

Korean Literature: Its Translation into English

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Until the end of the 19th century, the main external influence on Korea's literary culture was works originating in China. A vast quantity of writings of all kinds from past centuries exist, mostly written in the Sino-Korean characters, although the native Korean alphabet 'Hangeul' was increasingly used in more recent centuries, since the common people were usually unable to spare the time and money required if they were to learn to read and write the thousands of 'Chinese' characters. The 'Chinese Classics,' works of philosophy, poetry, fiction, history, formed the basic inspiration for all that was written in pre-modern Korea. From the 1890s, Korea was forced to recognize and open itself to the outside world, often unwillingly, under intense and growing pressure from Japan, where the 'Meiji Reforms' had already successfully overcome conservative reticence. Where Japan pursued 'modernity' with great enthusiasm, the governing authorities in Korea were unable to formulate a similar outward-looking polity and finally suffered the humiliation of seeing their nation annexed by Japan and turned into a Japanese colony. However, Japanese influence combined with the influence exercised by western missionaries and forward-looking Koreans to establish schools of the kind found throughout the modern world, and soon works of western literature were being translated into Korean by a few missionaries. Soon these influences led Koreans to begin writing in new, 'modern' ways.

A very considerable quantity of 'modern' fiction and poetry has been written in Korea over the last 120 years. During that time, a relatively small amount of it has been translated into English and published, either in Korea or internationally. There are very few academic studies of the history of translated Korean literature, and it is very hard even to find complete lists of what has been translated¹. For a time, 'the Literature Translation Institute of Korea (LTI Korea) tried to compile a complete list which would record the translations even of individual poems and short stories, but this is an almost impossible task. Quite often, a translator gives a work a title which is quite unlike the original Korean title..

In what follows, I will try to offer a very general outline of the development of what is essentially 20th-century Korean literature, superposing on that a review of the English translations of it that have appeared. It will quickly become apparent that the translations that have been published have been the result of a fairly arbitrary selection of works by the translators, whether native speakers of English or Koreans, mostly based on the writers' reputation within Korea, without considering whether their works might appeal to non-Korean readers in the same way. Moreover, the publishers that they have found have until very recently mostly either been based in Korea or, if located overseas, have been very modest, individually-run operations, functioning on a shoe-string budget. Such small-scale publishers have not been able to afford to publicize the translations they have printed, and have not had the prestige or the contacts required to ensure reviews in significant journals, or distribution in major bookstores.

The fact that virtually no English translation of a Korean work was published at all, and none outside of Korea until 1960, is in itself a sign of the absence of Korean writing from the international scene, and an honest appraisal quickly indicates that until very recently, well into the 21st century, Korean poetry and fiction were completely unknown to the general reading public of the English-speaking world, just as Korea itself was little or badly known. This fact of "marginalization" is, of course, shared by a great number of what Pasacale Casanova has called 'dominated languages.' The almost complete absence of Korean writers from

international literary festivals, still today, is one symptom of the invisibility of what is happening in the literary world of Korea. In the last few years, a small number of Korea writers have been noticed, published, have sold relatively well, and a few of their translated works have even received quite important awards, most notably *The Vegetarian* (written by Han Kang and translated by Deborah Smith) which won the first Man Booker International Award in 2016. However, these rare cases cannot be compared to the relatively high level of attention paid across the globe to Korean movies and popular music (K-pop), which have earned far wider acclaim than any Korean poetry or fiction. Certain K-pop groups are internationally famous in a way that no Korean writer can ever hope to be, if only because works of fiction now attract limited interest among the younger generation.

Translating ‘Korean Literature’: initial attempts

It seems important to begin by questioning the (relatively common) use of the term “Korean literature” when what is meant is “works of *modern* Korean fiction and poetry.” In contrast, the “English literature” studied in the world’s universities still tends to begin with Chaucer if not Beowulf and end with D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Here, however, the use of the word “Literature” sounds ancient and academic, even stuffy and scholarly. Works of contemporary fiction on sale in a London bookshop are never arranged together with poetry under a single label “Literature.” It will therefore be important to understand that by “Korean literature” what is meant is the fiction and poetry written in Korean in the past 120 years, what might also be termed “Writing from Korea.”

There have long been a considerable number of Koreans writing novels and poems, whether hundreds of years ago, or a century ago, let alone fifty or thirty years ago, and still today. Before 1900, those who sought admiration and prestige were mainly men writing in the Sino-Korean version of Classical Chinese; those who sought to communicate with humbler beings in less prestigious ways used *eonmun* (Hangeul) and both writers and readers were often women. However, no ordinary Korean today is able to read older Korean works as they were originally produced, whether in Chinese characters or in Hangeul. Contemporary Korean is a very different language. The poetry in Classical Chinese, the countless essays, the badly printed popular novels in Hangeul borrowed by the ordinary citizens of Seoul from lending libraries in the 19th century, when they have survived at all, lie completely unread by all but a tiny handful of academic experts intent on arduous research. Yet the fiction of pre-modern Korea, in particular, did not suddenly vanish at the end of the 19th century, it continued to be printed and read into the early 20th century and it blended with various influences to produce the *Sinsoseol* [new, ‘modern’ novel] which served as the basis for modern fiction. But who in today’s Korea eagerly reads and enjoys reading such works for their own sake, for pleasure or inner enrichment? To say nothing of the thousands of formal Chinese-character poems produced over the centuries by generations of *seonbi*, the gentlemen scholars of the Korean Goryeo and Joseon periods, dominated as they were by the prestige of what was written in China. It is no exaggeration to say that Korea has no equivalent to Shakespeare, Jane Austen, or Charles Dickens, whose works are still read for pleasure today.

