RECOMMENDED HISTORY READINGS
(texts not provided)

For History:


Anthologies and Translations:


The first set of readings presents a selection of myths, poetry, and prose from early times to the end of Chosŏn Dynasty. Classical Chinese was the official written language in Chosŏn Dynasty until the invention and promulgation of an indigenous script, hangŭl, by King Sejong and his court in 1446. Though denigrated as a “vulgar script” (ǒnmun) by the elite literati for a long time thereafter, hangŭl ultimately became the foundational bedrock for proliferation of vernacular literature.

The “Foundation Myths” are drawn from Remnants of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk yusa, 1285), a compilation of legends, songs, and stories from the earliest times by Buddhist monk Illyŏn. These “origin stories,” so to speak, provide glimpse of various belief systems and socio-cultural structures that shaped ancient kingdoms in Korea.

The rest of the readings are from Chosŏn Dynasty (1392 – 1910), the last and longest-ruling dynasty of Korea. Confucianism, established as the official ideology by the founders of Chosŏn, profoundly influenced and shaped the politics, society, culture, and indeed literature. The readings selected both reflect Confucian values (e.g., loyalty to the king, filial piety), as well as currents that challenge those values. In spite of the hegemony of Confucian ideology, indigenous customs and ideas persisted, and personal conflicts (e.g., romance between members of different social classes) also led to confrontations with prevailing norms.

Sijo, a three-line verse form, was the most popular type of poetry during Chosŏn. The subject matter was diverse, ranging from politics and philosophy to romance and nature. Likewise, the poets also came from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. The following selections, among the best known in the traditional corpus, were composed by Yi Pang-wŏn and Chŏng Mong-ju, early Chosŏn political figures; Hwang Chin-i, a kisaeng [female entertainer], and Yi Sun-sin, a military hero.

Prose also proliferated in classical Chinese and all the more in the vernacular hangŭl during Chosŏn. Hŏ Kyun’s “The Tale of Hong Kiltong” tells the adventures of a rebel-hero, much like Robin Hood in the western counterpart, while Pak Chi-wŏn’s “The Story of Master Hŏ” satirizes the vainglory of the upper classes. “The Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch’unhyang,” perhaps the most famous of love stories in Korea, is showcased here in p’ansori (a narrative verse form often performed by professional singers) form.

“Foundation Myths” (c. 13th c.)
“Songs of Flying Dragons” (1445-1447)
“The Sijo Exchange between Yi Pang-wŏn and Chŏng Mong-ju” (14th c.)
Hwang Chin-i, “I will break the back of this long, midwinter night…” (16th c.)
Yi Sun-sin, “By moonlight I sit all alone…” (16th c.)
Hŏ Kyun, “The Tale of Hong Kiltong” (16th – 17th c.)
“The Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch’unhyang” (19th c.)
MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE

Japanese Occupation Period (1910 – 1945): Becoming a Modern Nation / The Discovery of Modern Love / Modernity and Its Discontents

The annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910 brought an end to centuries of self-rule and ushered in a period of foreign subjugation. Korean writers grappled with the issue of colonialism and produced many works that dealt with the theme of national sovereignty and independence. Korea also witnessed another major transition during this period—namely, the birth of modern Korea. Whether through the advent of industrial capitalism or Western-style education, writers began calling into question existing values in the realm of politics, culture, society, and love.

How did writers employ the language of love and romance to deal with the question of becoming a modern individual and/or a modern nation? As can be observed in Yi Kwangsu’s “The
Heartless” and Na Hye-sŏk’s “Kyŏnghŭi,” the critique of old ways and endorsement of new ways often manifested explicitly in literary works produced during this time. Inversely, many writers were more ambivalent about the ideals of modern subjectivity and modern nationhood, as was the case with writers such as Hyŏn Chin-gŏn and Yi Sang. On another level, literature was also an effective means of mounting resistance against Japanese imperial authorities, albeit surreptitiously, as we might detect in the modern verses of Kim Sŏwŏl and Han Yong’un’s poems.

Yi Kwangsu, “From The Heartless” (1917)
Na Hye-sŏk, “Kyŏnghŭi” (1918)
Hyŏn Chin-gŏn, “A Society That Drives You to Drink” (1921)
Kim Sŏwŏl, “Azaleas” (1925)
Han Yong’un, “Your Silence” (1926)
Yi Sang, “Wings” (1936)


The “Liberation Space,” War and Division, and the Ethics of Survival

The euphoria that followed Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule at the end of the World War II was short-lived. Periodized diversely as 1945, 1945-1948, or 1945-1950, it was an incredibly frustrating time during which Koreans had competing visions on what constituted a legitimate polity on the peninsula. Following the division of the country along ideological lines
and a subsequent fratricidal war (The Korean War, 1950-1953), an intense version of anti-communism became the national creed of South Korea, enforced vigilantly by the state.

