

The Need to Reposition the Teaching of Contemporary Korean Literature

By Helen H. Koh

On the first day of class, I gaze out onto a sea of eager young faces. I can already sense the students will be highly engaged, yet I secretly hope for more than sheer enthusiasm. In my ideal Korean literature class, students take the course because of an interest in literature and not necessarily to explore their Korean identity. I certainly do not object to teaching students who want to know more about Korea, but it is difficult to teach literature to those who have little training or interest in it as a course of study.

Korean literature is generally taught in North American universities in an area studies department as one of the three major literary traditions of East Asia along with Japanese and Chinese literature. But far more than these better known national literatures, Korean literature functions as a means for heritage students and Korean studies majors to learn about the country in general. Meanwhile, the particular qualities of Korean literature that make it vital and worth studying for the way in which it, like other memorable works of literature, help us understand ourselves and the world around us—these qualities are too often lost. Instead, students are more likely to be concerned with what the story can teach them about being Korean or the culture rather than with what the literature itself has to offer. As an instructor of literature, I believe that this is where the problem lies. Usually, Korean literature is taught in isolation from literature programs throughout the rest of the university, and instead of attracting students in English, Comparative, or World Literature, the classes are composed largely of students who have had little exposure to creative fiction or poetry. For this reason my classes often compensate as a general introduction to literature for heritage students. In an ideal college curriculum, Korean literature would be taught as part of a Comparative Literature or World Literature program. Introduced in this context, I believe it could make an important contribution to the university literature curriculum, further enhancing students' understanding of literary traditions that exist outside the English language.

I was originally asked to write an essay about my experience teaching Korean literature, and I will illustrate my previous concerns about the role of modern Korean literature in the university with examples taken from my teaching, both within the university and in privately funded education programs. I can roughly divide the classes I have taught into two distinct groups of students. The first group is predominantly made up of heritage undergraduates. The second is composed of high school teachers who wish to introduce Korean literature to their school curriculum. Strategies I've devised for teaching modern Korean literature to these two groups differ in important respects. For students who know about Korea from childhood or through their parents and friends, a course on Korean literature is often a sounding board for the truths and myths of Korea. Moreover, the classroom becomes a personal gauge to measure how well they fit, or do not fit, a preconceived

notion of Korean identity. While heritage students may be eager to learn more about Korea, there are considerable personal investments at play. Arriving in the classroom armed with memories or information about the country of their parents' origins, many anxieties and expectations about Korea surface in the heritage students' struggle for self-knowledge.

To heritage students, I assign literature that offers insights into the events that have strongly shaped nationalist sentiment and encourage them to think about the historicity of national identity. In other words, I try to give students concrete examples of specific conditions and circumstances that helped form modern notions of identity in Korea. When a people who have a common sense of ethnicity and history and who share language and territorial boundaries are faced with a set of crises,

the stories written by members of the self-designated group contain the same points of reference, which helps assert a shared identity. Scholars of Korean Studies have frequently observed that a feeling of suffering, referred to as *han*, strongly contributes to the perception of unified national identity. The result in discussions of Korean literature is an overemphasis on sameness over difference—the emphasis on a shared and distinguishable sensibility to which is attributed a “national” or uniquely “Korean” sentiment. To balance this tendency toward a uniform national response, I encourage students to think about the distinct approaches and techniques adopted by writers in the stories and poems they read. Each writer creates a unique lens to view a situation through narrative voice and other literary devices. I remind students that when several Korean writers of the same time period are compared, there may be strong similarities in their writing, but there will also be differences among them because each individual has her own distinct perception and literary voice. This is what makes a writer remarkable, regardless of when and where she was born.

