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Book Review

Prospect for the Future of Research on Korean Children's Literature

Figuring Korean Futures: Children's Literature in Modern Korea, by Dafna Zur. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 304 pages. ISBN: 9781503601680.

Eun-Sook CHO

I was exceedingly glad and pleased to hear the recent news on the publication of Professor Dafna Zur's book, *Figuring Korean Futures*. About ten years ago, Japanese researcher Kiyomi Otake released a Japanese-written book on the history of the relationship between modern Korea and Japanese children's literature in a comparative context (Otake 2008). Zur's publication appears to mark the first time that a scholar in the English-speaking zone produced a scholarly work on the history of Korean children's literature. From now on, it will be regarded as a must-read book for overseas researchers interested in Korean society, culture, and children's literature.

I met the author at an academic conference held in Korea in the early 2000s and remember I was stunned by her fluent Korean and profound understanding of Korean culture and, more than anything else, by her passionate and genuine scholarship. Materials of Korean early modern literature are written in a mixture of Korean and Chinese languages of various styles, which makes the interpretation daunting even for Koreans. Also, a large bulk of them produced during the colonial period were lost in

Eun-Sook CHO is a professor in the Department of Korean Language Education at Chuncheon National University of Education. E-mail: choes@cnue.ac.kr.

the Korean War, and much of the surviving records are inaccessible under the national division into South and North Koreas. The situation is even worse for children's books and other printed materials due to the belated efforts to collect and assemble them into useful materials to allow academic research. While it would be more or less the same in other parts of the world, Korean children's literature has a fewer number of specialized researchers and rudimentary lists of bibliography are lacking. Although the situation has improved greatly since the 2000s with the compilation and reprinting of children's literary magazines in photographic editions (Won 2010) and the collection and release of criticism texts of early modern children's literature (Ryu 2019), researchers often find themselves wasting time and worn out by the sheer difficulty of trying to find even basic materials. Considering the constraining situation, the recent publication of Zur's work makes it even more astonishing and valuable.

This book consists of eight chapters, including the introduction and the epilogue. The author examines the formation and development of Korean children's literature in a temporal order from the early twentieth century to the post-Korean War period. The most flashing key word across the entire chapters is "tongsim" (child-heart). Throughout the chapters, she delves into the complex and multi-faceted phenomena in the history of Korean children's literature during the first half of the twentieth century holding on to the prism of "from the discovery to the disintegration of tongsim." It introduces a broad spectrum of discourses on society and culture which reveal the milieu of the time and meticulously cites numerous authors and their works whose names and titles are likely unfamiliar to foreign researchers. It is rather daunting to attempt to make a brief summary of the extensive contents of the book, but let me give it a try.

Firstly, the importance of children as agents to adopt a new culture and build the nation-state in Korea during the early twentieth century when it was in transition to the modern era. Secondly, entering the 1920s, the image of pure tongsim unique to children was generated in the deployment of the children's culture movement and their increasing visibility as individuals of different character in comparison to adults. Thirdly, literary styles suiting

the child reader were developed with the discovery of tongsim, and Korean translations of a broad range of stories, e.g., the Grimm Brothers' folk tales, contributed to the establishment of the genre of children's literature. Fourthly, the early tongsim-oriented literature, whose representative figures included Bang Jeong-hwan, underwent reconceptualization amidst criticism from the proletarian literary groups which had a heyday between the late 1920s and the mid 1930s. Fifthly, children were looked upon as small warriors affiliated to the state under the influence of the imperialist war in the late period of Japanese colonial domination. Sixthly, with the emergence of urgent epochal agendas in the liberation and post-war periods to rebuild the nation from the ashes of the war and revitalize the economy by relying on the power of technology and science, the tie of "children=purity=nature," which constituted the image of tongsim, fell apart at last. Young existences were no longer conceived as part of nature and came to be recognized as delegates to control and dominate nature.

As shown in the summary, the author views that, experiencing colonial domination in the early twentieth century and the national division following the liberation, Korea had a strong motivation to imagine the children as future actors who would solve the problems at hand, and this historical context contributed to the development of Korean children's literature of its own vein. The book title, *Figuring Korean Futures*, succinctly illustrates her perspective on Korean children's literature.

