POETS AND POETRY OF ANCIENT KOREA

By JOAN S. GRIGSBY—ILLUSTRATED BY LILIAN MILLER

Author's Note: The poems quoted in this article are based upon literal translations gathered from various sources, chiefly from the works of Dr. James S. Gale. Absolutely literal translations would offer little of interest to the western reader and would fail to convey the beauty of Korean verse. The Korean, studying a poem in ideographs, or "picture writing," fills in, from these, a wealth of color, light and sound. The result is the perfect spiritual union of poem and picture which the oriental mind habitually creates. I have endeavored to fill in with words just sufficient of the picture to render the poem acceptable to western minds. I have striven to avoid the use of added imagery. Occasionally, however, certain additions have seemed advisable in order to avoid obscurity. In such cases comparison has been made with the usages of contemporary poets and of the conventions of the period under consideration.

I

From the early centuries of the Christian era Korea —the "Land of Morning Calm"—paid honor to scholastic achievement. The scholar, no matter of how humble birth, had *entrée* to the imperial court and received preferment when political appointments were awarded. But with certain notable exceptions poets seldom proved successful politicians. Many of Korea's finest poems were written by statesmen after they had been exiled from the imperial court on account of failure in official posts which they were obviously unfitted to fill.

From 957 A.D. the center of Korea's civilization was an institution known as the *Kwagu*, or Government Examinations. Of these the writing of poetry was an integral part. Every boy with any pretension to intelligence set the Kwagu as his standard of success, and the toil which went to this achievement was so terrific that many broke beneath the strain. Four successive degrees had to be passed at intervals of two or three years. The examination of the fourth degree was held triennially in the emperor's palace. To "hold the brush in the presence of His Majesty" was the highest ambition of every poet. Those who succeeded became *Han-Lin*, members of the Imperial Academy, or, in the popular phraseology, "walked in the Forest of Brushes."

The popular life of ancient Korea was impregnated with literature. Verse-making was instinctive upon every occasion and with all classes. One of the earliest recorded verses was made by King Yoori in the year 17 B.C. His Queen had left him, owing to a quarrel with the secondary wife. Yoori followed the Queen, but she refused to be reconciled. Returning sorrowfully from his fruitless journey, he saw a pair of orioles on the branch of a tree and made the following song:

"In yellow sunlight on the golden road
I stand alone.
All, all is mine—rice fields and golden road,
All but the one thing I desire.

"In a tree by the road two yellow birds are mating.
Why must they sing so gaily?"

The influence of Chinese thought upon Korean poetry is easily discernible. While the T'ang Dynasty ruled China, this influence became so marked that the student is wise to distinguish carefully between T'ang poems which were so popular in Korea that they practically became national property, and those which were written by Korean poets after the T'ang style, yet retained something of the Korean spirit.

The early literature of the country was affected by its geographical position as an isolated and mountainous peninsula. Travel was slow and arduous, communication with other countries very difficult. Yet poetical descriptions of journeys are found in early records. Incidental verses "inscribed while traveling" offer one of the most delightful aspects of Korean poetry. They are usually short lyrical sketches which afford scope for the exercise of the intimate and often humorous observation that was so marked a characteristic of the old-time Korean. The following "While Traveling as Envoy to China" by Yi Chung-kwi (1564) is a good illustration of this type of poem:

"Peaceful this inn upon the river's brink,
Where pale green willows trail above the reeds.
Here clouds of blossom break the soft blue haze
Of morning skies. And here the evening falls,
A silken banner from the mountain walls.
Long days of travel line my weary face,
Yet have I known no hour of calmer rest
Than this. My thoughts are like the willow boughs,
Waved to and fro upon the rippling stream.
My rhymes are ripples, breaking from a dream."

Love poems were practically ruled out so far as the scholar was concerned. The western poet finds in the relation between man and woman an inexhaustible theme: to the Korean this relationship implies merely a bodily satisfaction as commonplace as that of eating when hungry and far less esthetic than the drinking of wine among friends. Discursive essays in poetic form were popular,

but these are tedious and offer little attraction to the western reader. The same applies to certain political satires which, though clever, are useful only to the student in search of a background for the literature. Apart from these, the subjects favored by Korean poets may be classed roughly under three headings—meditative poems, poems of friendship, including posthumous tributes and laments, humorous poems. Of these last only very few are susceptible of translation. One example, "Meditating on the Start of a New Era," may be given here as typical of the "double meaning" satirical poem so popular in early Korea. Of the author, Yi Inlo, very little of a definite character is known. He was recognized as a great man of his time, which was the middle of the eleventh century, but he left few poems for posterity.

