The Korean War and Beyond, in Modern Korean Fiction

By Bruce Fulton

Modern Korean literature lends itself especially well to teaching about modern Korea, for it is largely an issue-driven literature. To be sure, Korean literature is heir to a centuries-old tradition of didacticism that has produced an important body of art-for-art’s-sake literature. But there is also a tradition of didacticism in Korean literature, a need felt by the literati-statesmen traditionally responsible for written literature to prove their mastery of literary forms (a skill one needed to pass the civil service exam that opened the door to positions in the government bureaucracy), and in modern times to enlighten the citizenry to the harsh realities that have informed much of modern Korean history. Korean literature tends also to be a culturally-specific literature, the rich cultural tradition and the social-structural nuances of the Korean language weaving inextricable strands in the fabric of the written work. In short, classroom teachers will find in modern Korean literature a useful primary source of information about important historical events such as the Korean War, the April 19, 1960, student revolution, the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee in the 1960s and 1970s, and the Kwangju massacre of May 1980, as well as signal social developments, including the industrialization begun in the Park Chung Hee era, the population shifts from countryside to city, political repression during the dictatorial regimes of the period 1948–1987, and the increasing visibility of women in contemporary Korean society. It should be noted, though, that there is little to learn in Korean literature about the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea). The severing of communications between the two Koreas following the 1953 cease-fire that marked the end of the Korean War has meant that virtually no authors in the south have firsthand knowledge of life in the north. North Korean literature is virtually nonexistent in English translation outside of North Korea.

The situation with literature from South Korea is quite different. A substantial body of literature has been translated, along with a lesser amount of literature from the early-modern period (1917–1945), when Korea had yet to be divided into separate regimes. Although the quality of the translations remains uneven, an increasing number of novels and anthologies are being published in the West (earlier translations were often published in Seoul), and several English-language journals from Korea that carry literature, such as Korea Journal and Korean Literature Today, are available in the libraries of larger universities.

A good place to begin a survey of Korean literature in translation that deals with the Korean War and beyond is Kim Chong-un’s anthology Postwar Korean Short Stories (1983). This collection is prefaced by a generous introduction in which the late Professor Kim observes that few Korean stories deal with the war itself; instead the great majority of Korean War-related stories attempt to come to grips with the physical and psychological trauma, individual and collective, of this devastating conflict, which as of this writing has yet to be concluded by a formal peace treaty. Hwang Sun-wôn (represented in this anthology by “Time for You and Me Alone”) is one of the few authors who have left us a substantial body of work set on the battlefield, but even here the narratives focus not on the internecine fighting but rather on individual or group efforts to survive a hostile physical environment (“Mountains” [1993], “Life” [1983]), wartime atrocities (“Drizzle” [1990]), and psychological scarring (“Trees on a Slope [forthcoming]). Stylistically distinct in Postwar Korean Short Stories are O Sang-wôn’s “A Respite” and Chang Yong-hak’s “Poems of John the Baptist,” two existential responses to the absurdity of the civil war. Also notable are stories depicting the moral chaos of the postwar series; good examples are Son Ch’ang-sôp’s “Walking in the Snow” and Sô Ki-wôn’s “The Uncharted Map,” the latter title an apt metaphor of South Korean society in the 1950s.

Relating to the wartime stories, but embracing broader social concerns, are the kijich’on (military camptown) stories and novels. These take place in the demimonde surrounding the American military bases in South Korea and feature the economic marriage of convenience that takes place between the foreign military personnel and host-country nationals who provide them with tailor shops, eateries, and entertainment facilities. The American presence in these works, though rarely fleshed out in three-dimensional form, provides an anchor to American readers and at the same time offers a foil by which the Korean protagonists reassess their identity as Koreans, both individually and societally. That is, the microcosm of American culture provided in the camptowns provides Korean merchants, black-marketeers, and prostitutes with a degree of social mobility that may be denied them in Korea’s traditionally closed society. Gender issues in particular are salient in stories such as Kang Sôk-kyông’s “Days and Dreams” (1989).