It is, of course, a source of considerable rejoicing that in the last five years two pre-modern Korean works, *The Story of Hong Gil-dong*² (by an unknown author, recent scholarship having shown clearly that the commonly accepted attribution to Heo Gyun is mistaken) and *The Nine Cloud Dream* by Kim Man-jung³, have been published in widely-distributed English versions as Penguin Classics, a format designed to encourage a wide readership, one not at all restricted to academic experts or school classrooms. The editors clearly mean these works to be enjoyed in their own right as outstanding examples of “world

literature.” It is a beginning.

One of the most familiar names among long-dead Korean poets is Yi Gyu-bo, of the Goryeo dynasty. James Scarth Gale, the first western translator of literary works from Korean, prepared a complete translation of his poems and offered it to a publisher in London around 1930. They were suffering from the Great Depression at the time and turned it down, probably unread. The manuscript still sleeps virtually unread and certainly unpublished in the library of Toronto University. The late Kevin O’Rourke translated the same works and had better luck in that his translations were published by Cornell East Asia Series⁴, but that is such a small press, that his work remained a well-kept secret. A would-be reader needs to know that the book exists, it having received no publicity or distribution (and virtually no reviews) apart from a listing near the back of a thick catalogue.

James Gale⁵ stands virtually alone in the first half of the 20th century in his attempts to make the works of the Korean literary tradition known by translating and publishing them. He arrived in Korea in 1888 as a missionary for the YMCA after studying Arts in Toronto. He had to learn spoken and written Korean as well as written Classical Chinese. He had discovered poetry as a child in his small rural primary school where a Scottish teacher made the children read *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Sindbad*, as well as poems by Burns, Campbell, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Longfellow and others.⁶ When he was in high school, his teacher declaimed Shakespeare very powerfully.

Gale thus had a sensitivity to literature, especially poetry, that probably no other North American missionary to Korea shared at the time. He published the first ever English translation of a short (anonymous) Korean poem in the April 1895 edition of the *Korean Repository*. It is hardly a very remarkable poem but we should perhaps hear behind it Gale’s lament at the abolition the previous year of the *gwageo* examination, the highest-level state examination to recruit ranking officials during the Goryeo and Joseon Dynasties in Korea. Gale, like his much later missionary successor and biographer, Richard Rutt, was fascinated by Sino-Chinese literary culture. In 1900 he gave the first ever lecture to the newly-founded Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, in which he claimed that “Korean culture is Chinese,” basing his argument on the immense importance of the Chinese Confucian Classics as the philosophical and ideological basis for the governing classes in Korean society. A second lecture, given a few weeks later by Homer B. Hulbert, argued the opposite case, referring to the Korean myth of Tangun as the source of Korea’s unique identity. Gale later wrote that the abolition of the *gwageo* marked the end of true culture in Korea, since nobody would ever make the effort to master the Chinese classical tradition without that incentive. For him, there was no feeling that a new, better age was beginning with the introduction of modern education, as the other missionaries firmly believed. He could only lament the loss of the old Chinese classical learning.

It is remarkable that Gale was able to find publishers in England for two of his translations, given his Canadian background and the distance mail had to travel. In 1913 J.M. Dent (London) published his translations of tales by Im Bang and Yi Ryuk, titled *Korean Folk Tales* (although in fact they were not ‘folk tales’ but early forms of *yadam* [short, entertaining tales] written by scholars following Chinese models). Even more significant was his translation of Kim Man-Chung’s *The Cloud Dream of the Nine*, a fantasy fiction inspired by Buddhist notions of impermanence, published in London in 1922 by Daniel O’Connor.

Gale established and was the chief editor of a monthly magazine, *The Korea Magazine*, that appeared from early 1917 until April 1919 and that served as a platform for a good number of his translations. The popular love-story he called *Choon Yang* (usually spelled *Chunhyang*) was published there in installments from September 1917 to July 1918. In an ideal world, it might have been his most successful translation, but the *Korea Magazine* had very few readers,

almost none outside of Korea, it is today available in almost no libraries, and has never been reprinted or scanned online. It was only when I was able to prepare a complete transcription of the entire series and make that freely available in my home page⁷ in 2021 that anyone had access to it. The main interest of *Choon Yang* is that it seems not to be based on a Joseon-era text but on a prose “new novel” (*shin-soseol*) *Okjunghwa* (獄中花) “Flower in Prison” by the novelist Yi Hae-jo, which was serialized from January until July 1912 in the *Maeil Shinbo* 每日申報, a Seoul-based newspaper, then published in the same year as a single volume by the Bogeup Seogwan (普及書館) publishing company in Korea. This was the nearest that Gale ever came to modern Korean literature; it is not even sure if he realized that it was not simply a recent edition of a traditional tale.

Gale was not at all interested in the Korean literary works being written in his time; he disliked the more modern style of colloquial Korean they used. Other missionaries, such as Lillias Horton Underwood, also used a more popular style of language, while Gale was always inclined to use more formal, traditional styles. He probably hoped to help Korea develop a new vision of life and a new way of writing inspired by the western works that he admired and this would explain why his main activity as a translator was not into English but into Korean. This was not limited to his outstanding work translating the Bible into Korean, first as part of the official commission, and then independently. He published translations into Korean of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Part I in 1895⁸. Just before he left Korea, he published *The Swiss Family Robinson or Adventures on a desert island* by Johann Rudolf Wyss (1924), *Strange stories from England and America* (1925) including: Washington Irving's *Rip van Winkle* and Walter Scott's *The Tapestry Chamber*; *Little Lord Fauntleroy* by Frances Hodgson Burnet (1925), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1925), Walter Scott *The Talisman*, (1925), as well as the medieval *Life of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis⁹. Gale perhaps felt, like the other leading missionaries, that Korea would be transformed by being introduced to western modernity, embodied in popular western literary classics.