Let me give you an example of how I might teach a work of fiction to undergraduates. One of the most effective stories I have assigned is “The Underground Village,” by the socialist writer Kang Kyŏng-ae, one of Korea’s pioneering women writers.¹ The story is about a poor rural family trying to eke out a livelihood in the 1930s. Unflinching in its portrayal of rural misery, the characters struggle with grinding poverty aggravated by a lack of sanitary conditions and medicines, which leads to one tragedy after another. The story is effective in conveying to students the deep despair and disenfranchisement of rural folk during the Colonial Period. After reading this story about a Korea vastly different from the thriving South Korea reported in today’s newspapers (though not so far removed from coverage of North Korea’s famine), some students remain skeptical about the “realism” of the conditions depicted. Perhaps this skepticism is due to the conclusion of the story, where the well-meaning but uneducated mother harms her baby in a misguided attempt to cure her. I have known students to be shocked at the detailed description of the infant’s physical agonies and the mother’s basic medical ignorance, and for these and many other reasons find the story unforgettable.

I try to direct students to several important points about rural society and about social realism raised in “The Underground Village.” While the story describes rural Korea in the 1930s, the problems depicted were also germane to land and tenancy crises in many countries forced to restructure feudal conditions with the onslaught of capitalism. When teaching about the Colonial Period in Korean history or civilization courses, instructors will assign “The Underground Village” because

When teaching about the Colonial Period in Korean history or civilization courses, instructors will assign “The Underground Village” because it powerfully describes what it might have been like to live under Japanese rule. For intellectual historians, the story demonstrates the political engagement of a leftist writer who used her pen to respond to rural and national crises.

When undergraduates complete my Korean literature course, I would like them to have a sense of literature's vital role during a period of great upheaval. I also would like them to understand that intellectuals around the world were swept up in the fervor of socialism and were able to parlay their ideas into literary form.

it powerfully describes what it might have been like to live under Japanese rule. For intellectual historians, the story demonstrates the political engagement of a leftist writer who used her pen to respond to rural and national crises. This is certainly a worthwhile approach, and to offer students historical context, I have assigned the following reading assignments to supplement the story. For an historical treatment, "The Radical Critique" in *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920–1925* by Michael Robinson, or one of the chapters in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Robinson, may be helpful in intro-

ducing students to intellectual and historical debates of the period.² For a non-fiction comparison of life in colonial Korea, Hildi Kang has compiled a collection of memoirs in *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices of Colonial Korea 1910–1945*, which offers testimonies by individuals who lived under Japanese rule.³

A solely historical approach to "The Underground Village," however, limits the story to a Korea-centered perspective. I think it is just as important to teach students that Kang Kyŏng-ae's masterful story is relevant not only to Korean history, but is a powerful example of social realism. Works of social realism operate on the premise that a writer is committed to social change and toward this goal translates social facts into literary ones. Rather than limit "The Underground Village" to the perennial theme of Koreans suffering under Japanese oppression, I suggest examining other socialist writers of the 1930s for what their stories may share with Kang's. For example, Miyamoto Yuriko's "The Family of Koiwai" (1938) is a short story of a poor rural family written by a well-known socialist writer in Japan.⁴ There are, of course, many works of social realism written at this time that feature the plight of the rural family in other countries as well. My point is that a comparative reading would encourage students to examine how Kang adapts a popular literary technique to her own voice. After students have read "The Underground Village," I ask for their reaction to the misery depicted in the story and we discuss how techniques of social realism are used to achieve this effect. The following questions might serve as a guide. Based on your reading of "The Underground Village," can you describe some key features of social realism? Pick out the themes and stylistic techniques that argue the need for social and economic reform. How successful is Kang in using literature to convey her political message? Explain why social reformers might endorse realism as an effective means of educating readers.

When undergraduates complete my Korean literature course, I would like them to have a sense of literature's vital role during a period of great upheaval. I also would like them to understand that intellectuals around the world were swept up in the fervor of socialism and were able to parlay their ideas into literary form. Socialist ideas were an important force in Korean literary history, as exemplified by the KAPF (Korean Artists Proletariat Federation) in the 1930s, and in a more complex configuration, the movement for National Literature in the 1970s. In both cases, literature was not subordinate to politics but the very means by which political ideas were transmitted during censorship. Realism has a long tradition of being a powerful and popular vehicle for political dissent in Korea. And by reading stories by writers of many political persuasions, students may learn that Korean writers were not necessarily in agreement about the kind of social arrangement that could best represent all of society.

