

“Korean Hymns Some Observations.” *The Korean Repository* 4 (May 1897): 184-186.

KOREAN HYMNS - SOME OBSERVATIONS.

KOREANS, like all other peoples, are wonderfully susceptible to melody, and if we are to take advantage of this natural avenue to the heart, the question of the native hymnology becomes one of no small importance.

What constitutes a hymn? A collection of words to be called by the name should be something more than instructive rhyming, reminding us that -

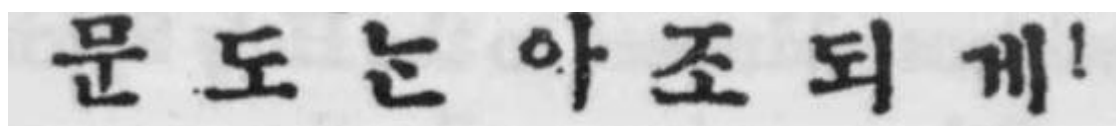
“Birds in their little nests agree;
And ‘tis a shameful sight
When children of one family
Fall out and chide and fight!”

or something more than a rhythmic jingle such as the tuneful number in which Betsey Bobbett -

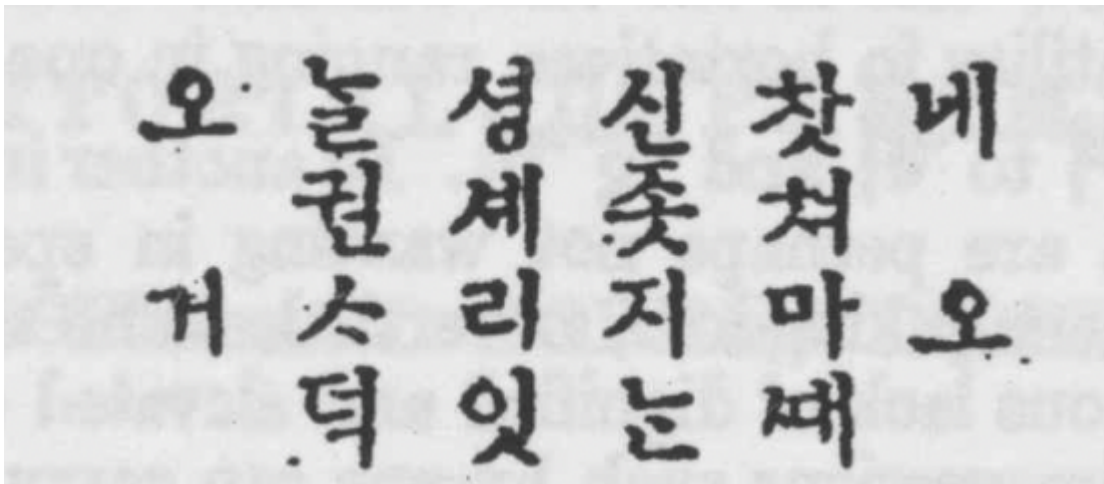
“Sighed to be,
A soothing poultice unto he!”
or a Western poet whose hero, discovering a fair maid in a sad plight -
“On her took pity
And bore her off to Kansas City,
There to meet the foe
Face to face and toe to toe!”

A hymn, to adorn the name and stand the test of that old gentleman Time, who has no regard whatever for the feelings of authors, or the divine untouchableness of their work, ought to embody one or both of two things - prayer and praise. It should combine simplicity and dignity of thought with elevated expression and rhythmic form.

A little study of our hymns reveals the fact that they are commonly deficient in one or more of four points, viz. clearness, meter, stress and honorifics. Being for the most part translations, the thought is usually good, but that it is sometimes obscurely and often awkwardly conveyed to the Korean, few will be disposed to deny. A little straightforward expression of opinion on the part of either foreigners or Koreans, as to what some of our accepted hymns do actually mean, might bring out a curious variety of ideas. What shall we say for instance, of the lines in which the Lamb of Calvary is exhorted, and in terms not gentle, to become a disciple,



Another hymn furnishes lines which, for ominous obscurity, could hardly be surpassed by the Delphic Oracle or Robert Browning.



For brevity of expression this almost rivals that other “poem” sometime referred to as an example of American wit,

I.	II.
Boy	Gun
Gun	Bust
Joy	Boy
Fun.	Dust.

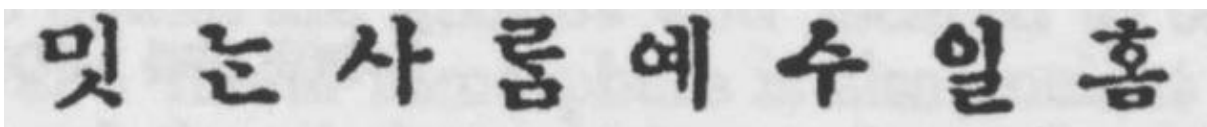
Many hymns which are reasonably felicitous in expression are faulty in meter and stress, especially in the latter particular. “But they can be sung” we say, “and the Koreans like them.” Yes; but can they be scanned - a much more important matter? And as to accepting them we can hardly allow that to be a final test in the matter of poetical construction. Take the line:

“Hark, hark, my soul, angelic songs are swelling.”

and notice how rudely it is shaken from its lofty sweetness, and how absurd is the effect produced in singing, by the simple transposition of the words “angelic songs.”

“Hark, hark, my soul, songs angelic are swelling.”

Is it not a similar effect produced in the line,



when forced to correspond in meter to our English line

“Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing”?

Or in the line

죄 잇는 사람 어두어 못보네

when sung to the tune requiring the stress to be laid on the 2nd, 5th, 8th and 11th syllables. Or more unfortunately still, in a certain well known hymn, not one line of the chorus of which, is reducible in its present form to the laws of scansion.

But more serious than any defect of clearness, meter, or stress, because calculated to convey an injurious impression to the native mind, is the application in many of our hymns of “half talk” and “low talk” to the persons of the Godhead. One otherwise excellent hymn contains in the course of four short verses no less than seven petitions addressed to the Holy Spirit and couched in the 게 form! Others swing easily thro a verse or two irreproachable in meter, stress and honorifics, only to collapse and go to pieces in low talk in the last stanzas. Others show an astonishing versatility in hortatives ranging in one short stanza from 하옵소서 to 해 and 하게. In another instance where actual honorifics are perhaps not wanting in speaking of the things of the heavenly kingdom, nevertheless the taste is offended by a conspicuous lack of dignified and elevated expression.

Just what impressions such hymns can carry to the native mind, of the majesty and sovereignty of that Being to whom they are addressed, and of that reverence and godly fear which should characterize approach to Him, it is not altogether pleasant to conjecture. These few observations are not made in the spirit of one who enjoys tearing down where he cannot himself build up, but are presented to the hymn-writers in the hope that they will avoid, in the future, some of the rocks upon which many of the barks of the past have split. It is not to be supposed that the writers of hymns in present use do not know that the thought should be clearly expressed, the meter and stress perfect, and the style of address to the Deity reverent and consistent, but they urge, and with much reason, that the difficulties of translation are such that these defects are almost unavoidable. Then why not try something in the way of original versification? All you would have to do, as one student of Korean hymns happily expressed it, would be to “think in meter.” Somebody please think in meter and give us as the result of some good original hymns.

LOOKING FORWARD.

Hangul text in **bold** indicates where an approximation to modern hangul has been used instead of the original.

Images of Korean text from the original document have been reproduced here where appropriate.