‘Korean literature’: its journey to the West

I have discussed Gale mainly in order to stress the minimal impact that the two or three Korean works whose translations were published had on the world's awareness of Korea's literary traditions. His translations into Korean had perhaps a somewhat wider readership. The most important single point is that after Gale, with the insignificant exception of the rehashed versions of some of Gale's poetry translations published (unnoticed) in Japan as *The Orchid Door* by Joan Grigsby in 1935, no further translation of Korean literature made by a non-Korean was published until 1971, when the American Methodist missionary Edward Poitras published (in Seoul) *Sea of Tomorrow*, poems by the Korean contemporary poet Park Dujin. Also in 1971 the scholarly British Anglican missionary Richard Rutt was fortunate to publish his volume *The Bamboo Grove: An Introduction to Sijo* with the University of California Press. Then soon after, in 1974, the Irish Catholic priest Kevin O'Rourke published *Where Clouds Pass By: Selected Poems of Cho Byung-Hwa*. But the book was produced by Chungang University Press, in Seoul, with no overseas distribution. It was only in 1983 that Bruce Fulton and his Korean wife Yun Ju-chan, living in the USA, published with a small publishing house in New York their first collection of Korean short stories, *Debasement and Other Stories*.

Prior to them, the few translations of Korean works into English that existed were made by Koreans and all were published in Korea. The first collection of translated Korean poetry is a roneotyped volume entitled *Songs from Korea* by Y.T. Pyun, in an old-style tied-thread binding, dated 1936, which begins with 102 translated ‘old songs’ (Joseon-era poems) and then continues with a substantial set of Pyun's own poems composed in English. Pyun Yung-Tai (or

Byeon Yeong-tae) was born in 1892, died in 1969, and served as Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea (1951–1953) throughout most of the Korean War (1950-1953) before becoming Prime Minister from June 28, 1954, until July 31, 1955. He was the first Korean to translate older Korean poetry into English, and is so far the only literary translator to have served as Prime Minister of Korea.

Then in 1948 Zōng In-Sōb (the spelling he himself used in publishing, Jeong In-seop 1905-1983) published his *An Anthology of Modern Poems in Korea*¹⁰, with translations of 125 poems by 100 (today often forgotten) poets. Zōng In-Sōb graduated from the English Department of Waseda University in Tokyo in 1929 and taught at Yeonhui College in Seoul until 1946, while being active in several literary and academic associations. During the Korean War, he studied for an M.A. and taught at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London. In 1954 he was one of the founders of the Korean PEN Club (an affiliate of PEN International, a worldwide association of writers), from 1956 he was its first President.

Ten years after the Anthology, Zong In-Sob's *Modern Short Stories from Korea*¹¹, was the first collection of modern Korean short stories in English translation ever to be published. The first volume to be published containing English translations of works by a single modern, living Korean poet was the volume *Before Love Fades Away*¹² published in 1957, containing poems by Cho Byung-Wha. This was soon followed in 1959 by *Selected Poems of Kim Sowol*¹³, both volumes being translated by Kim Dong-seong (1890–1969) and published in Korea. Kim was not originally a translator or writer but was best known as a comic artist, journalist, and politician. He left for America in 1908 and studied journalism at Ohio State University, returned to Korea in 1919 and became well-known as a founding member of the celebrated *Donga-Ilbo* newspaper. He was later to become the Minister of Culture in South Korea's first government in 1948.

Peter Hyun published *Voices of the Dawn: A Selection of Korean Poetry from the Sixth Century to the Present Day* with John Murray, London, in 1960, the first volume of Korean poetry to be translated and published outside of Korea. Peter Hyun was born in 1927 in what is now North Korea, then moved to the USA to study during the Korea War, before moving to Europe in 1952. In 1964, Peter Lee published his *Anthology of Korean Poetry: From the Earliest Era to the Present* with John Day of New York. Like Peter Hyun, he had spent his entire adult life outside of Korea, and later became one of the first generation of American scholars in Korean Studies. However, Korean Studies had yet to begin to figure in the universities of the English-speaking world; the impact of these first overseas publications was thus bound to be almost insignificant.

'Modern Korean literature' during the Japanese colonial and liberation periods

The translation of Korean writing into English after Gale thus only began after the end of the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War, done by a small number of highly educated Koreans who had studied in England or the United States. That is to say that all the most significant transformations of Korean society, together with its fiction and poetry, in the first 70 years of the 20th century occurred completely without any westerner being aware of them, let alone anyone translating and publishing the works emerging. The works published during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), after Liberation, during the Korean War (1950-1953) and at the beginning of modern industrial development passed untranslated. Progress and development were the key words already for early twentieth-century Korean writers, whose attempted innovations in content, form and style marked the works of Korean fiction composed by such writers of *Shinsoseol* [new novel] as Yi Injik, Yi Hae-jo, Ch'oe Ch'ansik. Their work, however, still relied heavily on premodern forms of narrative. It was not until the publication

of Yi Kwangsu's *Mujeong* [The Heartless] in 1917 that a significant break was made. In his fiction, Yi Kwangsu initially criticized traditional Joseon value systems and customs, and endorsed modern, western notions of free love and the fulfillment of the individual self. Modern Korean histories of Korean literature seem very reluctant to discuss the impact of Japanese writing on Korean writers, while Yi Kwangsu's name (like that of far too many others) is reviled later because of his pro-Japanese stance. Yet colonializing Japan's strong focus on the corrupt, backward, unenlightened nature of later Joseon, and the direction of the Meiji Reforms, seem to have encouraged younger Korean writers to turn their backs on the past and seek Progress without any sense of regret or loss, or of national betrayal.