As the author notes, tongsim seems to be a useful keyword which explains Korean children's literature. I also have stressed that the concept tongsim played an important mediating role in constituting the identity of Korean children's literature as a genre during its early period (E. Cho 2009). The modern consciousness of the "child," which was ignited in the colonial context of the early twentieth century, exerted a critical influence on the formation of children's literature. Specifically, most researchers of children's literature agree to the fact that the term tongsim—one which represents a modern recognition of the child in the history of Korean literature—had undergone the incessant process of appropriation, disintegration, and reconstruction. Because of that, it seems an appropriate attempt to illuminate

the development of Korean children's literature based on the theme of how the concept tongsim was reconstructed depending on the temporal period and the stakeholders concerned.

A particularly novel and striking interpretation the author makes in the progression of the discussion based on the reverberating theme of "from the discovery to the disintegration of tongsim" regards the one on the post-Korean War period when tongsim was seen to be "broken."

> As this book has argued, the bond between child and nature, captured by the term tongsim was at the center of children's literature from its emergence in the early twentieth century. The concept of tongsim held that the child was natural, on the threshold of culture but not yet fully inducted into it. It shaped the language, narrative content, and images written and illustrated for children, as well as four decades of discourse about the intellectual and emotional needs of Korea's future generations. Tongsim both described and prescribed what was deemed "natural" whether this meant an agent of pure sentiment, a rebel, a colonial subject, or a national citizen. But with the end of the Korean War and with all hopes pinned on the promise of freedom and progress delivered by science and technology, the bond between child and nature was broken. No longer was the child an extension of nature. Rather, the child was now an agent tasked with the control of nature and sometimes a victim of nature's sinister tendencies. North and South Korean writers diverged in their confidence in humankind's ability to expose and overcome nature's obstacles. Either way, the child was now integrated as a social and political being, one as much implicated in politics and affected by the whims of nature as adults. (pp. 192–193)

In the description on this period which is pertinent to the epilogue of the book, the author takes note that the ideology of "scientism" wielded a strong power in South and North Koreas. After witnessing atomic bombing ending World War II, Koreans perceived the vehement rally of escalating military expenditure and space exploration between the United States and the Soviet Union as an issue directly related to their national security, and were naturally

persuaded by the importance of science. The author holds that science was emphasized in both Koreas after the Korean War not just at the policy level for national security and economic growth, but it was embraced proactively in mundane life, thus bringing fame to science fiction (SF) which harbored scientific thinking and vernacular. A core argument of the author is that scientism reflected in SF allowed people to imagine the physical world as something logically comprehensible and accessible, and posited children as subjects to "conquer" and "control" the natural world, thereby breaking down the representation of the child in a close bond with nature from the early period of the modern era.

She buttresses the argument rather persuasively by conducting a concrete analysis of SF works produced in both Koreas after the national division. It is worth noting that her analysis is pioneering as North Korea's SF literature had hardly been studied by South Korean researchers of children's literature up until a decade ago. Dong-soo Seo, the author of *Bukhan gwahak hwansangmunhak-gwa utopia* (North Korea's Science Fantasy Literature and the Utopia, 2018) published last year, admitted in the introduction that he did not even know that SF existed in North Korea until he acted as a discussant of Dafna Zur's presentation under the title of "The Utopia and the Environment in North Korean Science Fantasy Literature of the 1960s"[1] in a 2009 conference. It is not an unusual case. Most researchers born and educated in the South have difficulty in imagining North Korean literature simultaneously. Growing up from childhood subjected to the repeated indoctrination of the anti-communist ideology of antagonizing the North in intense South-North confrontations, they find their imagination shrinking or make self-inspection directly and indirectly when they address North Korea issues. One has to make multifold conscious efforts in order not to be trapped in the mindset of simple comparison or the binary framework reinforced over and over with limited information available on the other side in the dearth of mutual exchange. Perhaps, it is impossible in nature for researchers

1. The original title is *1960-nyeondae bukan gwahak hwansang munhak-e natanan yutopia-wa hwangyeong*.

"within" each system to acquire a third-party objective point of view without being obliged to any side. Because of that, it is very interesting to observe how overseas scholars of Korean Studies view North and South Korean literature.

