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## Early Korean Hymnology

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THE FIRST EVANGELICAL hymnbooks in Korea were the "*Chan mi ka*" of the Northern Methodist Mission, the "*Chan yang ka*" printed by Dr. Underwood about 1893, and a temporary edition of the "*Chan song si*" issued by the Northern Presbyterian Mission in 1895. Many of the first hymns used were translations, or oftener transliterations, into Korean script from the hymnbooks of China, and were full of Chinese derivatives which even Korean experts found harder to understand than the original ideographs. These hymns were written in the ordinary Korean eight foot trochaic, a metre that fits no Western tune, because all our long metre hymns are iambic. To sing them to our tunes was like singing the trochaic "He that goeth forth with weeping" to the tune of the iambic "Wake my soul, in joyful lays". Yet, strange to say, most of the musical people could not see what was wrong.

Then Mrs. Baird wrote an adaption of "Jesus, Savior, pilot me" that fitted the music unusually well and missionary singers began to ask why this hymn was so easy to sing and teach; also why it was so popular among the Koreans. It not only fitted the music but, instead of being packed with Chinese derivatives, it was in the easiest vernacular, such as even the old grandmothers could understand, and weep over, too, as they felt their need of guidance and the comfort the hymn afforded.

The success of this hymn encouraged Mrs. Baird and others to imitate its good qualities. While it may have been possible to cram all the meaning of an English line into a Chinese line it was impossible to crowd in the necessary Korean prepositions, so that one line in English usually makes two lines in Korean. For this reason the translator gave merely the spirit of the hymn in easy, singable Korean.

Some of the hymn writers took up the study of Korean poetry as a help, making note of figures of speech, and the parallelisms, alliterations and refrains that take the place of rhymes in Korean poetry, rhymes being impossible in this language. Frequently the writers preferred composing an original hymn in Korean to a translation and the results were successful, including those by Korean brethren.

New and enlarged editions of these hymnals appeared from time to time. In the second edition of the "*Chan song si*" (1898) the eight foot hymns were all rewritten in iambic or,

where that seemed impossible, were marked “to Korean music” or “Chant”. The chief trouble was that the Korean language is not adapted to iambic meter, few words having the accent on the second syllable, so that the writer had to place a one syllabled word at the beginning of nearly every line and this became monotonous. It might have been better to have omitted all the iambic hymns.

Another fault with the early hymns was that in such crowded lines it was impossible to use the proper honorifics to and of the Deity, and often the low or half-talk of the drinking song was addressed to Him. This was corrected as far as possible.

No small difficulty was the fact that practically none of the Korean assistants knew anything about writing in metre - at least in the iambic - and had to be taught.

When plans for the union hymnbook were being considered, Mr. Bunker asked the Methodist Missions to appoint only those who appreciated the advantage of having the accents of the words match the music, but he alone was able to serve on the committee - the active members of the Presbyterian committee being Mrs. Baird and the writer. This committee made new translations of the hymns that had not already been adapted to their tunes and prepared the “*Chan song ka*”, which has been in use for the past twenty years. It would be interesting to know how many editions and of what size have been issued during that period.

All of these four hymnbooks have brought comfort to tens of thousands of souls during the past forty years. Many Christians purchased the hymnbook before they did the New Testament, and frequently women learned to read in order to read the hymns. It was easier to learn to read hymns they had already committed to memory than to learn from the New Testament, so the hymnbook became their most popular classbook in reading. Noticing this some writers made metrical versions of choice portions of Scripture.

Editions with music were prepared with tedious labor by special committees and were a great convenience to the leaders and organists who previously had to carry an armful of books if they needed the notes.

These hymns were sung to western tunes, they may not have been “idiomatic Korean”, and may not have been “poetical” as a recent Korean writer says, but after forty years they are still sung to western tunes and the Koreans seem to appreciate them. Nor has the new, educated generation supplied their Church with any hymns to eastern tunes unless they be in the revised edition now in the press.

When one stands looking at a house he cannot possibly appreciate the amount of thought, labor and attention to detail that have gone into the structure. So no one can estimate the

hours of labor that went into the weighing and measuring of every syllable and note of the hymn that for many years have sustained the Korean Christians in their trials and eased their deathbeds.