The second group of students—high school teachers who want to introduce Korean literature in the school curriculum—knows very little about Korea. My teaching experience has been with those whose exposure to Korea is limited to the Korean War, South Korea’s economic development, and most recently, North Korea’s nuclear capabilities. Everything else about Korea remains a mystery. Since this second group is made up of teachers rather than young adults, the class poses a different set of challenges. The disciplinary knowledge of high school teachers trained in literature or history provides them with a set of analytical tools that can easily help fill in gaps in knowledge about Korean history and literature. I have found the best way to engage adult students is to draw upon the strength of their humanities training. When students are sophisticated readers of literature, we can focus on textual concerns rather than fundamental concepts in literature. Frequently, high school teachers comment that contemporary Korean writers delve into issues already familiar to them in Western novels and short stories, but in unexpected ways. In such classes, I introduce students already versed in literature to the creativity of a group of writers they are encountering for the first time.

My goals are, in some ways, the opposite of what I teach heritage undergraduates to whom I emphasize that Korean writers are not necessarily unique in their responses to contemporary issues. In contrast, high school teachers are well aware of the main discussions in contemporary literature and history and already have references in Western literature for comparing Korean examples. Since they will automatically read Korean authors within these global discourses, my task is to explain to them what was different, and possibly unique, to Korean literary production.

I can best explain the contrast in the preparedness of heritage undergraduates and adult high school teachers by giving O Chŏng-hŭi’s short story “Evening Game” as a teaching example.⁵ This story in particular has met with the most positive response from adult teachers, while college students often express frustration with the writer’s style, best characterized by a disjointed presentation of time and blurring of fantasy and reality. An undergraduate with little knowledge of literary techniques tends to be most comfortable with realism and may be perplexed when confronted with a lack of clarity in time and space such as O Chŏng-hŭi’s stories present. Moreover, for heritage students burdened with assumptions of what Korean literature (and families) should be, the subject matter of O’s stories might seem too sexual or individualistic, and, therefore, not representative of the Korean society they imagined.

“Evening Game” describes a typical evening in the life of a middle-aged female protagonist, whose primary role is caretaker of her elderly, diabetic father. Sounds familiar—a filial daughter devoted to the care of an ailing father. As the story continues, however, the woman recalls disturbing memories of her mad mother who was institutionalized by her father, a sibling who died mysteriously in infancy, and a suicidal brother who deserted the family. While the protagonist appears to have been left keeper of her family secrets, in the penultimate scene her own fantasies of repressed sexuality enter the textual space in a brief encounter with a construction worker. The verbal and sexual exchange between the middle-class woman and male worker is unromantic and businesslike. At the same time, the first-person narrator’s detached and

This story [“Evening Game”] in particular has met with the most positive response from adult teachers, while college students often express frustration with the writer’s style, best characterized by a disjointed presentation of time and blurring of fantasy and reality.

I also want students to be able to grasp the thread of unease and rebellion that runs through the work of all of these women writers despite differences in writing style. In my view, their writing bears a profound consciousness of the difficulties of being a woman in South Korea.

disembodied description leave students wondering whether the meeting actually occurred or is a product of the narrator's imagination. My task here is to get students accustomed to a variety of literary styles and encourage them to think about the meaning conveyed by the author's choice of technique, no matter how strange it might seem. Rather than resolve the question of fantasy or reality, I try to shift students' attention to the possible meaning of O's discordant writing. What kind of experience might the author be trying to represent by blurring fantasy and reality in the story? How does the protagonist feel about her family and her role as a filial daughter, and how is this expressed in her telling of the story? Why might the woman in the story engage in or imagine sex with a stranger even as she spends her evenings tending to her father? These kinds of questions might provoke students to question their assumptions about "normal" Korean fami-

lies. I also introduce the idea that O's writing style may be a commentary on the conflict of upholding traditional roles in contemporary society.