Whereas Postwar Korean Short Stories comprises stories from the 1950s and 1960s, Land of Exile (1993) includes in addition to work from these decades several stories from the 1970s...
and one from the 1980s. All are thematically relevant to those times. Many are examples of division literature—that body of work dealing with the territorial division of the Korean peninsula initiated in 1945 when Soviet and American authorities demarcated the peninsula at the 38th parallel for the purpose of accepting the surrender of Japanese troops at the end of the Pacific War, and its hardening by the 1953 cease-fire that established the present DMZ (demilitarized zone) between North Korea and South Korea. The title story of this collection, about a man from a peasant family who participated in massacres of landed gentry around Korea, the title story is especially poignant. Playing with Fire (1997), a novel centered in the same theme, by the same author, Cho Chông-nae, is also available. Other stories in Land of Exile concern the societal problems resulting from South Korea’s headlong transformation from a rural to an urban-industrial economy beginning in the 1960s. “A Dream of Good Fortune” by Hwang Sŏg-yŏng and “The Man Who Was Left as Nine Pairs of Shoes” by Yun Hŭng-gil are representative.


At the turn of the millennium one of the most visible changes in South Korea is the increased participation of women in the nation’s society, exemplified most recently by Park Keun Hye’s campaign for the nation’s presidency (She is the daughter of the late dictator Park Chung Hee). This participation has extended to the field of literature, with women writers finally gaining parity with their male counterparts after centuries of marginalization by the literary powers—that be. Like their male colleagues, these women write persuasively of their nation’s social, political, and historical upheavals. Unlike them, they also provide a complex chorus of women’s voices, which in combination provide a rich account of how contemporary Korean women see themselves in a traditionally patriarchal society. Three of these voices are heard in Words of Farewell (1989). One of them, O Chŏng-hŭi, is noteworthy for her accounts of how modernization has warped the traditional Korean family structure. She, Pak Wan-sŏ, and Ch’oe Yun are South Korea’s most important women fiction writers. All are represented in a more recent woman’s fiction anthology, Wayfarer (1997). They are joined by a group of articulate women poets, a sampling of whom is found in translations by Suh Ji-moon (1987).

Korean fiction of the 1990s is characterized not only by this increase in women’s voices but also by a decrease in socially engaged stories. Even so, the history of modern Korean literature, which is conventionally dated to 1917 (the year of publication of Yi Kwang-su’s novel Mujŏng [Heartlessness]), reveals a seesaw contest between the literature of social engagement and pure literature. Korean literature of the new century is expected to continue to illuminate the multitude of changes taking place on the Korean peninsula as well as to reflect patterns of thought that have informed Korean civilization since earliest recorded times.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

The following is a selection of additional English translations of Korean fiction from the Korean War and beyond. The list is far from inclusive, and interested readers should consult a database at a university Asian collection for further sources, which will include in addition to fiction several worthwhile volumes of poetry in translation.

ANTHOLOGIES


Literature East and West (Korean literature issue), 14, no. 3 (September 1970).


Modern Korean Literature, ed. Peter H. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990). Poetry, essays, and fiction; most of the contents are taken from Lee’s two previous anthologies, The Silence of Love (poetry) and Flowers of Fire (fiction).

Modern Korean Short Stories, ed. Chung Chong-wha (Hong Kong: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1980).

Modern Short Stories From Korea, trans. In-Sob Zong (Seoul: Munho sa, 1958).


Seeing the Invisible (Korea theme issue of Manoa, 8, no. 2, 1996). Five stories from South Korea’s post-modernization period by women writers, plus an introductory essay by the feature editor.

Translation: The Journal of Literary Translation, 13 (Fall 1984), Korean Feature Section, pages 1–129.