The history of Korean literature during the Japanese colonial period is still mostly unfamiliar outside of Korea, except perhaps to a tiny number of scholars. In an attempt to make it more accessible, a group of Korean critics contributed to a brief outline of its most generally accepted characteristics.¹⁴ They tell us, for example, that in the 1930s the novelist Yeom Sangseop emphasized the discovery of the individual while staying faithful to the sensibilities of modern realism, exploring the profound tensions between different Korean generations. Hyeon Chin-geon, too, devoted himself to exploring the relationship between society and the individual; Na Tohyang was a thoughtful investigator of the lives of the common people in an era of privations; Choe Seohae articulated in a passionate manner the alienated classes' voice of furor and protest. Yeom Sangseop, Chae Mansik, and Kim Namcheon all wrote family sagas in which the fate of a single clan in the course of several generations parallels the fate of the Korean people as a whole. Yi Sang, Choi Myeong-ik, and Heo Jun widened the horizons of psychological fiction, while Yi Taejun and Yi Hyoseok achieved fine articulations of the aesthetics of the short story. In addition, Kang Kyeong-ae, Paek Sin-ae, Kim Malbong, Pak Hwaseong, and other female writers made important contributions to "women's literature" by sketching compelling portraits of women suffering under the impoverished conditions of colonial rule. All of this shows Korean writers struggling to portray the tensions marking their society in their days.

Writers of poetry early in the 20th century faced the challenges of moving on from the traditional forms known as *hansi* (Chinese-character poetry) and *sijo* (poetry written in Korean) toward something new, and the influence of Japanese (then Korean) translations of late 19th century French Symbolist poetry was instrumental in the creation of modern Korean free verse. No poet played a more important role in introducing the French symbolists and teaching Koreans to write "free verse" than Kim Eok (born 1896, died after being kidnapped by the North in 1950). In 1921, he published *Onoeui mudo*, Korea's first modern book of translated Western poetry. It included very free versions of 21 poems by Verlaine, 10 poems by Remy de Gourmont, 8 by Albert Samain, 7 by Baudelaire, 6 by Yeats, and so on. In 1923, he published *Haepariui norae* [Song of a Jellyfish], the first collection of his own modern Korean poetry. In today's Korea, his supposed pro-Japanese activities make him even more of a pariah than the poets who later sided with the North, in spite of his enormous historic importance and influence. While he was teaching at Osan School, Kim Sowol, one of the beloved Korean language poets by Koreans, was his student and they maintained a close relationship until Kim Sowol died in 1934. He also introduced the works of Tagore to Korea through translations, such as *Gitanjari* (1923). This made a considerable impression at a time when the dominant literary influences were Japanese. Kim Eok is especially important since his translations of Tagore provided vital insight into a god-centered vision of life which provoked an opposing atheistic vision in the celebrated collection of 'love-poem-like' poems, *Nimui Chinmuk* [Your silence] by the Buddhist monk Manhae Han Yong-un, with its essentially Buddhist affirmation of silence, a symbol for the Buddhist vision of ultimate non-being. Today, Kim Sowol and Manhae are the only poets from this time that ordinary Koreans know and admire, and it is important to mention

that this is a relatively modern development, based on a widespread, popular misreading of *Jindalaekkot* [Azaleas] and *Nimui Chinmuk* as patriotic, anti-Japanese works. Sensitive readers have always known that they not so simply interpreted and that their nationalistic credentials derive mainly from the desire of President Park Chung-Hee in the 1960s to inspire Korean children with a nationalistic ethos. Yet today, no Korean would ever claim that the works of such a writer as Kim Eok have any enduring appeal in themselves. If they are known today it is only because they are mentioned in school textbooks for their historical interest but otherwise they are completely unread.

Throughout the Japanese colonial period, Korean writers were faced with a situation in which there can have seemed little hope for the future of Korean writing. In schools under the Japanese, “the national language” was Japanese, “national literature” was Japanese literature, instruction was given using Japanese. Many Korean intellectuals aspired to study in Japan, where they would have direct contact with the “Modernity” they longed for and could not find inside Korea. Tagore read and talked in Japan, the New York Symphony Orchestra played in Tokyo (the poet Kim Young-nang made a journey only to hear them, selling a field to pay for the journey). One of the strongest forces for Progress and social change in Japan and Korea at this time was Socialism / Communism / Marxism, and writers for whom this was a major influence stand apart from those whose concerns were more traditional and aesthetic. Im Hwa, Yi Sang, and Pak Taewon were founders and leading members of the Korean Artist Proletariat Federation (KAPF), organized in 1925, which regarded literature as a means to establish socialism. It was banned by Japan in 1935 but its inspiration continued on into the time of the Korean War. Some modern Korean writers either died or crossed the border to North Korea: Yi Sang died in 1937; Im Hwa went North in 1947, returned to Seoul with the North Korean army during the War, and was finally executed as an American spy in North Korea in 1953; Pak Taewon crossed the 38th Parallel into North Korea in 1950 where he wrote and worked as a professor at Pyongyang Literature University. Life in North Korea was hardly easy for him, for soon after his arrival in the North, he was ‘purged’ and prohibited from writing in 1956, but his writing privileges were reinstated in 1960. Others who went North were less fortunate and were executed during or just after the war.

