

The Evolution and Current Status of Classical Novel Education in Korean Secondary Education*

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Abstract

This study aims to conduct a diachronic examination of how education on classical novels in Korean secondary education has been formed, developed, and restructured in response to successive changes in the national curriculum, while comprehensively analyzing shifts in educational perceptions and contemporary issues within this field. In particular, this paper systematically traces changes in the nature of classical novel education by focusing on analyses of Korean language curricula and textbooks from the First National Curriculum through the 2022 Revised Curriculum, and critically examines the tensions between educational objectives articulated in each curricular period and their actual implementation in textbooks.

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To this end, the study actively reviews and engages with prior research in order to organize the historiography of classical novel education and to carefully identify major issues characterizing each historical phase. The findings reveal that classical novel education has evolved from an ethnonational and moralistic instructional model, through a canon-centered and literary-historical approach, toward a more recent effort to shift to learner-centered literary education grounded in students' experiences and lived realities. Nevertheless, the study confirms that structural limitations persist, particularly in the form of an excessive emphasis on literary history and the rigid repetition of a narrow set of canonical texts.

Furthermore, this study proposes potential directions for overcoming these challenges by suggesting possibilities for expanding classical novel education within the context of the global dissemination of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and emerging artificial intelligence (AI)-based educational environments.

Keywords: Korea; literature; classical literature; classical novels; education

1. Introduction

Classical novels, as a core genre of Korean classical literature, have long occupied a central position in secondary-level Korean language and literature education. Accordingly, scholarly research on classical novel education has accumulated steadily, and the focus of such discussions has shifted in response to changing societal demands and successive curriculum reforms. Early studies on classical novel education primarily concentrated on identifying the educational value of individual works and exploring teaching and learning methods. From the 1990s onward, however, this line of inquiry expanded to examine how the educational status of classical novels has been constructed and represented through national curricula and textbooks.

In-gi Park (1996, pp. 15–18) pointed out that when research in literary education is overly focused on textual interpretation or pedagogical methods, it becomes difficult to capture the structural context of educational phenomena, and he therefore emphasized the need to analyze curricula and textbooks as core mediating mechanisms of literary education. This critical perspective subsequently functioned as a theoretical point of departure for textbook analysis research in classical literature and classical novels. Myung-jun Kim (1988, pp. 42–48) revealed that classical literature education was shaped within state-driven demands for the transmission of national culture and moral education, and analyzed how classical novels were utilized not primarily as objects of literary appreciation but as instruments for conveying normative values.

From the 2000s onward, research on classical novel education became more fully developed around issues of textbook inclusion and canonization. Yong-gi Kim (2014, pp. 101–115) observed that certain classical novels repeatedly included in textbooks form what he termed a “canon within the canon,” criticizing this phenomenon for structurally limiting learners’ experiences of classical fiction. Won-su Lee (2014, pp. 533–560) likewise warned that genre-centered approaches to classical novel education risk reducing works to standardized types, thereby inhibiting learners’ active and interpretive engagement with texts.

Alongside these studies, a growing body of research has empirically analyzed changes in classical novel education in relation to curriculum revisions. Hee-jung Cho (2016, pp. 63–118), examining Korean language and literature textbooks from the period of the 2009 Revised Curriculum, demonstrated that classical novels function as core instructional

materials within literary history units. Yoon-jung Hwang (2020, pp. 385–398) further argued that even after the implementation of the 2015 Revised Curriculum, classical novel education remained excessively aligned with literary-historical achievement standards, and that the intended goals of learner-centered and competency-based education had not been sufficiently realized.

More recently, attempts have emerged to extend discussions of classical novel education by framing them as issues of educational perception. Hong-won Choi (2017, pp. 3–10) conceptualized textbooks as educational texts endowed with “intentional practicality,” arguing that educational perceptions of classical novels are structurally shaped through the contexts in which they are presented in textbooks. Furthermore, in conjunction with the 2022 Revised Curriculum, Hongyoun Cho (2025, pp. 190–191) proposed the concept of the “new normal” as a framework for reconfiguring classical novel education around learners’ lives and lived experiences.

However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on individual curriculum periods or specific groups of textbooks, and relatively few studies have offered an educational-historical and theoretical synthesis of the evolution of classical novel education within the overall trajectory of curriculum development. In response to this gap, the present study seeks to diachronically reconstruct changes in the characteristics and educational perceptions of classical novel education from the First National Curriculum through the 2022 Revised Curriculum, and to comprehensively discuss its structural limitations as well as its potential for expansion.