Regarding South Korean SF, domestic researchers appear to hold a similar conclusive view to the author's. That is, they believe that in the age of space competition, children/adolescent SF popularized science for the young audience, which resulted in generating interest in the space race and the Cold War, and cast an optimistic view on the future of technology. Examining the ways that foreign SF works were adopted in children/adolescent literature during the 1970s, Ae-soon Choi asserts that science depicted by SF classics such as H.G. Wells' highlighted "a sense of superiority that only humans can dominate the world and a future outlook for the infinite potentiality of advancement and progression" rather than the suspicion and fear of its ultimate use for destroying the humankind or mounting space war. That was the consequence of the combination of the national aspiration to join the rank of developed countries—taking after the model of powerful nations such as the United States—and the emphasis on the role of education for progression and enlightenment (Choi 2013, 213–242). In addition to that, interestingly, the author takes notice that while touting science, SF works of both Koreas exhibited an ambiguous attitude towards supernatural skepticism, social criticism, and the development of science and technology. Her outstanding insight is peered in the argument that despite their different systems, the South and the North revealed homogeneity in the mode of presenting the utopian ideal, each reflecting the other like a mirror.

Ironically, however, my minor gripe and divergent views mainly concern the last part in which the discussion on post-liberation SF is featured with her creative interpretation and insights. First of all, I would like to point out that the way that the formation, development and disintegration of the concept "tongsim" is portrayed in the book may unintentionally invite a misunderstanding that it had died out in the post-liberation period. As indicated in the excerpt above, the author believes that the close bond between children and nature fell apart after the liberation and they, just like adults, became integrated as social and political beings. As a matter of fact,

however, the romanticized view of "tongsim," which referred to the child's pure natural character, was hired quite frequently in the children's literature community of the 1960s and the 1970s when they sought to establish the identity of children's literature based on systematic logic. For example, Jae-cheol Lee repeatedly employed in his *Adong munhak gaeron* (An Introduction to Children's Literature, 1967) and *Hangug hyeondae adong munhaksa* (A History of Korean Children's Literature, 1978) the definition that "children's literature is a special genre of literature created by authors for the intended readership of children and adults with tongsim." Here the concept "tongsim" has its origin in the child's animistic psychology or magical perception of the world, and is abstracted as an intrinsic natural quality of a person who has not lost childlike dreams and longing after growing up. Also, writer Won-soo Lee wrote in *Adongmunhak ipmun* (An Introduction to Children's Literature, 1964) that tongsim is the "childlike, pure, innocent mind uncontaminated by the wear and tear of life." Seok-jung Yun expressed his view in the Magsaysay Award speech in 1978 that tongsim is the natural human mind, the conscience; it has no border and transcends time and space such that one "can communicate and share emotions freely with an animal, a tree, or a stone" (Yun 1988). Especially, the groups endorsing literature for literature's sake and its depoliticization—which were the dominant force in the children's literature community during the 1960s and the 1970s—attempted a logical merging of the concepts of "tongsim" and "fantasy" and presented it as an "antimodern" alternative with which to overcome the contradictions and dark sides of highly developed modern society based on rational reason. Lillian H. Smith's *The Unreluctant Years*, whose Korean translation entitled *Adong munhaknon* (Discussions on Children's Literature) came out in the 1960s, declared children as a "special race different from adults" and their world as "another starry world" (Smith 1966, 7). This conception of the child was often hired as a ground to support the rationale of depoliticized children's literature. In a nutshell, it can be said that although the context had changed from that of the 1920s, the nature-friendly romanticized idea of tongsim still remained powerful in post-war children's literature.