Meanwhile, other Korean poets chose to express their chagrin and spleen in esthetically mannered poems that avoided any reference to the daily realities of life under colonial rule. Bak Yeongcheol, Kim Yeongnang, Jeong Jiyong and others, who viewed refinement of language and exploration of rhythm as central tasks in poetic composition, brought a heightened awareness of poetry as art. Then Kim Gi-rim, Kim Gwanggyun, and Jang Manyeong began to write poems based on more modern sensibilities. In the late 1930s, Bak Mogweol, Jo Jihun and Pak Dujin, who together came to be known as the “Green Deer School,” found spiritual solace in the beauty of nature. It was in this highly estheticized context that Seo Jeongju began to write poems of intense sensuality and melancholy.

Toward Contemporary Korean literature

In any account of literary history, two vital words are “influence” and “imitation.” Both words have a double reference. On the one hand, there is the historical and social context in which and about which every writer writes; that is a dominant immediate “influence” inspiring themes and emotions. Coupled with that is the influence on each writer of every literary work s/he has read prior to writing. Literary works do not come into being by parthenogenesis, they arise and exist in mutual dialogue and conflict with one another. The role of earlier models which inspire, stimulate, and provoke later writers is complex. Harold Bloom wrote¹⁵ of “anxiety of influence” when writers are overawed by the excellence of what has gone before,

that seems impossible to rival. In the West, these words operate in a long tradition and refer first to the enduring presence of ancient Greek and Roman classics. Today, and for quite a long time since, “imitation” has a bad reputation because it has come to look like plagiarism. But “mimesis” remains a powerful topic, inviting us to reflect how a writer writes in response to external realities, a response which may be grief, resistance or celebration. Returning to what I have already said, Korean writers are seriously handicapped by having almost no living bonds of “influence” and “imitation” to works written in the past, whereas the writers of Joseon were dominated by the powerful models of the Classical Chinese tradition, like Renaissance writers in Europe by the Latin classics.

Still, no matter when, every Korean writer has always been aware of the need to reflect contemporary realities in their work, one way or another. It is probably impossible now to imagine the challenges facing Korean writers in the 1930s and 40s when Japanese militarism grew ever more belligerent, and finally brought the entire region into war, in Manchuria and China first, and then across the Pacific. For several years during the Pacific War, publications in Korean language were banned, whether books or newspapers. Finally, the victory of the Allied Forces brought an end to the war and Liberation to Korea, but combined with the unforeseen division of the Peninsula. Yet naturally, this newly liberated reality, that was to culminate in the Korean War, seemed at first to offer wonderful new possibilities. The literary language itself had to be virtually reinvented and the social reality of Korea had changed completely in as yet incomprehensible ways. It was a moment of enormous challenge and struggling creativity.

In 2006, the University of Washington in Seattle staged a remarkable exhibition of over a hundred volumes of Korean fiction and poetry published just after the end of the Pacific War brought a degree of independence, between 1945 and 1950, some combining work by writers who would soon head North with those by writers who would remain in the South. The catalogue is still online.¹⁶ If the Korean War and the ensuing total division had not followed, the history of Korean literature would surely have been very different. These few vibrant years ended in disaster, noted writers took opposite sides, many fine writers went North, several others were kidnapped and killed by the retreating Northern armies.

I have already mentioned the early attempts to publish English translations of modern Korean writing, mainly just before or immediately after the Korean War. These early publications were in fact mostly a quite haphazard selection of short stories and poems, many composed toward the end of the Japanese period. After the War there could be no question of publishing or translating works by the writers who had chosen to support the North. In this new reality, Korean PEN was established in an attempt to gain international recognition for South Korea’s writers, and the early translations into English were made by the founding members of PEN.

The multiple traumas of Division and War, to say nothing of the political violence and corruption in the years under Syngman Rhee after the War, had such a strong impact that it is not surprising that the first Korean translators of Korean short stories felt obliged to explain to their (assumed) non-Korean readers why Korean fiction, in particular, was so dark and so unlike anything being published elsewhere in the world. They mainly meant in the USA, of course. They realized that their desire to display the qualities of the contemporary Korean fiction that they as Koreans admired was going to be compromised by its gloom and lack of humor, its tragic tone and assumptions of prior knowledge of what life in South Korea was like, where it was coming from, creating a very solid difference from what was being read and enjoyed in the West and serving as a wall, no matter what qualities Korean critics and readers found in those same works. Many works of Korean fiction in the post-war years evoked the examples of human dignity and courage manifested during the war, as well as lamenting the

division of the country and its families. They were Korean works written by Koreans for Koreans.

The April Revolution of 1960 provoked poets, led by Kim Su-yeong, to seek a more contemporary idiom and more directly social-related topics, but the military coup of 1961 brought an increase in censorship and anti-communist rhetoric. In the years that followed, Progress was manifested in the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the country, which provided new topics for fiction, perhaps more than for poetry. Shin Dong-yeop, Kim Su-yeong and Shin Kyeong-nim gave a new impulse to socially resistant poetry, inspired by the sufferings of the poor, though their stance was not at all explicitly “socialist.” Their vision was then continued, to some extent at least, by the work of Kim Chiha and Ko Un. The preference for dark “documentary realism” devoid of suspense or humor and for stories about pain and alienation continued on into the 1990s, when women writers turned their attention to the solitude and alienation of working-class women or of married women living alone in apartments, often slowly going mad. There was little or no light relief. It could be thought that Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* was a final extension of this tradition.

