in Edo Japan who made considerable contributions to both domestic and foreign policy and enjoyed the favor of Tokugawa Ieyasu. Despite his renown as a public figure, however, Hayashi was even better known as a scholar and a pioneer of neo-Confucianism in Japan, and his endorsement of *Kūmo sinhwa* helped it garner an even wider readership.

The copies of *Kūmo sinhwa* that remain in Japan at the central library of Tenri University are as follows: one published before Hayashi Razan (1583–1657) died, another published three years after Hayashi's death (1660), and the last one published sixteen years after Hayashi's death (1673).

It can be surmised, therefore, that Hayashi Razan left his notes on *Kūmo sinhwa* after he read the oldest edition, which was published in 1653, four years before his death. It also appears that Hayashi Razan gave the publisher the original copy and that Hayashi composed his notes after reading the published version.

Although it is not known when and how *Kūmo sinhwa* came to be known in Japan, there is no doubt that it won many devoted readers and that it played an important part in the emergence of *Otogibōko*. First, it is clear that *Kūmo sinhwa* was widely read in Japan. A comparison with another work is telling: after the first wood block print of *Jiandeng Xinhua* was produced in 1421, it was introduced to Japan in 1480, but it took until 1646 for it to be published. In contrast, *Kūmo sinhwa* was published in three stages, first in 1653, then 1660, and finally 1673. This publication history bears witness to *Kūmo sinhwa*'s value, and indicates that it enjoyed a sizeable readership and was widely distributed in Japan.

It goes without saying that the editors involved in its publication would have taken note of Hayashi's stamp of approval; considering also that Asai Ryōi, who wrote *Otogibōko*, was also familiar with the work, there can be little doubt as to the reach of *Kūmo sinhwa* in Japanese literary circles.

Kūmo sinhwa was also instrumental in the emergence of *Otogibōko*. Published in 1666, *Otogibōko* is a collection of prose fiction works from China and Chosŏn compiled by Asai Ryōi. The collection is not just a translation of the original texts but an adaptation of the source material that distinguishes itself from the more faithful translations that came before it. It is precisely because of the creative liberties taken by Asai Ryōi that *Otogibōko* is often considered the progenitor of the Japanese novel.

Of course, this is not to say that all the stories in *Otogibōko* are mere adaptations of *Kūmo sinhwa*. But what is clear is that the stories in the second volume of *Otogibōko* are faithful adaptations of stories from *Kūmo sinhwa*. In *Otogibōko*, "Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King" appears in the first chapter under the title "Raising the Ridge of the Roof of

the Underwater Palace of the Dragon King,” and “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” is presented under the title “Love Completed Based on Song.” The stories have almost identical plots, and the contents and aesthetic characteristics of the two works reveal them to be essentially one and the same.

The protagonists; the Dragon King, the public officials and the three guests; the thunder, lightning, wind and rain witnessed inside the palace: all of these elements are extraordinarily alike in the two works, with the only difference being that the names and the setting have been changed to make them Japanese. The fact that the author chose to place *Kūmo sinhwa* first in order out of some sixty works is indicative also of the author’s admiration for it and suggests more importantly that “Celebrating the Completion of the Framework for an Underwater Palace of the Dragon King” served as the model for *Otogibōko*.

The story “Love Completed Based on Song” in *Otogibōko* is quite transparently an adaptation in Japanese of “Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang” with the setting and the names and ages of the characters changed. The two stories share the same pattern of meeting and parting, and both feature a final farewell brought on by an invasion of foreign marauders. Whether it is Yi Saeng eavesdropping on Ch’oe Rang’s recitation of a poem from the other side of a wall, or Nakatani Heibusho overhearing Makiko’s lament on the transience of her youth in a similar setting, the events that bring the characters together initially and the particulars of their subsequent reunions all mirror each other.

The characters in each story are exactly alike in personality, and the descriptions of the characters’ daily lives are likewise strikingly similar. The following passages are descriptions of the personalities of Yi Saeng, Nakatani Heibusho, Ch’oe Rang, and Makiko:

In Songdo, there was a young man named Yi Saeng who lived by Nakt’a Bridge. He was eighteen, handsome and gifted, and spent much of his time studying literature at Sōnggyun’gwan.

“Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang”

Nakatani Heibusho lived by a bridge. He was twenty, handsome and talented, and he had traveled abroad to study literature.

“Love Completed Based on Song”

I’m a mere girl and it doesn’t frighten me; how is that a man speaks as you do? If we’re ever found out, I promise I’ll be the one to take the blame.

“Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang”

Makiko looks toward the house and replies that she’ll be by his side for a thousand years if he should keep his promise. She sings that she will never tell a living soul, and that she’d rather die than see any harm come to him as a result of her parents’ disapproval.

“Love Completed Based on Song”

When the invaders approached Ch’oe Rang, she became furious, shouting at them: Devils, the lot of you! Kill me if you dare, I’d rather be a spirit trapped in the belly of a wolf than to submit to pigs and dogs like you!

“Love Story of Yi Saeng and Ch’oe Rang”

When Yoichi of Yakushi Temple, tempted by Makiko’s beauty made as to caress her cheek, Makiko screamed that she would never submit to such pack of filthy country bumpkins as they were. With Makiko exhorting them, they murdered her in rage.

“Love Completed Based on Song”

Even a cursory examination excerpts demonstrates that the characters in the two stories are essentially identical apart from their names. The works are virtually indistinguishable in theme, characterization, plotline, and in the description of the environs and the interaction between characters.

As can be seen, *Kūmo sinhwa* played a crucial role in the creation of *Otogibōko*, and thereby made a significant contribution to the development of the Japanese novel. Asai Ryōi’s *Otogibōko* laid the groundwork for later Japanese genres such as *ukiyo-zōshi*, or “books of the floating world,” and the *yomihon*, or the “reading books,” and the influence of

Kūmo sinhwa extends into the Meiji period: around the time Japan abolished feudalism and embarked on its process of modernization, *Kūmo sinhwa* was published yet again.

A well-known Japanese critic has lavished praise on *Kūmo sinhwa*, noting, “Everything about the work—from the theme to the portrayal of the people and customs of Chosŏn as well as the prose itself—is quite original, and it is a memorably testament to the indomitable spirit of its author.”

It is clear that Kim Sisŭp’s *Kūmo sinhwa* is an important work that reflects the principles and development of the literary tradition in Chosŏn, and that it belongs in the highest ranks of world literature. Having occupied the same land since time immemorial and united by blood and language, the Korean people have nurtured through the ages a vibrant indigenous culture and made numerous contributions to literary history. Among these is *Kūmo sinhwa*, the collection of stories by the fifteenth-century Chosŏn philosopher and writer Kim Sisŭp. Although there has been considerable research devoted to this work, these efforts cannot be said to have done it justice.