In relation with that, I believe that we need to think about whether the SF

genre was representative of the main stream viewpoint of Korean children's literature in the post-liberation period. I would like to point out that the weight of SF products was somewhat overestimated in South Korea, although I am not certain about it for the North. Needless to say, it is true that the SF genre targeted the child/adolescent reader rather than adults (Kim 2013, 394.),[2] but it can hardly be said to have occupied a central status in South Korean children's literature. After the Korean War, children's literature in the South showed a trait of mixture with a variety of genres in fad. While the author herself delineates on Won-soo Lee's *Sup sok nara* (In the Woods, 1949), the plentiful release of fantasies, such as Lee's *Sup sok nara* and So-cheon Kang's *Kkumeul jjingneun sajingwan* (Photography of Dreams, 1954), which portrayed the experiences of war and national division using the strategy of "epic fantasy," has been evaluated as an important change in the history of South Korean children's literature. It is also worthwhile to recollect that the child/adolescent audience gave overwhelmingly rave support to cheerful "comic novels" such as Heun Pa Cho's *Yalgaejeon* (A Legend of Urchins, 1954). Comic novels written mainly for student readers had the popular epic grammar in which light episodes in school and family are put together as in situation comedies. They earned popularity with attractive mischievous characters and the production of carnival-like situations, behind which was lurking a complex web of phenomena characteristic of Korean society at the time, including some expectations for a US-modeled democracy and education, a light satire of capitalistic mamonism of the era, and the yearning for the construction of a new society. It is notable in the history of culture that comic novels garnered the support of the so-called baby boomers who were born after the Korean War and were followed by the deluge of teenage movies in the 1970s and the 1980s. On the other hand, it is also worth mentioning that reading good books and classical pieces was encouraged by the state-led book reading policy, and boys and girls with a literary bent used to read

2. Ji-young Kim notes that adolescents constituted the most stable readership of SF in the publishing market between the late 1960s and the 1970s and so, space action dramas adopting the plot of adventure novels which were most favored by children and youths, took a large share in the lists of books made entry into collected works.

masterpiece fairy tales and world classics printed in thick-volume book series, enamored by refinement and sophistication. In short, while SF could be an adequate locus of comparison between post-war South and North Koreas in the relationship of national policy and the view of the child, it needs to be clarified that it was not a main genre representative of children's literature. As the author points out, there has been a tendency in Korean children literature to conceive the child in association with the vision for the "future" of nation and state. Since its early period, children represented the hopes of the future. Expressions such as "think about Korea in ten years' time" or "raise good children to have a better life" were widely and routinely used like an idiom, and children's books were conceived in tune with that. While the expectations for children contributed to lifting their status in society and stressing the necessity for implementing multifarious cultural projects for them, there is room for reconsideration at the current juncture. Because children's books implicate the adult's privileged position that tongsim is always transparently knowable. We need to listen to Professor Zur's arguments to reflect on and rethink about Korean children's literature.

Further, in order to prevent our researches from aiding in the portrayal of children and adolescents as passive subjects of illumination, we need to study in parallel efforts how to unravel their active response. It is because, while it is true that children have been regarded as the objects of enlightenment, such intentions have not always been successfully implemented. What would it mean to become a reader of such magazines as *Eorini* (Children), *Sinsonyeon* (New Youth), *Byeolnara* (A Starry World), and *Hakwon* (A Garden of Learning)? If we pay attention to what sorts of communication arena and culture were generated in the readership, I think, we may be able to discover new facets that have been invisible up to now. I look forward to future researches to be made on the autonomous communication structure of child/adolescent readers and the creation of peer culture thereon.

Sunyoung Park once remarked, "Scholars who begin to study 'Korean literature' in the United States may still find it somewhat elusive, without a firm presence within the field. Books are piled up in the shelves, but how to array them is not very clear; they have not yet been transformed into

systematic knowledge based on logic and remain as a subject of study devoid of form" (Park 2014, 560). Professor Zur's recent research product carries great significance in providing researchers with a valuable book to fall on with ample information on children's book authors, writings, and related materials on one hand, and offering an angle of deciphering a logical connection between them on the other hand. I sincerely welcome her laborious work which demonstrates the potentiality of children's literature as a constituent of Korean Studies.

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