Vernacular Itineraries:

Korean Letters from Family to National Archive

Ksenia Chizhova

Vernacular Korean letters were exchanged routinely in the royal and elite families of Chosŏn Korea (1392-1910), and women were at least on one side of the letter’s itinerary. While male-centered literary Chinese learning held highest prestige, the patriarchal families of the time cherished their private archives, in which vernacular letters were sentimental mementoes, testaments of women’s learning, and status symbols. This familial epistolary archive received varying elaborations as it transitioned into museums and departments of national literature in South Korea. While elite vernacular epistolary style (naeganch’e) embodies the core of tradition and national literature for such colonial-era intellectuals as Yi Pyŏnggi (1891-1968) and Yi T’aejun (1904-?), the anti-colonial and anti-feudal current of the post-1945 South Korean scholarship overlooks the elite tradition. This explains the persistent invisibility of women-centered elite vernacular culture in the contemporary scholarship of Chosŏn Korea. Developing the notion of itinerary—the transition, appropriation, and recoding of elite vernacular letters—this paper ponders the implication of archival practices upon the study of the past, and highlights the knowledge systems that determined the visibility and meaning of elite vernacular culture in Korea’s modern era.

Keywords: Chosŏn Korea, vernacular epistolary anthologies, women’s culture, archives and memory, nationalization of tradition.