

Waxen Wings

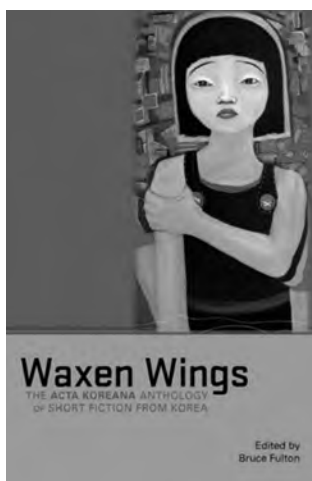
The Acta Koreana Anthology of Short Fiction from Korea

BRUCE FULTON, EDITOR

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Reviewed by Tracy Kaminer



As a teacher of world literature to high school seniors, I have experimented with many works in translation, attempting to introduce unfamiliar cultures through story. When the references are too vague or the background too intimidating, students close the book before they give the literature (and sometimes the culture) a chance. That is why *Waxen Wings* is a welcome work. While Korean readers or scholars who are steeped in tradition and literary arts can appreciate the stories on a deeper level, the novice can find works that are dif-

ferent enough to be interesting but universal enough to be accessible and appealing. Some of the stories are based on folktales and myth, while others have such diverse themes as politics, fantasy and imagination, nature, Western popular culture, and the macabre. The first of the nine stories in the collection was published in 1936 and the last in 2006.

Yi Hyosök (1907–1942), who, Fulton tells us, escaped to the countryside when Japanese occupiers clamped down on his writing, starts the collection with his less controversial “In the Mountains.” The brief story is a poetic yearning for communion with nature from a character who has been unfairly accused by his village employer of consorting with the employer’s concubine. He runs away to cleanse himself of the filth in the village by sleeping in the leaves, eating what the earth provides, and becoming like a tree himself. The landscape does not let him down, and the only price is loneliness. He has less-than-honorable thoughts about how to deal with that loneliness, for example, by kidnapping a girl from the village, but at the end, as he slept, he “felt himself turning into a star.”

“Constable Maeng” by Ch’ae Manshik, born in 1902, exposes the falsehoods we all tell ourselves. The story may need some introduction to understand that liberation from Japanese occupation took a heavy toll on those who collaborated during that time. Constable Maeng is one such character. Although he considers himself an “upright” man, we learn that he can lie to himself because he was not as successful as others in extorting big bribes from other Koreans and enriching himself during the occupation. Now he has little except for a shrew of a young wife, whom he finds “amusing,” and his own fear about working as a constable again after learning that others like him had been beaten to death by those who were angry about being mistreated under the old rule. The translation by Joel Stevenson is lively and playful, such as in this dialogue when the young wife is complaining that her husband has never given her a silk dress: “You are

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such a jerk. If you had a mouth as big as a wicker basket there’s nothing you could say for yourself.” Here is a man who is slow to recognize that society has changed, and he is on the wrong side of history. With alternating humor and gravity, the story engages us in a reflection on the ways in which we make excuses for the wrongs we have committed when we choose to expect very little of ourselves.

“Weaver Woman” by O Ch’onghüi and “We Teach Shame” by Pak Wansö, both written in the 1970s, follow. These two women are responsible for much of the success of Korean women writers today, says Fulton in his introduction. While the first story recalls the folktale of a herder boy and weaver girl, the second is a story that readers can relate to on many levels—from the widening wealth gap brought to the forefront by both the Occupy and the Tea Party movements in the US right now—to questions we hold in our hearts about our lives’ purposes and directions. The sensitive narrator reflects on her three sham marriages, her evacuation from Seoul in 1951, and life in a camp town with American soldiers. How, then, can people chase wealth all around her, be content to use and discard each other, and disparage their own countrymen? What happened to the “inexpressible harmony” of black tiles and white snow of the South Gate, which remained as she fled Seoul into unspeakable misfortune?



CHINA

Through the Eyes of Her Students

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Written by authorities in the subject, *China Through the Eyes of Her Students* provides a rare glimpse of life in China through essays and personal journals of China’s university students. Edited by DM Coffman, this text adds an excellent foundation for Chinese studies.

“Waxen Wings” by Ha Söngnan, published in 1999, is full of Western references, from the Icarus myth to movies starring Humphrey Bogart and Audrey Hepburn. It is dreamlike, told in second person.

“Prison of the Heart” by Kim Wönil, who was born in 1942, is the most directly political story in the collection. He is strongly identified with the division theme in contemporary literature. The narrator, who has just come back from visiting the Soviet Union, finds his brother, a political activist for the poor, dying in the hospital. The brother has spent much of his adult life in jail. A surprising element of the story is the religious dimension. The activism is born of Christian liberation theology, and the world of the shantytowns we glimpse in the story contrasts well with the narrator’s discomfort with the superficiality in “We Teach Shame.” “Prison of the Heart” is the longest story in the book. While it feels didactic at times, the story gains its power when the disenfranchised people enter the story toward the end to carry the brother “home” to the shantytown. The shantytown is located at the top of a steep hill, prompting the mother to comment, “The poorest people on this earth are those living closest to heaven.”

“The Pager” by Kim Yönggha, first published in 1996, concerns a writer who chooses fantasy over reality and tests the power of his imagination. It is an entertaining tale about a young man whose girlfriend leaves him for another man and then moves to the US to further her studies. When she tells him of her decision, all the bumbling boyfriend can think to say is, “Good luck in your studies.” The rest of the story is the “what if” of the young man’s imagination.

“Waxen Wings” by Ha Söngnan, published in 1999, is full of Western references, from the Icarus myth to movies starring Humphrey Bogart and Audrey Hepburn. It is dreamlike, told in second person. Although the story is about a young girl who wants to defy gravity and fly, the reader connects with the loneliness of the person who wants to break free from strict surroundings, the schoolchildren who castigate anyone not like themselves, and the punishing manner of the gymnastics teacher who cuts the narrator loose when she has served her purpose. It makes one wonder: What is going too far in challenging the norm? What is the price one has to pay?

Fulton includes the gritty “Corpses,” written by P’yön Hyeyöng in 2004, as an example of the expanding diversity of women writers’ voices. The disturbing, violent story is followed by “The Glass Shield” by Kim Chunghyök, published in 2006. It is another story about isolation, even though it features a pair of friends. We meet two unemployed friends in their twenties on a subway as they painstakingly unravel a ball of yarn. Readers who have experienced the recent economic downturn will relate to this story. The two men go for interview after interview. They try to take a creative approach to their interviews to make the experience meaningful for themselves. They go nowhere until they are photographed on a subway unraveling yarn, and the photos go viral. Suddenly, they are celebrities. The story is contemporary in theme, funny at times, and ultimately about the loneliness of one who sees differently.

What does the collection teach us about Korea? That Koreans are not so different from us, whoever we are. ■

TRACY KAMINER teaches World Literature at Marist School in Atlanta, Georgia. She has been a presenter on Korean poetry and short stories at the Korea Academy for Educators in Los Angeles and at regional workshops sponsored by KAFE and the Sejong Cultural Center. She received a Teaching Excellence Award and a China Teacher Leadership Award, funding travel to Asia, and she has mentored Chinese teachers and served as a consultant for the American Councils for International Education.

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