2. The Formation of Classical Novel Education Prior to the 2009 Curriculum

This chapter offers an in-depth, education-historical examination of how classical novel education in Korean secondary education was formed and developed under specific educational ideologies and literary perspectives from the First National Curriculum through the Sixth National Curriculum, that is, during the period prior to the 2009 curriculum revision. This period laid the foundational groundwork for the subsequent shift of classical novel education toward a literary history-centered and canon-oriented structure. Accordingly, a careful analysis of the educational perceptions characterizing this era is essential for understanding later curricular transformations.

2.1. The First to Third National Curricula: Classical Novel Education Centered on the Transmission of National Culture and Moral Instruction

During the First through Third National Curriculum periods, literature education within the Korean language subject strongly reflected the post-liberation historical task of establishing national identity and transmitting national culture. In this context, classical novels were regarded as representative texts for conveying traditional Korean values and ethical consciousness, and moral themes such as filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, and the principle of rewarding good and punishing evil were emphasized as core content of teaching and learning. Classical novels were employed less as objects of literary appreciation than as didactic texts presenting desirable models of human conduct, and learning activities centered on making value judgments about characters' actions and identifying the moral resolutions of narratives.

Kim Myung-jun criticized this educational tendency, arguing that classical literature education during this period subordinated the aesthetic autonomy of literature to social norms and moral instruction (Kim, 1988, pp. 45–50). He noted in particular that the complex narrative structures of classical novels and the internal conflicts of characters were insufficiently examined, while didactic meanings were often extracted in a linear and reductive manner. This tendency produced a structural limitation in which classical novels came to be perceived not as “literature to be read and interpreted,” but as “literature to be taught and inculcated.”

2.2. The Fourth to Sixth National Curricula: The Introduction of Genre Awareness and the Formation of a Literary-Historical Perspective

From the Fourth through the Sixth National Curricula, literature education within the Korean language subject gradually began to acquire a more systematic academic framework. During this period, the concept of literary genre was formally introduced into classical novel education, and pedagogical orientations increasingly emphasized understanding individual works not as isolated texts but as components of a broader genre within the history of Korean classical literature. Classical novels were presented alongside classical poetry within units on classical literature, and elements such as the historical background of works, their socio-cultural contexts, and their generic characteristics were established as major learning components.

Lee Won-su evaluated this genre-centered approach to classical novel education as contributing to greater academic coherence in literary education, while simultaneously cautioning that it entailed the risk of reducing works to standardized and typified categories

(Lee, 2014, pp. 533–560). In other words, although genre awareness facilitated a systematic understanding of classical novels, it also tended to constrain learners' opportunities to interpret texts in individualized and concrete ways.

While classical novel education during this period achieved a significant transition from an emphasis on national and moral instruction to a literary-historical mode of understanding, it did not yet expand into an educational approach that placed learners' literary experiences at the center. These structural characteristics continued to exert a lasting influence on subsequent phases of curriculum reform.

3. Changes in Classical Novel Education in Response to Curriculum Revisions

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of changes in the nature of classical novel education under the 2009, 2015, and 2022 Revised National Curricula, examined across three analytical layers: (1) curriculum policy language, (2) patterns of textbook implementation, and (3) evaluations presented in prior research. Through this multi-layered approach, the chapter aims to illuminate how classical novel education has been institutionally stabilized over time while simultaneously accumulating structural limitations.

The table below offers a summary overview of the general direction in which classical novel education has evolved in response to successive curriculum revisions. With this framework in mind, the following sections analyze each period individually, focusing not on a simple enumeration of characteristics but on how curriculum orientations, textbook practices, and scholarly evaluations intersect and mutually reinforce one another.

Phase	Curriculum Period	Central Educational Objective	Characteristics of Classical Novel Education	Major Scholars
Formative Phase	1st–6 th National Curricula	National and moral education	Didactic interpretation	Kim Myung-jun; Lee Won-su
Systematization Phase	7 th Curriculum; 2007 Revision	Understanding literary history	Genre- and canon-centered	Heejung Cho
Intensification Phase	2009 Revision	Korean literary history	Deepened canonization	Yong-gi Kim
Transitional Phase	2015 Revision	Core competencies	Contextual inquiry	Yoon-jung Hwang
Reconfiguration Phase	2022 Revision	Life-centered literature	Experience-based learning and re-creation	Hongyoun Cho

3.1. The 2009 Revised Curriculum and Classical Novel Education

The 2009 Revised Curriculum established “an understanding of the scope and history of Korean literature” as a core achievement standard within the literature domain. This measure reaffirmed classical literature as a field representing the origins and traditions of Korean literary history, and within this framework, classical novel education achieved a degree of institutional stability. In curriculum documents, classical novels were presented as a representative genre demonstrating the maturation of narrative literature and society in the late Joseon period. To implement this orientation, textbooks adopted a practice of repeatedly including a small number of canonical works.

