

A Yang for Every Yin: Dramatizations of Korean Classics

Preface

The title of our book presents the message that all of our stories deliver. It comes from a song in *Harelip*: “Though it’s quite a fix you’re in, there’s a thick for every thin, there’s a yang for every yin.”

The Chinese developed the cosmic philosophy of yin and yang almost 5,000 years ago, and it eventually became a basic principle in Taoism, Confucianism, Shamanism and Buddhism. This system of thought represents the way the world and life work. Yin and yang separately stand for opposites; yin denotes dark, north, cold, female, earth and similar qualities, and yang is light, south, warmth, male, heaven and the like. As important as their opposite features, though, is their complementary and interactive nature--each element or quality works with its opposite to bring about balance. Our stories reflect this principle: when there’s too much of one human quality, things go wrong, and it takes a dose of the reverse quality to set things right again. In *Harelip*, for example, as the song says, the yang side of the Dragon King’s personality got his liver into trouble, and he needed the yin nature of the Hare’s liver to put him back in balance.

An ancient Chinese parable illustrates another aspect of yin and yang. In the ancient Chinese allegory “The Border Guard’s Horse,”¹ Ong’s horse ran away one day and ended up in the hands of a warlike tribe across the border. When the villagers expressed their sympathy, Ong shrugged, then told them calmly, “Good fortune follows misfortune.” When his horse returned one fine day together with a marvelous steed and the villagers congratulated Ong on his good fortune, he told them, “But misfortune follows good fortune.” And when Ong’s son fell from the steed and became a cripple, Ong replied to his commiserating neighbors, “Good fortune follows misfortune.” Shortly after, when all of the village’s able-bodied young men were killed trying to repulse a barbarian raiding party, and only Ong’s crippled son survived because he hadn’t been able to fight, Ong couldn’t help feeling lucky. But he knew better than to gloat over his good fortune, and mumbled to himself, “As you know very well, Ong, misfortune follows good fortune.” He could just as well have said, “There’s a yin for every yang.”

I wrote the first four plays for students at Sungkyunkwan University, in Seoul, where I taught for many years. The plays were later performed in other universities. *Chun Hyang Song*, the last play, was written by the late William Cleary. He also composed and arranged the songs in his play. It was first performed in 1965, at Sogang University in Seoul, and several more times, on major stages, in the following years. I saw the play performed at Sungkyunkwan University in 1982, and it inspired me to write my own plays based on Korean folklore. William Cleary’s play is at the end of our book, as the best wine is saved for last. In fact, I have dedicated this book to William.

The mix of light-hearted plays and serious-minded supporting texts (the book’s introduction and the afterword for each play) might raise an eyebrow or two. My intention in including the background material is to provide better understanding and appreciation of the stories and the culture that they came from, and some interesting material for readers who have a strong sense of curiosity. I trust, though, that the stories by themselves are universal enough that the actors will do quite well if they just use their personal experience and imagination as supporting material.

This is the second edition of *A Yang for Every Yin*. The entire book has been revised, but the basic content and structure remain. You will find five dramatizations (stage plays) of Korean classics here; and, for each play, there is the afterword (mentioned above), which presents notes about the story’s cultural and historical aspects and about the play itself. The appendix at the back of the book has a glossary of Korean words, end notes, and references.

You can hear the songs and download pdf-format musical scores and a playbook for each play on the accompanying CD. You are welcome to perform the plays at no charge, but you need to get written permission from me, the author of the book, at jfholstein@yahoo.com.