"*My candle burns a flame of jade.*
The peachwood comb goes through my hair,
This way and that. ***My head is clean.***
The old dead hairs fall to the ground.
I build my topknot fresh and firm.
Would that we so might comb the State
Free of her follies and her greed!
So cast aside old dead ideas
And build new strength to face our foes!

"*Too soon my candle gutters down.*
The flame of jade is lost in grease
And sleep drowns my desires."

For the meditative poems the favorite subject of the

Lilian Miller, well known for her wood-block prints, has made these illustrations, in her black-and-white oriental ink style, here first shown in America

"Where pale green willows trail above the reeds"—from a poem composed by Yi Chung-kwi (16th C.) while traveling as an envoy to China

Korean courtyard by moonlight, illustrating the line "A shadow pine tree grows upon my wall"—from a song by Choi Choong (2nd C.)

Korean is the moon, which has enchanted him throughout the centuries. He never wearies of inventing new metaphors by which to describe it. "The Smokeless Torch," "The Amber Moon," "The Wide-Cool Palace"—these and more florid imageries appear so frequently that one has to use discrimination when translating in order to avoid tedious repetition. The clarity of the Korean moonlight has a magical quality which turns a squalid village into a "street of jade." The following song, "In the Night," was written during the early second century by Choi Choong, who is described as "a man of commanding presence and uprightness of heart." It was originally written to be sung with harp and drum:

"Light of the silver torch that has no smoke
Recalls me from the seventh world of sleep.
A shadow pine tree grows upon my wall.
On the white paper of my window screen
A shadow hill by shadow brush is drawn.
All life is shadow in my room tonight.
I know not if I wake or if I sleep—
Music breathes through the silence; can it be
Wind in the shadow pine tree—or a song
Drawn from a hidden harp that has no string?"

Between the sixth and the eighteenth centuries, while Korea reached and then gradually fell away from the peak of its culture, intellectual friendships among men exercised an immense influence over literature. Two youths of kindred ambitions would decide to study and to

enter for the Kwagu together. They would then take the "Oath of the Peach Orchard," or oath of eternal friendship, which is binding throughout life and beyond death. From such roots sprang some of Korea's rarest literary flowers. Mutual encouragement and informed criticism kept the standards high. When one friend died, the posthumous tribute offered by the other often touched great heights. I select the following "Lament for His Master" by Yi Soong-in (about 1400) as typical of this class of poem. The use of the word "master" does not necessarily imply either servitude or the relation of teacher and pupil: it is the term which comes nearest to a word used by Koreans to express a respect and affection evoked by superior intellectual ability.

"My heart is full of sorrow; for the sound
Of crickets, chirping gaily in the rain,
Is like his laughter, coming back again.

"My eyes are full of sorrow; for the dawn—
A crimson tapestry on hills of jade—
Is like his robe of red and green brocade.

"My house is full of sorrow; for the sounds
Of all the voices in the courtyard seem
To mock his voice that now is but a dream."

Another delightful form of intellectual comradeship was found in the groups which gathered around the *Su-wun*, or country study halls, where scholars of the district met to discuss the sacred writings, to study and to teach. For several centuries these study halls, each of which was dedicated to some noted saint and sheltered his spirit tablet, exercised a stimulative influence on literary and religious thought.

One of the greatest study leaders of the Su-wun was Yi Chung-kwi, whose poem "While Traveling as an Envoy to China" has already been quoted. A story is told of Yi which illustrates the fashion in which many poems of his day were composed. He was sent, together with his students, to meet a visiting envoy from China, one Choo Chi-pun, a famous master of the pen. They met at Pyeng-yang, a city some distance to the north of Seoul, the capital. Choo Chi-pun stepped from his chair, greeted the assembled poets and especially the master, Yi Chung-kwi, whom he requested to compose a poem of a hundred stanzas before cockcrow the following morning. This may have been a joke or a piece of deliberate malice on the part of the Chinese scholar, but, in either case, Yi took the challenge seriously. As soon as Choo Chi-pun had retired, the group of Korean scholars gathered into consultation. If the poem was not made Korea's scholastic reputation would "lose face"; yet Yi, a man of deliberate thought, did not feel equal to composing so long a poem on such short notice. One scholar suggested that each member of the group should write a part, the results to be pieced together. This suggestion was not acceptable. Finally one, bolder than the rest, Cha Chul-loi ("The Cart") said: "I, who am already a fool, cannot suffer from being regarded as an even greater fool. I will try."