The Wounded Season (Korea theme issue of Manoa, 11, no. 2, 1999). Five stories relating to the Korean War and the Kwangju uprising and massacre of 1980, plus an introductory essay by the feature editor.

AUTHORS

(Listed chronologically by author birthdate)

Ch’oe Chŏng-hŭi (1912–1990)

“The Memorial Service on the Mountain,” in Modern Short Stories from Korea. In the vein of Hyŏn Ch’ŏng-gŏn’s “Fire.”


Kim Tong-ni (Kim Shi-jong; 1913–1995)

“Father and Son,” trans. Kim, in Postwar Korean Short Stories, 2nd ed. Incisive portrayal of one such relationship.


O Yong-su (1914–1979)


Hwang Sun-won (1915–2000)


*Shower*, trans. Yu, in *Flowers of Fire*. Perhaps the most cited but least understood of his stories.

*Cranes*, trans. Lee, in *Flowers of Fire and Modern Korean Literature*.

*Pierrot*, trans. Suh, in *The Rainy Spell and Other Korean Stories*. An autobiographical account of the Hwang family’s refugee life during the civil war.


*Shadows of a Sound*, trans. Holman, *Korea Journal* 27, no. 8 (August 1987), and *Shadows of a Sound*.

*In a Small Island Village*, trans. Holman, *Korean Culture* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1987), and *The Book of Masks*.


Son So-hui (1917–1987)


Chon Kwang-yong (1919–1989)


Yi Pum-sun (1920–1982)

*A Stray Bullet*, trans. Pihl, in *Listening to Korea and Flowers of Fire*. Caused a furor in Korea because of its pessimism.

*The People of Crane Village*, trans. Pak, in *The Drizzle and Other Korean Short Stories*.

Yu Chu-hyon (b. 1921)


Son Ch’ang-sop (b. 1922)


Sohn Hwi (1922–1986)

*Flowers of Fire*, trans. Lee, in *Flowers of Fire*. A rare celebration of the will; antideterministic.


Kang Shin-jae (1924–2001)


Pak Kyong-ni (b. 1927)


O Yu-gwon (b. 1928)

*Two Travelers*, trans. Kim, in *Two Travelers and Other Korean Short Stories* (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1983).

O Sang-won (1930–1985)


Só Ki-won (b. 1930)


Ha Kün-ch’an (b. 1931)


Pak Wan-sô (b. 1931)

*Winter Outing*, trans. Pihl, *Korea Journal* 30, no. 2 (February 1990), and *Land of Exile*.


Yi Ho-ch’ol (b. 1932)


“Big Mountain,” trans. Fulton and Fulton, Korean Literature Today 2, no. 3 (Fall 1997).


Cho’ee In-hun (b. 1936) *The Square*, trans. O’Rourke (Devon, Eng.: Spindlewood, 1985). Critically regarded novel about a Korean War POW who elects to go to a third country after the war rather than to the North or the South.


Yi Ch’ông-jun (b. 1939) *This Paradise of Yours*, trans. Chang and Chang (Seoul: Korean Literature Foundation, 1986). One of the more accessible works by a novelist of ideas.


Hwang Sông-yong (b. 1943) “The Road to Samp’ô,” trans. McHale, in *The Road to Samp’ô and Other Korean Short Stories*.


“Almaden,” trans. Fulton and Fulton, *Asian Pacific Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1994), and *Wayfarer*.


Kong Chi-yŏng (b. 1963)

Kong Sŏn-ok (b. 1963)

Shin Kyŏng-suk (b. 1964)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BRUCE FULTON is Young-Bin Min Associate Professor of Korean Literature and Literary Translation, Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia. He is the co-translator of several anthologies of modern Korean fiction, most recently A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction (University of Hawaii Press). He edited the Korea section of the Columbia Companion to Modern East Asian Literature (forthcoming from Columbia University Press) and is co-editing a K-12 Korean literature reader and curriculum guide for the Korea Society.