

12-2013

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Recommended Citation

de Fremery, Wayne, "Dance of Anguish: Poetic Texts from 1920s Korea" (2013). *Barowsky School of Business | Faculty Scholarship*. 16.

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CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Dance of Anguish: Poetic Texts from 1920s Korea

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As bibliographer D. F. McKenzie has suggested, the book is an expressive form. This means that “the fine details of typography and layout, the material signs which constitute a text” (McKenzie 1999, 25) signify. Therefore, the “human motives and interactions that texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption” (McKenzie 1999, 15) are also implicitly part of what a text means. The objectives and relations McKenzie describes are those of authors, of course, but also those of the whole spectrum of people involved in a text’s creation and dissemination—what McKenzie has termed the sociology of a text. How the fine details of Korean literary artifacts may impact our appreciation of what they may mean has been all but ignored by scholars of modern Korean literature. Bibliographic descriptions of the artifacts of early twentieth-century literature and research detailing the people and technologies most directly involved in their physical production are almost entirely absent from discourses about twentieth-century Korean literature. Our understanding of this literature is acutely circumscribed by our ignorance of how its texts were made.

This photo essay aims to demonstrate the anguished state of Korea’s literary artifacts from the early twentieth century and, by extension, textual studies as they pertain to this period of Korean textual history. Images of a damaged second edition of Kim Ŏk’s translation of mostly French symbolist poetry, *Dance of Anguish* (Onoe ũi mudo, 1923), captured in the warm light of O Yŏng-sik’s archive, feature prominently. Other images have been selected to suggest, impressionistically, some of the work that needs to be done to excavate the textual record of early twentieth-century Korea, especially as it relates to Korean literature. The photo essay begins with a montage featuring the covers of vernacular books of Korean poetry from the 1920s,

as well as a similar montage suggesting how vernacular Korean poetry was laid out on the pages of poetry collections. These images, like others presented here, are meant to complement my longer article, “Printshops, Pressmen, and the Poetic Page in Colonial Korea,” which also appears in this issue of *Cross-Currents*.¹

The intent of this photo essay is to reveal the tortured beauty of Korea’s poetic texts and inspire more concerted efforts to preserve and understand Korea’s twentieth-century literary and textual history. The acidic papers used to make much of Korea’s twentieth-century textual record are already crumbling, which means that we are racing against the clock if we wish to know and safeguard the texts created on the Korean peninsula during the first decades of the last century. The good news is that if we begin to take the study of Korea’s twentieth-century textual artifacts seriously, we will not only reveal Korea’s literature in meaningful new ways but also shed light on the people and technologies that created the texts, thereby enriching our understanding of Korea’s cultural history. As McKenzie writes, “In the ubiquity and variety of its evidence, bibliography as the sociology of texts has an unrivalled power to resurrect authors in their own time, and readers at any time. . . . It can, in short, show the human presence in any recorded text” (McKenzie 1999, 28–29).

The human stories suggested by the physical contours of Korea’s early twentieth-century books have gone unrecognized, along with how these stories and the physical presence of a text can affect our hermeneutical activities. They have gone unheard, in effect, because of reading practices that overlook the material medium that instantiates any text. If a richer understanding of cultural activity during Korea’s fraught twentieth century is an aim, it is imperative that we begin to read Korea’s literature for all that its physical texts articulate in their silence.

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Notes

- 1 I wish to thank all of those who kindly opened their archives and allowed me to take the photographs that appear here. Regrettably, the list of people to whom I am indebted is too long to present here. Indeed such a list would be longer than this short introduction. Please see de Fremery (2011), particularly the acknowledgements, for a more thorough description of my sincere gratitude to all those that have made my research and this photo essay possible.

References

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