The Commercial Publication of English Translations of Korean Literature

Turning back to the task of English translation, we have seen how it began with Koreans who, returning from overseas, felt a need to make some of the poems and stories which their contemporaries admired accessible to non-Koreans, recognizing that almost no non-Korean would ever master their language. Then a small number of missionaries, the only foreigners motivated to master Korean, began to translate, as well as a few Koreans living overseas. The initial motivation was certainly a nationalistic one. This received added impetus when, soon after the end of the Pacific War, a certain kind of Japanese fiction was promoted in the US by the American government as a means of transforming the American perception of the Japanese from the brutal, sadistic warriors of the past to sensitive lovers of sophisticated beauty, as natural enemies of the Soviet Union and as allies of the West in the Cold War. The 1968 Nobel Prize awarded to Kawabata Yasunari (whose *Snow Country* was published in English already in 1957) was a shock for Koreans. The to them incomprehensible prestige enjoyed in the West by Japanese fiction must have left Koreans feeling ignored and humiliated. They knew that in the West prestigious writers were part of each nation’s national image and they wanted Korea’s prestigious writers to contribute to Korea’s greater prestige, without realizing that what they as Korean readers responded strongly to might not have the same impact on people who had not shared Korea’s unique experience of trauma.

The most important single factor in creating a new bridge between Korea and the USA was the arrival in the mid-1960s of the first Peace Corps volunteers. While missionaries learned Korean in order to spend most of their lives working in Korea, these young Americans went back home soon after they had learned at least a certain amount of Korean, taking with them (often) a deep affection for the deeply impoverished country. Some then entered East Asian Studies departments and in due course became the first generation of professors of Korean Studies in the US, including David McCann, Bruce Cummings, Edward Shultz, and Bruce Fulton. A new concern arose, since their American students could not learn enough Korean to read difficult texts, translations of Korean texts, both old and recent, were needed for classroom use. This was the first (small-scale) commercial reason for publishing translations from Korean in the USA and a few university presses took a lead. However, these academic books rarely reached a general readership.

The main criteria for selecting certain works for translation, whether by Koreans or others, continued to be those found in the standard histories of Korean literature as taught in

Korea. The critical opinion of Korean academics seem to be accepted as the main basis for admiration and there seems to have been no great thought given to what works might have a stronger appeal to non-Korean readers. That might explain why the works which were published largely failed to attract an international audience. Translation was therefore entirely devoted to works that Koreans admired, the assumption being that their qualities would be obvious to the whole world, no matter how they were written (or translated). Moreover, popularity or entertainment value were hardly categories for the awarding of the annual Korean literary prizes on which reputations depended. Much more important factors were the name of the writer by whom a younger writer was first recognized and the publisher of the work to be crowned.

Some figures can help to illustrate this. In the 30 years between 1970 and 2000, some 130 English translations of Korean poetry, fiction and (very occasionally) drama were published. Of these, 95 were translated by Koreans, and over 40 were published in Korea, others by rather obscure American presses. 53 of the total were poetry. 44 were anthologies of poetry or short stories with works by multiple authors. 63 were fiction (collections of short stories or full-length novels). It was not until 1979 that a full-length Korean novel was published, *Ulhwa the Shaman* by Kim Dongni, translated by Ahn Junghyo and published by Larchwood (USA), a press that went on to publish a few other Korean novels in the following years. That novel was a curious work, for the original short story *Munyeodo* had been published in 1936. The author then revised and expanded it, finally publishing the full-length version only in 1978. The translation appeared just one year later. The short story, written under Japanese rule, was intended as a parable of the threats weighing on Korean cultural, national identity, symbolized by the shaman's conflict with Christianity. The later novel reflected the author's growing conviction that Korea should produce a new religion for the world, in which humanity and nature would live in sympathetic synthesis. It awoke strong emotions in Korea, which were hardly paralleled in the outside world, its basic theme of the search for a new religion inspired by shamanism being unlikely to mean much in the West. In all, before 2000, English translations of 36 full-length novels were published, 20 of which were published in Korea and therefore never distributed overseas.

In the first 12 years of the 21st century, another 130 volumes were published. 60 of these were poetry. Nearly 100 of the books had at least one Korean named as translator/co-translator. By now, very few were published in Korea but still almost none were published by a major commercial or university press. 18 were anthologies and 38 full-length novels were published. Finally, in the 10 years since 2012, 73 more volumes of poetry and 130 more volumes of fiction have been published, most of the fiction being full-length novels published overseas.

Attention to what is now known as "World Literature" began in countries where translation was more widespread than in the US or the UK. In France, for example, in the 1980s and 90s, the small publisher Actes Sud began to publish multiple thin, pocket-book-size French translations of works from many countries, including Korean short stories and novellas, then later some full-length novels. In the 1990s, some good Parisian bookstores stocked those little books, but hidden in a rather dark corner, on a shelf labelled "Corée," close to "Chine" and "Japon." The same was true in England. Korean literature was not expected to appeal to general readers, but only to specialists, if at all. It was an exotic curiosity at best.