Based on her analysis of Korean language and literature textbooks reflecting the 2009 Revised Curriculum, Cho Heejung reported that classical novels accounted for the largest proportion among classical prose texts and functioned as core instructional materials within literary history units (Cho, 2016, pp. 70–82). This finding indicates not only that classical novels had become the central axis of literary history education, but also that the requirements of the curriculum were relatively faithfully reflected in textbooks.

However, this institutional stability was accompanied by the problem of intensified canonization. Kim Yong-gi noted that during this period, a limited number of works—such as *The Tale of Hong Gildong* (*Hong Gildong jeon*), *The Tale of Chunhyang* (*Chunhyang jeon*), and *The Tale of Heungbu* (*Heungbu jeon*)—were repeatedly presented in textbooks, thereby forming a structure he described as a “canon within the canon” (Kim, 2014, pp. 112–118). While this tendency encouraged an understanding of classical novels centered on representative texts, it simultaneously restricted learners’ opportunities to encounter the diverse narrative types and thematic variations that exist within the genre.

3.2. The 2015 Revised Curriculum and Classical Novel Education

The 2015 Revised Curriculum sought to reorient literary education by advocating a competency-based approach and an understanding-centered curriculum. Literature was redefined not as a mere object of knowledge transmission, but as a process through which learners cultivate thinking skills and sensibility through language activities. This shift also influenced classical novel education, leading to an emphasis on understanding works within their social and historical contexts and exploring their contemporary significance.

However, according to Hwang Yoon-jung’s textbook analysis, the intent of the revised curriculum was not fully realized at the level of textbook implementation. Classical novel materials continued to be most frequently presented in conjunction with literary-historical achievement standards, and opportunities for learners’ autonomous appreciation and interpretive engagement remained limited (Hwang, 2020, pp. 409–416). This can be evaluated

as a case illustrating the structural tension between curriculum discourse and textbook practice.

Classical novel education during this period thus exhibits a transitional character in which the potential for change coexisted with the persistence of established structures. While learner-centered and competency-based education was emphasized at the curricular level, literary history-centered approaches continued to be maintained through institutional inertia in actual classroom practice.

3.3. The 2022 Revised Curriculum and Classical Novel Education

The 2022 Revised Curriculum redefines literature as “a language activity through which learners explore the meaning of life,” placing learners’ experiences and emotions at the center of literary education. This shift may be understood as an attempt to reconstruct classical novel education as a field of lived experience connected to contemporary life, rather than as a mode of transmitting knowledge about the past.

Hongyoun Cho conceptualizes this transformation as the “new normal” of classical novel education, proposing possibilities for reinterpreting classical novels in terms of present-day significance through activities such as creative rewriting, media transformation, and comparative cultural reading (Cho, 2025, pp. 192–205). At the same time, however, he points out that at the stage of textbook implementation, literary history-centered structures remain largely intact, thereby highlighting the persistent gap between curricular intentions and educational practice. In this sense, classical novel education under the 2022 Revised Curriculum can be understood as a phase in which the potential for reconfiguration coexists with enduring structural constraints.

4. Key Issues and Possibilities for Expanding Classical Novel Education

Building on the preceding analysis of curricular changes, this chapter theoretically deepens the discussion of the structural issues currently confronting classical novel education in Korean secondary education, while also exploring possibilities for its expansion under new conditions such as the global dissemination of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and the emergence of AI-based educational environments. The table below summarizes the major structural problems of classical novel education that have been commonly identified in prior research.

Issue	Description	Related Studies
Canonization	Repetitive inclusion of a limited number of works	Yong-gi Kim (2014)
Literary-Historical Bias	Reduction of works to historical reference materials	Hongwon Choi (2017)
Lack of Experiential Engagement	Limited opportunities for appreciation and interpretation	Yoon-jung Hwang(2020)

4.1. Structural Problems of Canonization and Literary History–Centered Education

A core issue repeatedly raised in discussions of classical novel education is the problem of canonization. Yong-gi Kim has argued that a small number of works repeatedly included in textbooks form a “canon within the canon,” thereby constraining learners’ experiences of classical novels (Kim, 2014, pp. 112–115). While this canonization structure contributes to establishing classical novels as representative texts within Korean literary history, it fails to sufficiently reveal the internal diversity of the genre and its narrative experimentation.

Through an analysis of textbook inclusion contexts, Hong-won Choi criticized the educational

bias that leads classical literature to be consumed solely as historical material, interpreting this tendency as a structural product of literary history-centered education (Choi, 2017, pp. 22–25). Within this structure, classical novels function not as literary texts that generate contemporary meaning, but rather as evidentiary materials used to explain the past.

