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**BOOK REVIEWS**

The Korean Language. Ho-min Sohn, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, XX + 445 pp.

The author of the foremost study of the Korean language in English, A Reference Grammar of Korean (Martin), tells us his opinion of what constitutes a good reference grammar.

“For a reference grammar the most important criterion is balanced completeness. As much useful information as possible must be given in a form that makes it readily accessible to the user. The information that is most often, or most sorely, needed should be the easiest to get at.” (3)

Ho-min Sohn’s The Korean Language comes quite close to meeting the general requirements that Martin has established for a good reference grammar, but it also has certain characteristics that make one wonder whether he actually intended it to be such. In his two-page Preface (xvii-xvii) the author presents a few hints: “aims to present most of the major areas of Korean in as simple and widely received terms as possible, so that the book is accessible to general readers as well as linguists” and avoids terms that “would be meaningful only among specialists and students who keep abreast of the contemporary linguistic trends’’; “It can be used most profitably for university courses such as Introduction to Korean Linguistics and Structure of Korea.” The cover’s inner flap provides such hints as “detailed survey” and “comprehensive introduction.” All this leads us to believe that the book was not intended to serve as an exhaustive grammar of the Korean language but rather a very thorough introduction. To get a better idea of what kind of study this is, and who will want to read it, we can find a few more clues presented further inside the book.

This grammar satisfies many of a reference grammar’s conventional requirements for content, coverage and data. (AVG conducted an enlightening survey of linguists’ expectations of a reference grammar; during your visit to their Web site, read their project to build a universal framework for description of the world’s languages.) It includes the features of a language that are usually covered and most popularly expected in a reference grammar: morphology and syntax, orthography, phonetics and phonology. It also includes many of the features that make a reference grammar a major one: lexicon, dialects, [page 72] orthography, history and genetic information. Sohn’s book, however, does not include coverage of two major subsystems, semantics and pragmatics, nor does it attend to these aspects in its coverage of individual elements of the language. The author claims that his chapter on grammar structure “surveys the syntactic and semantic characteristics of contemporary standard Korean” (p. 265), but this reviewer found no semantic coverage other than translation of Korean words and strings.

The content is covered in a manner conventional to a reference grammar. The most popular method (according to the AVG survey) is descriptive, and described both diachronically (language change) and synchronically (at one stage of development) but primarily synchronically, and Sohn has employed this method and manner; Chapters 2 and 3 (35 page s) are devoted to “Genetic affiliation” and “Historical development” and there are occasional references to change throughout the rest of the book, which focuses on the Korean language currently in use. Another popular expectation among linguists is that “forms and functions should be described together” (AVG). Sohn presents a form (e.g. “9.10.3 Auxiliary predicate constructions”) and then lists the functions that employ this form (e.g. “9-10.3.4 Permission, concession, prohibition, and obligation”).

As for quality of coverage, a comparison of Sohn’s treatment of conditionals with the same in Quirk’s Grammar and Martin’s Reference Grammar should give you some idea. All three cover the conditional as a sub-structure (adverbial clause); Quirk discusses the element’s structural and semantic qualities, Martin presents the structural rules and the element’s many spoken forms, and Sohn simply lists it as an example of the rule of subordination.

The data that Sohn uses to support his coverage is plentiful and, on the whole, clearly presented. For syntax, he uses the format of transcription / structural translation / literal translation:

hal. ape-nim I kuli-sy-ess-e.yo?

grandfather-HT NM draw-SH-PST-POL

“Did grandfather draw (it)?”

It is not possible to determine, from the information that Sohn provides, the source of the corpus that he uses to support his coverage. For all the reader knows, he may have created it according to his needs.

Apparently, navigation in this reference grammar was not given top priority. The Table of Contents is helpful enough; it presents sub-sections to [page 73] even the lowest level. The index, however, is not very helpful to the reader looking for an element that does not represent a major topic, be it a pattern or a word. I tried to find something on the grammar for conditionals but neither ‘conditionals’ nor ‘myo^n’ was listed. In fact, only about fifteen Korean words apparently proper nouns are listed. Cross-referencing is inconsistent. To be fair, though, if the intention of the author was to present a top-down study of the language, it may be asking for too much to expect an index that includes the lowest-level details.