The selections below offer examples of literary representations of what life was like for Koreans undergoing a chain of tumultuous events throughout liberation period, war and national division, and the trauma that ensued in the war’s aftermath. “Flowers of Fire” tells the story of three generations in one family whose very lives are indelibly shaped by those very events. “Cranes” conjures up the possibility of reconciliation between the North and South Koreas through the story of two childhood friends reuniting across the ideological divide. “Kapitan Ri” and “The Wounded” meditate upon the pragmatics and ethics of surviving in a war-torn, traumatized nation undergoing one political upheaval after another. In an ingeniously subversive manner, “Granny Flowers in Those Heartless Days” gives us a glimpse into what living through a war meant for women: how do we narrate a woman’s war?

Hwang Sunwŏn, “Cranes” (1953)
Sŏnu Hwi, “Flowers of Fire” (1957)
Chŏn Kwang-yong, “Kapitan Ri” (1962)
Pak Wansŏ, “Granny Flowers in Those Heartless Days” (1977)


Democracy and Developmental Dictatorship

The years spanning from 1961 to 1987 were some of the darkest years in South Korean history. Following the military coup of Park Chung Hee in 1961, South Korea would witness two military authoritarian regimes in succession until the nationwide democratization movement led by the populace ushers in an era of procedural democracy in 1987. The authoritarian regimes during this period legitimized their military dictatorships by promoting developmentalism, modernization, and economic growth. Although the years between 1961 and 1987 were a time of
unparalleled political oppression, it was precisely the state’s repressive measures that drove literature into a period of great expansion and intense political activism.

The three selections here are works from some of the most representative writers from the 1960s and 1970s. While some writers were more surreptitious and circuitous in their critique of the authoritarian state, some others mounted resistance to the state in far more conspicuous ways. “Seoul: Winter 1964” offers a look into the breakdown of social order as South Korea moved from an agrarian to an urban society by meditating upon the question of language and communication. “Five Bandits” is a biting satire of the collusion between the authoritarian state and capitalists in the 1970s. “Knifeblade” exemplifies the cost of forming a broader category of “fellow travelers,” so to speak, among individuals of disparate socioeconomic class, in an era of rapid industrialization.

Kim Chi-ha, “Five Bandits” (1970)
Cho Sehŭi, “Knifeblade” (1975)


North Korea’s Search for Autonomy

Following the division of the Korean peninsula, in the north a totalitarian communist state was established that continues to this day. Although North Korea is often “othered” as the international pariah and/or an “axis of evil” in the global community, what is happening in North Korea is part and parcel of what is happening in the global geopolitics at large.

The three stories selected here showcase an amalgamation of nationalism and socialism in literature of North Korea. How are class-based identity and nationalist identity negotiated in North Korean literature? What is the function of literature in a society that needs to carve out and maintain autonomy for itself in the geographical configuration of the “great powers” (i.e., U.S., Russia, China)? In the three stories that span nearly five decades’ time, the importance of constructing and renewing the revolutionary spirit is emphasized. How does the revolutionary imperative under a socialist regime change over time?
Post-authoritarian Era and the New Generation

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the spectacular collapse of the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe in 1989 reverberated around the globe, but the moment was especially poignant for Korea, for the country transitioned to “real” democracy and drew global attention with the first direct presidential election in 1987 and the successful 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. In South Korean literature, this post-Cold War environment brought major changes in subject matter (personal lives), diverse modes of representation, and the emergence of a new generation of writers with sensibilities very different from those of writers from the authoritarian era.

The selections here depict what life is like in post-democratization, post-developmental consumption society. To a large extent, all three stories exhibit concern with self-reflexivity, awareness of representation itself, and an attempt to negotiate an urban space and locate oneself in that space. How far has Korea come since the authoritarian era, and how much does Korea still have to go? In “The Gray Snowman,” the grand narrative of democratization is given a askance glance from the perspective of gender. And in the background of “My Brother’s Back” and Is That So? I’m a Giraffe is the “IMF Crisis,” the Asian financial crisis of the mid-to-late 1990s, which shook the structures and hierarchies inherent in society and family.

Ch’oe Yun, “The Gray Snowman” (1992)
Park Min-gyu, Is that So? I’m a Giraffe (2005)