He called for a tall screen, a brazier, a bowl of wine and a fan. Han Suk-pong, a famous calligraphist, sat outside the screen with a roll of fine paper and an ink stone. Cha took a long drink, waved his fan, retired behind the screen and hummed awhile to collect his thoughts. Then came inspiration, and the "fool" sent the poem of one hundred stanzas tripping off while Han dashed the characters on to the scroll. It is said that Cha's topknot could be seen bobbing up and down behind the screen, keeping perfect time to his verses as he chanted them off, one by one. When the poem was finished the scroll was rolled, sealed and carried to Choo Chi-pun, who had only just fallen asleep. On being awakened he was so excited that he immediately began to read the poem aloud. The record says that "the delight of it absorbed his thoughts of sleep and carried his soul up into the ecstatic regions of saints and sages."

II

It is impossible, of course, to convey in a foreign language the exact style of each separate poet as found in the original. There are, however, certain typical trends which are susceptible of elastic grouping. We find, for instance, that the poems of scholars who wrote at leisure out of the contemplative silence of a retired life are of a more finely finished craftsmanship, a more austere imagery than those of the courtier. The contrast between these types is illustrated in two poems of the twelfth century. One of these is by Kwak Yu, a successful statesman whose high scholarly attainments early led him to a choice between a political and a literary career. He chose the former and prospered. His friend and fellow student Yi Chah-yun withdrew from public life at the height of his success and became a hermit. Thirty years later Kwak Yu visited Yi Chah-yun. In accordance with Korean custom each scholar wrote a poem to celebrate the occasion. I give first Kwak Yu's poem:

"Among the mountains, after thirty years,
We meet again who in our youth were one.
We toiled together then by candlelight,
Until the Horn grew pale, the Willow gray.

"But lengthening suns have drawn us far apart.
You turned your eyes away from orchid doors.
The grove of brushes called to you in vain.
Only the blue crane and the silver cloud,
Ever receding, ever drew you on.
Sunset and dawn have been your red brocades,
Moonlight your wine, poured from a lapis bowl.

"Now, with my feet upon the bridge of jade,
I pause, I falter, speechless gaze at you.
How may our spirits meet?"

In almost every line of this poem Kwak Yu employs conventional imagery such as would be dictated by court usage. "Until the Horn grew pale, the Willow gray"—this is a favorite equivalent to "burning the midnight oil." The "orchid door" may be used specifically to designate the women's quarters or it is often descriptive of more varied forms of beauty. In this poem the phrase might refer to the celibate life chosen by Chah-yun, but it is probably a play on words by which Kwak Yu gently teases his friend for his ascetic habits.

An understanding of the many different uses of the metaphor was, in itself, a study within a study and indispensable to the art of poetry. Not only the phrase itself but its grouping and associated ideas contributed to the

Examiners. This record of material advancement is less interesting than the spiritual development of the man's nature. Here a steady flame burned. Music and poetry were his real life. On these he seems to have subsisted, drawing therefrom mystical strength and peace which nothing could disturb. From such a "fortress of the soul" did Yi Kyu Bo look out upon his world with kindly, humorous eyes. Alert, active, liberal in his views of men, he has left behind him a matchless commentary upon his times. His poetry is absolutely individual, and it ranges over an astonishing variety of subjects.

His finest poems are too long to reproduce here. I have selected three of his shorter ones. The first, "Cockcrow," is typical of the word pictures which he loved to make, especially of rural scenes; the second, "Departure," reveals him in a fantastic mood; the third, "On the Death of His Little Daughter," is poignant with the suffering which he understood only too well and which rendered him so readily sympathetic to the sorrows of all men.

"Cockcrow," the first of the three poems, follows:

"The cock crows in his thatched house by the river.
I know that dawn draws near.
The moon grows pale.
Black are the ripples passing, one by one,
Like shadows through the white bridge of the moon.
The dawn breeze wakes where drooping willows sway.
Out of the silence comes a distant song,
Nearer and nearer.
The midnight fishermen are going home.
White are their garments as the white reed flowers,
One with white moonbeams.
Are they ghosts or men?
I cannot tell. Their singing dies away."

