

## TRADITIONAL KOREAN LITERATURE

### *Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910): Korean Traditions, Confucian Values*

*The first set of readings presents a survey of vernacular poetry and prose during the Chosŏn dynasty. While classical Chinese was the official written language of government and scholarship, the invention of an indigenous script, han'gŭl, by King Sejong and his court in the mid-fifteenth century laid the foundations for vernacular literature.*

*Sijo, a three-line verse form, was the most popular type of poetry during the Chosŏn. And the subject matter ranged from politics and philosophy to romance and nature. The poets, likewise, came from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. The following selections, among the most well-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.*

*Vernacular prose also proliferated, especially in late Chosŏn. "The Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch'unhyang" is Korea's most famous romance. Often compared to "Romeo and Juliet," it tells the story of a young couple taking on the world in the name of love.*

*A common thread that runs through both the poetry and prose is Confucianism. Established as official ideology by the dynastic founders, Confucianism profoundly influenced and shaped politics, society, and culture. The following selections provide examples that reflect the Confucian values, (e.g., loyalty and filial piety), as well as currents that challenge them. In spite of Confucian hegemony during the Chosŏn, indigenous customs and ideas (e.g., hereditary aristocracy) persisted, and personal conflicts (e.g., romance) also led to confrontations with prevailing norms.*

[14<sup>th</sup> c.] "The Sijo Exchange between Yi Pang-wŏn and Chŏng Mong-ju." In *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*, edited and translated by David McCann, 32. New York: Columbia University, 2000.

[16<sup>th</sup> c.] HWANG Chin-i. "I will break the back of this long, midwinter night..." and "Jade Green Stream..." In *Early Korean Literature: Selections and Introductions*, edited and translated by David McCann, 56-57. New York: Columbia University, 2000.

[16<sup>th</sup> c.] YI Sun-sin. "By moonlight I sit all alone ..." In *The Bamboo Grove: An Introduction to Sijo*, edited and translated by Richard Rutt. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998. No.9.

[19<sup>th</sup> c.] Anonymous. "The Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch'unhyang." In *Virtuous Women: Three Classic Korean Novels*, translated by Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un, 250-333. Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, 1974.

**MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE**  
*Japanese Occupation Period (1910-1945): “Colonial Modernity”*

*The annexation of Korea as a Japanese colony in 1910 brought an end to centuries of self-rule and ushered in a humiliating period of foreign subjugation. Korean writers grappled with the issue of colonialism and produced many works that promoted the spirit of national independence. The Japanese occupation period also witnessed another major transition – the birth of modern Korea. Whether it was industrial capitalism or Western-style education, old ways gave way to the new in the first half of the twentieth century. Literature was no exception, as new forms of poetry and prose made their appearance.*

*The poems of Kim Sowŏl and Han Yong’un are anthologized in the Korean canon not only as pioneering works of modern verse but also as literary monuments to nationalism. In what ways do the following selections express the anti-colonial, national spirit of the Koreans under Japanese rule? In what ways are the poems open to other readings?*

*Nationalism during the Japanese occupation eventually developed into two opposing camps. The so-called “cultural nationalists” advocated a gradual approach toward independence that emphasized education and economic development. In contrast, the radical nationalists, inspired by Marxism, sought immediate liberation through armed struggle and social revolution. Yŏm Sang-sŏp’s “The Rotary Press” and Yi Ki-yŏng’s “A Tale of Rats” are literary representations, respectively, of these competing strains of Korean nationalism.*

[1925] KIM Sowŏl. “Azaleas,” translated by David McCann. In *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*, edited by David McCann, 18-19. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

[1926] HAN Yong’un. “Your Silence,” translated by Sammy Solberg. In *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*, edited by David McCann, 27-29. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

[1925] YŎM Sang-sŏp. “The Rotary Press.” In *A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction*, edited and translated by Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton, 32-45. Honolulu: The University of Hawai’i Press, 1998.

[1926] YI Ki-yŏng. “A Tale of Rats.” In *A Ready-Made Life: Early Masters of Modern Korean Fiction*, edited and translated by Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton, 23-31. Honolulu: The University of Hawai’i Press, 1998.

### ***Contemporary Korea (1945-present): National Division, Democracy, Totalitarianism***

*The euphoria that followed Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule at the end of World War II was short-lived, as war and national division soon followed. In the north a totalitarian communist state was established that continues to this day. In the south a succession of dictators eventually gave way to democracy, and the country also emerged as a global economic powerhouse.*

*The selections below offer examples of literary engagement with various settings in contemporary South Korea. Pak Wansŏ's "Winter Outing" explores the tragedy of the Korean War and its personal legacies. Yi Mun-yŏl's *Our Twisted Hero* can be seen as an allegory that probes the psychology underlying authoritarianism in South Korea. Finally, Kim Yŏng-ha's "Whatever Happened to That Guy Stuck in the Elevator?" is a zany glimpse into the hectic urban life of post-modern Seoul.*

*Because of the closed nature of North Korean society, little is known outside the country about its literature. What is certain is that all publications are controlled by the state. One of the few pieces of North Korean literature that have been translated into English is "A Tale of Music," a story about a Korean resident of Japan who moves to North Korea and the dramatic transformation that takes place in his life.*

[1975] PAK Wan-sŏ. "Winter Outing." In *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*, edited and translated by Marshall Pihl and Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton, 150-164. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

[1987] YI Mun-yŏl. *Our Twisted Hero*. Translated by Kevin O'Rourke. New York: Hyperion, 2001.

[1999] KIM Yŏng-ha. "Whatever Happened to That Guy Stuck in the Elevator?" translated by Jason Rhodes. In *Photo Shop Murder*, by Young-ha Kim [Kim Yŏng -ha], 17-28. Seoul: Jimoondang, 2003.

[2003] KANG Kwi-mi. "A Tale of Music," translated by Yu Young-nan. In *Literature from the Axis of Evil: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations (Words Without Borders Anthology)*, edited by Alane Mason et al., 103-129. New York: New Press, 2006.

#### **Note:**

- Author's surnames are in all capitals. Korean surnames precede the given name.
- The date inside the bracket is the year the piece was first published.
- An [F] following the author's name indicates the author is female.