In England, the Harvill Press was founded after the war to publish translated novels from Russia and other East-European countries, mainly, and by other important European and international writers, such as Italo Calvino or Marguerite Duras. It built up a fine reputation. The owner, Christopher Maclehouse, one day felt an urge to publish a Korean title, since none were available anywhere. His wife, who was French, duly read the Korean titles published by

Actes Sud and identified Yi Munyol's novel *The Poet* as the most interesting. By a complex series of events I became one of the translators. The book was published in 1992. For the first time, a major western publisher had chosen a work and then commissioned a translation. Previously it was always the translator who chose what was to be translated, then desperately sought for a publisher. *The Poet* was duly reviewed in the Times Literary Supplement. But instead of it being reviewed by a specialist in contemporary world fiction, they asked an academic expert in Korean Studies, Keith Howard, to write a review, although his specialty was ethno-musicology, including Korean music, and he admitted to knowing nothing of Korean literature. The review, quite lengthy, was all about modern Korean history and ignored the novel entirely!

Korean literature: now and beyond

It can be argued that the most important turning-point in the progressive "globalization" of Korean fiction came in 2011, when the American publisher Knopf published *Please Look After Mom* by Kyung-Sook Shin, translated by Chi-Young Kim. Until then, almost all Korean titles had been published by small, unknown presses with no budget for publicity or bookstore distribution, or by university presses relying mainly on class-room use and automatic library purchases. At last Korean fiction was no longer seen as material for study but as a commodity for the worldwide entertainment industry, just like movies, TV dramas, and (a little later) K-pop. *Please Look After Mom* was marketed in the West for general readers, especially members of book-clubs, being presented as a touching Asian family saga. It was not at all marketed as a specifically "Korean" title, although the author's identity made that clear enough. It was distributed, reviewed and publicized in the usual Knopf style, massively. It did not sell millions of copies, as some of Knopf's titles do, but for the very first time a translated Korean novel was treated just like any other novel, whether translated or not, and was noticed in the mainstream media.

The other major event for the translation of Korean fiction was the recognition accorded to Deborah Smith's translation of Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* by the 2015 Man Booker International Prize. Again, we find a touching Asian family saga, although darker and more clearly a study in social and psychological alienation. The fuss made by some pedantic Koreans about the somewhat free / inaccurate translation had no effect on international sales. In fact, *The Vegetarian* was the trailblazer for what was to follow. Korea had by this time begun to be an international household name, especially among the younger generations, thanks first to a series of very successful romantic TV dramas adored especially in Japan, South-East Asia and India, more than in the UK or USA, and then to the growing popularity of Korean movies, but above all to K-Pop music.

A New York literary agent, Barbara Zitwer, seized on the growing popularity among younger Western readers of such psychological "thrillers," as well as horror stories, science-fiction, and almost anything written by younger women, and was able to find important commercial publishers for a considerable number of Korean novels, mostly by younger female authors such as Bae SuAh, Hwang Sun-mi, Pyun Hye-young, Jeong You-Jeong, Cho Nam-Joo, Kim Soom, as well as Kim Un-su, and the older male Hwang Sok-yong. The name of Sora Kim Russell looms large among the younger translators producing this new form of Korean Wave.

Thanks to Barbara, we have escaped from the nightmare decades of the past in which a translator, having selected a novel or poet she liked and translated the work, desperately tried to find a "publisher" of any kind. Major companies like Knopf were inaccessible because they only deal with literary agents. We often turned to one-man publishing operations, White Pine Press, Cornell East Asia Series, M.E. Sharpe, MerwinAsia, Homa & Sekey. That often meant

that the books got printed, but nothing more. The Korean government has long tried to encourage the “globalization” of Korean writing, first through the Korea Culture & Arts Foundation, then through LTI Korea, providing generous funding to translators once their work was accepted by a foreign publisher, as well as supporting publication and sending Korean writers overseas to speak and read at festivals. But that has had very little real impact.

But today, the tables have turned. It is not only K-pop and Korean movies that make the headlines, even Korean fiction is being translated, then published by major commercial presses, and embraced by readers in many countries as never before. Not all of it, of course, since major publishers can only publish a certain number of titles each year, and they only want to publish novels that they reckon they can market successfully. Publishing is a commercial enterprise. Korean writers have begun to understand that they have to be writing to entertain the world at large, especially the young, not only to satisfy older South Korean academic readers. The mostly younger translators now producing translations of popular novels and graphic fiction by younger Koreans can hope for more success, so long as the Korean writers are able to provide what is needed. Fiction today has to be entertaining, and different, has to speak to the world’s demanding young readers who do not care if a writer is famous in Seoul and Busan. Certainly, there are many Korean writers who write exclusively for a Korean readership. That is only normal, the same is true for every nation’s writers. But when a novel assumes in its readers a total familiarity with its original country’s history, culture and psychology, it will not be understood by readers in other parts of the world, no matter how well it is translated. It is those Korean writers who write for tomorrow’s world as a whole who will be given the priority by translators and publishers.

Since the Covid pandemic struck early in 2020 I have been translating contemporary Korean novels proposed to me by Barbara Zitwer. Of the eight I have completed, four have so far been taken by major publishers. Yi Geum-yi’s *The Picture Bride* will be published by Forge (USA) in October 2022. This tells the story of three young women from a remote Gyeongsang Province village who in 1919 set out to become “picture brides” marrying Koreans working in the plantations of Hawaii. Two find themselves married to men far older than they thought, while the main character discovers that her husband did not know she existed until she arrived, his father having acted without telling him in order to have a grandchild before he died. The three women end up working together, united by strong bonds of friendship. The last part moves to 1941, Pearl Harbor, when the daughter of one of the three discovers something surprising about herself.