Regarding the second poem, "Departure," I find this note: "On the last day of the third moon he makes a fantasy upon the departure of the god of spring."

"The falling petals of the Flower Pavilion
Fashion his perfumed bed.

"There, through the last watch of the moon he rests.
Into his sleep a purple wineflower drips
The fragrance of her dew.
Laughing he wakes. Drunken with blossom breath
He wanders through the garden, seeking love.

"Whom will he take to share his ecstasy?
The peach? Her wanton gifts have wearied him.
The mountain apricot? Too harsh her tone.
But the silk skirts of the peony shimmer like tinted moths.
Her scarlet petals tremble. She falters forth his name.
Even in the Western Garden he would find no fairer flower.

"Swiftly the last watch of the moon goes down
And flames of morning leap from hill to hill.

"Retreating steps— At dawn an empty courtyard,
Departing echoes of his cavalcade.
Peony petals fall in the Flower Pavilion.
There is a sound of tears."

The third poem is, in itself, a comment upon the unusual attitude of Yi Kyu Bo's mind, since in his day, even as now, a daughter was little regarded by the average Korean, whose affections were centered in his sons.

"My little girl with face like shining snow—
How empty now the silent courtyards seem
Where once her gay skirt flashed among the flowers!

"At two she talked like some wise parrot's tongue.
At three, retiring, sweet and very shy,
She hid herself behind the outer gate.
This year, being four, her tiny hand should hold
Her first small brush. I would have taught her well.
But she is gone. Only the brush remains.

"My little pigeon of this troubled nest,
Why did you fly away so very soon?
A flash of light— You came. A flash— You fled.

"I, who have learned to watch the passing days,
Can count them calmly still. But who shall dry
A mother's falling tears?
Across the fields
A raging storm draws near. The ripening grain
Will fall before the howling wind tonight.
Of all we sow how little do we reap!"

Another man with outstanding thoughts and a style somewhat different from that of his fellows was Yi Soong-in, who wrote during the fourteenth century. His "Autumn Song" is a good example of the shorter poem, consisting of strong contrasts within a short space, which was popular at that time and for many years later.

"Leaves of autumn hurrying through the courtyard—
Last year, the patter of dancing footsteps.
This year, the sound of falling tears.

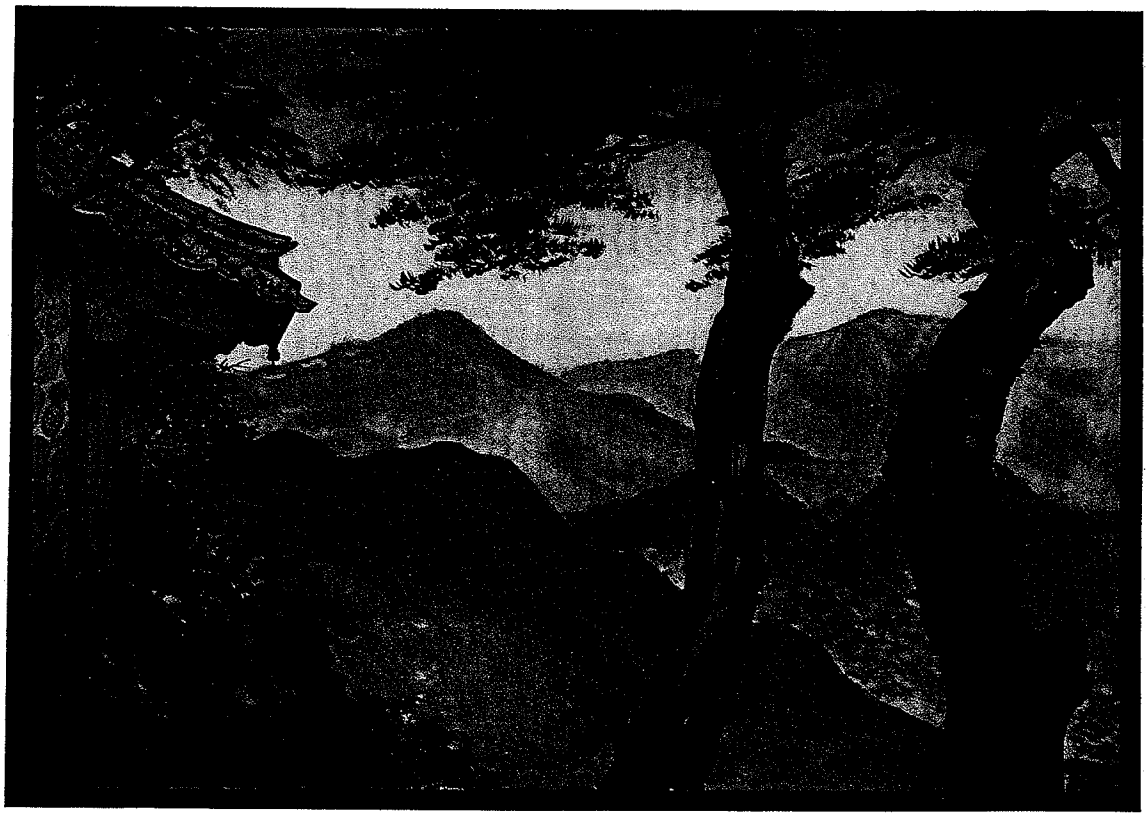
"Dark red maple mirrored in deep water—
Last year, the heart of a happy poet.
This year, the blood of a warrior slain."