The author states that he wrote this book for all students of the language, from linguists to undergraduates. It is not, however, intended as a textbook for students who are learning to speak the language.

John Holstein, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul

Spirit Bird Journey. Sarah Milledge Nelson, Littleton, Colorado, RK Log Press, 1999.

This is a good read. Its content and style, however, make it a good-better-best sort of book. It concentrates on two distinct and different stories, one the story of a Korean girl, adopted by Americans, who visits Korea, and the other the tale of a prehistoric girl who lived in the Korean area. The second, the tale of the prehistoric girl, is told with sureness and delicacy and reflects the authors expertise in her field, anthropology. There is much to be learned from this section, but there is no hint of academic lecturing. New knowledge comes as result of what happens, what people do, and what they say. This is the best part.

The first story, the modern one, is not told with the same ease and flow as the one in prehistory ana is a bit preachy. It is often awkward and does not carry the same conviction as the other, perhaps because the author is too close to the problems herself and also has problems with the generation gap. This is the better part.

Now we come to the good part. The fact that the author is moving back and forth between two different time periods, which are widely separated, leads to another problem, the problem of moving the story back and forth. Her method often seems forced and contrived, and when the story stays in one period for a long time, it may be difficult for the reader to get his mind working in the correct period when there is a change. The situation changes and improves for the reader as the story advances, since the time spent in one period or the other becomes shorter, and the author stops worrying so much [page 74] about getting the modern girl back and forth in time; she just does it.

Too bad! The editor/proofreader could well have done a better job. There are some pretty rough areas here and there and quite a few minor errors.

The story of the girl in prehistory is an interesting one which gives us some new vantage points from which to view the role of women in ancient times. This certainly is a great improvement over such idiocies as The Flintstones in giving us some ideas about things that might well have happened in the long ago and far away, and it is challenging to try to identify the areas of Korea covered by the story from prehistory.

This is a book well worth reading, especially, because it gives rise to many new questions about things Korean, and also because it gives many new possible or probable insights into them. It opens up many new paths for our thinking to follow concerning Korean prehistory and its results, Korean history, and probably gives the novice many new insights into anthropological studies. Would that there were more such books in English, most especially if they are like the best part.

Gertrude K. Ferrar, Seoul.

A Tiger by the Tail and Other Stories from the Heart of Korea. Linda Soon Curry, Englewood, Colorado, Libraries Unlimited, 1999, 120 pp.

A teller of tales - the tales themselves –the philosophy, culture and history revealed in the twists and turns of plot, character, time and space—A Tiger by the Tail shares them all.

The book begins with a true story - a baby abandoned during the Korean War - found by a serviceman and eventually adopted and raised by a loving Caucasian American family. She had a happy life, but as she matured she became increasingly aware of a need to connect with her biological roots. This she did by exposing herself to Korean culture - friends, food, music, and stories. From these stories, she learned to more fully understand herself. Out of this understanding she has retold some of her favorite tales.

The author, Linda Soon Curry, expresses in her introduction a desire to help other Koreans connect with their roots, in particular her adopted daughter. She has chosen 25 stories and added personal notes and story-telling techniques.

Folk stories from around the globe help us see into the cultures and histories that otherwise might remain unknown to the general populace. It is often through our stories, that values, identities and world views are passed to each generation. The power of stories is so great that sometimes values are passed on unconsciously. There are still young girls seeking for their handsome prince to protect and care for them in spite of the women’s revolution. [page 75] Eventually, as the culture changes, so do the stories.