I have also translated *Can I Go Instead?* by the same author for the same publisher, a long novel about two women’s lives from 1920 until the present, moving between Japanese Korea, Japan, Manchuria, the USA, then back to Korea. This too will be published by Forge. JM Lee’s *Broken Summer* was only published in Korea in May 2021. The translation is complete and it will be published by Amazon Crossing in September 2022. A famous artist wakes one morning to find that his wife has left him, leaving a section of a novel she has written depicting him as a seducer of an under-aged girl. We return in flashback to the death by drowning 25 years before of the wife’s older sister. The artist’s father was imprisoned for her murder but doubts remain until at the climax all becomes clear and the artist acknowledges that he has been using and abusing his wife all these years. Im Seong-sun’s *The Consultant*, which tells the adventures of a murder-planner who sets out for the Congo in Africa in search of a meaningful life and nearly dies, will be published by Bloomsbury (UK) in 2023.

These brief summaries of translated but not yet published recent novels serve to confirm that the Korean fiction which appeals to major world publishers today is not gloomy and nationalistic. It is as entertaining and imaginative, although often in grotesque and hair-raising ways, as any Korean movie, and shows that Korean writers have come a long way from the

earlier grim “documentary realism.” Korean “literature” is now fully “globalized,” so much so that translators and agents have to struggle to keep up with it. Long may it continue.

In contrast, it might seem that the vast majority of published translations from previous decades have little merit. Their English is often weak, the translations inaccurate, and the contents of minimal interest, despite the celebrity enjoyed by the original works and writers in Korea. The only reasonable response is that they should be considered a form of archive, documenting for readers with no Korean the themes and topics that enjoyed popularity in Korea in the past. The documentary value of these books must be recognized, for it will continue to be the case that extremely few non-Koreans, even those majoring in Korean Studies, can read with ease and interest what was written in Korea in earlier decades. More mysterious today will be the readiness of some to continue to translate the works of long-dead Korean writers, as though by some magic transformation they can restore vitality to the literary fossils of the past. Here we encounter another topic, the question of what gives lasting value to a literary work. Today’s best-sellers very easily fade into oblivion while long-forgotten works sometimes emerge suddenly vested with new interest. The translator, faced with so many works past and present, has to make a choice of what deserves translation. Only history will show what works, if any, are of lasting interest, and by that time the translators will have joined the writers beyond all need for language and translation.

Brother Anthony’s main articles on translation

“The Foreignness of Language’ and Literary Translation” in *Journal of English Language and Literature* (The English Language and Literature Association of Korea) Special Number 1996

“Methodologies of Poetry Translation: Translating Shin Kyong-nim's Mokkye-changt'o” in *Hanguk munhakui Woiguko ponyok* Seoul: Minumsa 1997

“Translating Korean Poetry” in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (King's College, London) Volume 13 (1998)

“Literary Translation from Korean into English: A Study in Criteria” in *Translation and Literature*, University of Edinburgh. Volume 11, Part 1 (Spring 2002) 72 - 87

“Translating Korean Poetry: History, Practice, and Theory” in *European Journal of Korean Studies* Volume 18, No. 2 (2019), pp. 153–166.

These and many other papers can be read through links in <http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/Trans.htm>

¹ The fullest lists of published books are probably those online in my own home page: <http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/>

² *The Story of Hong Gil-dong*, Translated by Minsoo Kang. Penguin Classics. 2016.

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- ³ *The Nine Cloud Dream*, Translated by Heinz Insu Fenkl. Penguin Classics. 2019.
- ⁴ *Singing Like a Cricket, Hooting Like an Owl*, Selected Poems of Yi Kyu-bo, translated by Kevin O'Rourke. Cornell East Asia Series. 2010.
- ⁵ It is not possible to deal in much detail here with the immense quantity of translation and writing produced by James Scarth Gale and mostly still unpublished. Anyone wishing to explore the topics barely touched on here must turn to the extensive, outstandingly sensitive discussions of his legacy, and the texts of his collections of essays, "Pen Pictures of Old Korea" and "Old Corea," contained in *Redemption and Regret: Modernizing Korean in the Writings of James Scarth Gale*, edited by Daniel Pieper. University of Toronto Press. 2021.
- ⁶ *James Scarth Gale and his History of the Korean People*. Edited with an extensive biographical Introduction and Bibliography by Richard Rutt. Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch. 1982.
- ⁷ <http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr/KoreaMagazineTOC.html>
- ⁸ Part II was done by Lillias Horton Underwood in 1920, who also translated Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde).
- ⁹ Scanned versions of most of these Korean books are viewable online through Yonsei University Library.
- ¹⁰ Seoul: Mun Hwa Dang, 1948.
- ¹¹ Seoul: Munho-sa. 1958.
- ¹² Seoul: Chang Shin Munwhasa. 1957.
- ¹³ Seoul: Sung Moon Gak. 1959.
- ¹⁴ Yi Nam-ho, U Ch'anje, Yi Kwangho, Kim Mihyŏn, *Twentieth-Century Korean Literature*, Translated by Youngju Ryu. Eastbridge Books. 2005
- ¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York. Oxford University Press, 1973.
- ¹⁶ *Between Liberation Space and Time of Need, 1945-1950: An Exhibition of Rare Literary Works from the Korean Collection of the University of Washington Libraries*. East Asia Library, University of Washington Libraries. 2006.