An interesting figure of the sixteenth century was Yi-I, or, as he is more frequently called, Yool-kok ("Chestnut Valley"). He is described as "Korea's great saint." A record states that "his name outshines all others." He was a pupil of Yi Whang, whose poem on Chah-yun has already been quoted. The lives of both these men were saddened by a terrible event, the *Moo-o Sa-wha*, or destruction of the scholar class, which left a trail of incalculable suffering behind it. Eventually Yool-kok, who had held many official posts, withdrew to the mountains to lead a life of meditation. The following poem, "Thinking of His Country's Woes," is characteristic:

"Three moons have faded since I told my soul
'This sorrow cannot see another moon.'
But spring came and the withered grass was green,
Came yellow violets and a later moon.
The great rains fell.
The mountain torrents roared.
Then, in the hush that follows after rain,
Green frogs sang shrilly in my garden well.
But still tears fall."

IV

As previously stated, love songs are seldom found



"Gray mountains crowd against the evening sky"—from "Thinking of the Master Yi Chah-yun," by the Korean poet Yi Whang (16th C.)

among the classic poets. There are, nevertheless, certain love poems which demand consideration. These are nearly all the work of concubines, secondary wives and *ki-sang*, or dancing girls, and are therefore anonymous. Though they are seldom counted among the higher achievements of Korean poetry they have their own charm. The following is a typical example:

"*I have dreamed so often of returning footsteps*
And wakened only to the sound of rain,
Beating the willow tree, beating the paper screen,
That now I fear to watch for my lord's returning
Lest I see his shadow fashioned of mist and rain."

V

The decadence of Korean literature set in gradually. With the dawn of the nineteenth century the change was clearly perceptible. As foreigners began to enter the country and as western usages gained foothold, the old sense of values faded out. Scholarship was no longer the most important factor in the national life.

The breach widened between the ancient times and the new. On the one side stood the Korean of the old school, Confucian gentleman, scholar, dreamer, poet, whose spirit wandered frequently and far into the realms that are called "unreal." Opposed to this dignified figure of the past appeared the youth of the present-day Korea. These two scarcely comprehend each other's speech.

Where the literature of Korea stands today or what its future will be no one can say. Sometimes I am tempted to believe that Hong Yang Hao, one of the last great poets, foresaw the end when, in the eighteenth century, he wrote his "Autumn":

"*My horse crushes the dry sticks and dead leaves.*
At every step he awakens the voice of autumn.
Wild winds sweep by with a sound like the tattered skirt
Of an aged dancer."

Yet another of Hong Yang Hao's poems sounds a more hopeful strain as he tells of "Meeting a Priest on a Bridge in the Mountains":

"*On the bridge below the Water Gate*
I saw his shadow lying aslant the stones.
Amidst a thousand flickering leaves
How still he seemed!
I asked him what he sought among these mountains.
He answered not but pointed with his staff
To formless clouds beyond the farthest peak."

And, after all, this is the true note of the Korean poet. He is always pressing upward toward the farthest peak,

"*His spirit listening, and his yearning eyes*
Straining to seek those things they may not see."