In most cultures, birth, marriage and death are considered major events. Western folk tales are full of royal births and the eventual quests to find the true princess or the right prince (Cinderella, The Frog Prince). There is usually a power struggle as evidenced by trickery, death and treachery along the way. By plots and spells, young maidens will prick their fingers or eat poison apples, hungry wolves devour grandmothers or grumpy goats kill those who dare trespass on their bridge. Human emotions of love, hate, goodness, evil, generosity and greed seem similarly universal The details of how these are lived out are sometimes different in our cultural stories.

In the first section of tales, eight stories with similarities to Western folk tales are retold. Each teaches such things as the power of love and devotion, loyalty, sacrifice, the results of being greedy rather than being generous, forgiveness, respect and peace. In her notes following each story, the author compares these to Western folk tales, Shakespearean literature and The Bible. In addition to her insights, one might also see the forgiveness of HungBu to his brother NolBu (The Swallow Queen’s Gift) as similar to The Prodigal Son or the reconciliation of the Kings of the North and South Kingdoms (Star Crossed Lovers) as particularly appropriate for today’s North and South political peace talks.

In the second section, six stories are presented that the author feels are of particular significance regarding traditional Korean values. The details of food, family relationships and roles perhaps are typically Korean; however, the lessons depicted are universal. Like the stories with Western counterparts, greed, foolishness, lying, and snobbery are abhorred and kindness, cleverness, and accepting the heart of a person rather than looking at his/her status of birth is rewarded.

Tigers have been significant to Korean culture. The tiger is powerful, yet it can also be gentle in the presence of courage. It is magical in its ability to change from spirit to animal to human, and it has the ability to look inside to a person’s heart.

Tall tales such as The Wealthy Miser, The Charming Flute, Reflections, and The First To Be Served are humorous exaggerations again with universal themes: the power of music and the folly of sneakiness, assumption and presumption.

The illustrations are delightful. The photographs are vivid with clear descriptions. Unfortunately, no Hangul is used for character names or descriptions of objects that are typically Korean. All such items are only transliterated. I feel perhaps this addition would have enhanced the power of [page 76] the book thus helping to connect the reader even further to the Korean culture.

Some ideas which seem universal on the surface may really be quite different, because we read and understand from our own world view. Is there some different underlying cultural significance to the intelligent woman in The Clever Wife than what it seems to be on the surface? Or perhaps we misunderstand the degree to which ideas are universal. In Star Crossed Lovers the daughter leaves her family for the sake of true love. Although Westerners may see that as somewhat painful for the girl, we may even consider her noble in her sacrifice. But how does that seem to a loyal traditional Korean family? Her sacrifice of leaving her family is likely far greater than Westerners could imagine or perhaps it is so improper that unfulfilled love is the consequence. It is perhaps better to read with one eye that says, Oh, I see and another which says, I need to see more deeply.

Elizabeth Else, Seoul

BRIEF NOTICES

Korea: Art and Archaeology. Jane Portal, London, The British Museum, 2000, 240 pp.

Published to commemorate the opening of a permanent Korean Gallery in the British Museum, this book describes and illustrates over a hundred of the greatest achievements of Korean craftsmanship throughout all periods of history on the Korean peninsula. The author has included 100 color and 30 black-and-white photos and illustrations. Topics include metalwork, sculpture, lacquerware, ceramics, painting and printing.

The book is compact, well-designed, and very readable, without being simplistic or hurried. The scope of Korean history and culture has been summarized in such a way as to make the important aspects both interesting and comprehensible to the lay reader.

The author, Assistant Keeper in the Department of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum, is responsible for the Korean collections and Chinese decorative arts.

Think No Evil. C. Fred Alford, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1999, 218 pp.

This is a fascinating study of the contemporary notion of evil as understood and practiced in modern Korean society. The book does not [page 77] approach evil from an abstract metaethical plane, but on the level of everyday experience. The author has interviewed dozens of members of Korean society, from all sectors of human experience and religious beliefs. His examination of Korean values brings valuable and interesting commentary on the current trends of society and the economy in Korea, as well as the political climate. It deals with relationships, not just within the society, but with the world community as well. An important study, worth thoughtful consideration.