4.2. The Deficit of Literary Experience and the Limits of Learner-Centered Education

Yoon-jung Hwang has pointed out that even after the implementation of the 2015 Revised Curriculum, classical novel education has failed to move beyond explanation- and commentary-centered instruction, resulting in the structural limitation of learners' literary experiences (Hwang, 2020, pp. 402–414). This indicates that classical novels continue to be presented merely as objects to be understood, rather than functioning as literature to be experienced.

In-gi Park previously argued that when the concept of experience is insufficiently secured in literary education, learners come to perceive literature solely as an object of knowledge (Park, 1996, pp. 63–66). From this perspective, the problems of classical novel education extend beyond issues of text selection and instead expand into questions concerning the educational perception of literature itself.

4.3. The Globalization of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and the Recontextualization of Classical Novel Education

The global expansion of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) offers opportunities to reinterpret classical novel education beyond the boundaries of domestic education and within a global context. Heroic narratives, family narratives, and socially critical perspectives found in classical novels can be expanded into universal values through comparative engagement with world literature, and this approach can be closely linked to Korean studies education for international learners. Hongyoun Cho argues that when classical novels are restructured in connection with cultural content, it becomes possible to enhance learners' interest and comprehension simultaneously (Cho, 2025, pp. 208–211). This perspective suggests that classical novel education need no longer remain confined to the past, but can instead be expanded as a form of education that connects the present with the global sphere.

4.4. AI-Based Educational Environments and the Future of Classical Novel Education

AI-based text analysis, automated summarization, and translation technologies possess the potential to transform approaches to classical novel education. However, the application of such technologies also entails the risk of reducing classical novels to mere data. Accordingly, AI should not function as a tool that replaces literary interpretation, but rather as an auxiliary instrument that supports learners' interpretation and reflection.

Seung-eun Lee contends that literary education in digital environments should, paradoxically,

aim at deepening the qualitative dimensions of literary experience (Lee, 2022, pp. 5–40). From this perspective, AI-based classical novel education should focus less on the use of technology per se and more on how educational design enables learners to experience classical novels in meaningful and transformative ways.

5. Conclusion

This study has undertaken a diachronic examination of the evolution of classical novel education in Korean secondary education, from the First National Curriculum to the 2022 Revised Curriculum, and has comprehensively analyzed its educational perceptions and structural characteristics. Classical novel education was initially formed within the national post-liberation agenda of transmitting national culture and moral values, and subsequently underwent processes of systematization and canonization centered on literary history through successive curriculum reforms. Within this trajectory, classical novels secured a firm position as a core genre in Korean literary history; at the same time, however, structural limitations that constrain learners' literary experiences have also accumulated.

In particular, since the 2009 Revised Curriculum, classical novel education has achieved institutional stability through its alignment with literary-historical achievement standards. Yet, as noted by Yong-gi Kim (2014, pp. 112–115), the intensification of canonization centered on a small number of works has prevented sufficient engagement with the internal diversity of the genre and the generation of contemporary meanings. Although the 2015 Revised Curriculum sought to transform this structure by emphasizing competency-based education, analyses such as that of Yoon-jung Hwang (2020, pp. 410–414) demonstrate that at the level

of textbook implementation, literary history-centered approaches continued to persist with considerable strength.

The 2022 Revised Curriculum attempted to reconfigure classical novel education by redefining literature as “a language activity through which learners explore the meaning of life.” This shift may be evaluated as an important turning point, as it seeks to reconceptualize classical novels not merely as legacies of the past, but as experiential texts connected to learners’ lives. Nevertheless, as Hongyoun Cho (2025, pp. 58–61) observes, the curricular orientation of this reform has not been fully realized in textbooks and classroom practice, instead coexisting with established structural patterns.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the future task of classical novel education lies not simply in adding new texts or modifying teaching and learning methods, but in transforming the underlying educational perception through which classical novels are understood. In other words, classical novels must be reconfigured not as objects for the transmission of literary-historical knowledge, but as literature that learners can experience as part of a reflective engagement with their own lives and the world. To this end, structural improvements are required to ensure that curricular intentions are substantively reflected in textbook selection practices and instructional design.

At the same time, the globalization of the Korean Wave (Hallyu) and the emergence of AI-based educational environments present both new possibilities and new challenges for classical novel education. Classical novels may be expanded into universal values through comparison with world literature, and digital technologies can be employed as meaningful tools to support learners’ understanding. Such expansion, however, should not proceed in a direction that reduces classical novels to mere cultural content or data, but rather should aim

to deepen literary reflection and experiential engagement.

In conclusion, by synthesizing the evolution of classical novel education from educational-historical and theoretical perspectives, this study reinterprets within a single structural framework the issues that previous research has addressed in a fragmented manner. These discussions suggest that future research on classical novel education should expand in a direction that integrates curriculum analysis, textbook studies, and theories of literary experience, and they may serve as foundational material for reexamining the educational potential of classical novels within secondary literature education.

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