In contrast to the typical undergraduate, the high school teachers were more comfortable with the variety of narrative forms found in contemporary fiction, and often expressed admiration for her distinctive writing. That is why O Chŏng-hŭi, perhaps more than any other writer, compares favorably with Western authors exploring gender and sexuality. But I also want students to learn that the conditions under which O writes are different from those of Western writers with whom they are familiar. To this class I introduce the author's work specifically within the context of women writing in contemporary South Korea to explain how women fared during the late 1960s through 1980s (the period of rapid industrialization and the period in which O was most prolific). Without this history, it is impossible to understand the kind of experience the author shares in her most disturbing stories. Although Korean critics have criticized O Chŏng-hŭi as a solipsistic and nihilistic writer, I believe her work is deeply connected to the burgeoning frustrations of women in society at large as a result of continued legal and economic discrimination.

To make my point, I assign stories by O's female contemporaries. Short stories by Pak Wan-sŏ and Kang Sŏk-kyŏng directly address the burden of traditional mores for Korean women.⁶ By comparing O Chŏng-hŭi to these writers, students quickly understand the general social conditions in which O was writing and can fully appreciate how startling her writing was when her short stories were first published in South Korea. Moreover, I also want students to be able to grasp the thread of unease and rebellion that runs through the work of all of these women writers despite differences in writing style. In my view, their writing bears a profound consciousness of the difficulties of being a woman in South Korea.

I began this essay with the concern that Korean literature serves largely as an introduction for students who wish to learn about contemporary Korean society. If the study of Korean literature is to be taken seriously, however, it cannot be relegated to an ancillary position, either for majors in the social sciences or for heritage students more interested in questions of ethnic identity.⁷ I remain convinced that a background in literature is more important for a course on Korean literature than prior experience or knowledge about the country. To remedy the second-class status of Korean literature in the university, I suggest incorporating it into a comparative literature curriculum. Another option would be to teach Korean literature in a comprehensive program

of East Asian literature. One of the best experiences I have had was teaching Korean literature to a class composed of students studying modern Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literature within the same program. The students were able to form a broader understanding of the East Asian literary context and locate common points of reference as well as different responses to modernization. The program enabled them to understand how Korean literature has been informed by many of the same conditions as its neighbors in regard to the West, and yet emerged as a distinctive voice among its neighbors. After all, it would be inaccurate to claim Korean literature as unique among world literatures, but still important to claim its place as a literature that vitally expresses the aspirations of the individual in turbulent times. ■

NOTES

1. Suh Ji-moon and James Wade, trans., "The Underground Village" in *Hospital Room 205 and Other Stories*, ed. Korea National Commission for UNESCO (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa, 1983), 1–37.
2. See Michael Robinson, *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920–25* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988); see also *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, eds. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).
3. See Hildi Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea 1910–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
4. See Miyamoto, Yuriko, "The Family of Koiwai" in *Stories by Contemporary Japanese Women Writers*, trans. and ed. Noriko Mizuta Lippit and Kyoko Iriye Selden (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1982), 3–21.
5. Fulton, Bruce and Ju-chan, trans., "Evening Game" in *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989), 181–201.
6. For stories by Kang Sök-kyöng, see *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*. Stories by Pak Wan-sö are well-represented in English language translations of Korean literature, but the largest single compilation of stories can be found in *My Very Last Possession*, ed. Chun Kyung-ja (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).
7. For that matter, I do not think that the teaching of Korean literature should remain the preserve of native speakers educated in Korea—a persistent bias despite the growing number of specialists who are not of Korean heritage. This practice keeps the study of Korean literature at a parochial level, reinforcing the ethnic and cultural prejudice that only native Koreans can truly understand the literature.

HELEN H. KOH received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in Korean Literature in 2001. From 1999–2002, she was a Visiting Fellow at the East Asian Institute at Columbia University. She lives in New York and writes articles on Korean literature and film, and at present is at work on her first novel.

CGP The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership

国際交流基金日米センター

FUNDING FOR OUTREACH AND EXCHANGE PROJECTS

The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership (CGP) awards grants to US and Japanese nonprofit organizations for collaborative bilateral and multilateral projects that contribute to the improvement of US-Japan relations and the world's welfare. CGP is seeking proposals for its Education and Grassroots Exchange Programs in the following areas:

Education

CGP supports projects that aim to improve education about Japan primarily at the K–12 level, such as professional development and curriculum development initiatives. CGP places priority on teacher training projects that build networks among educators interested in Japan and projects that facilitate collaboration between scholars and teachers to develop teaching resources.

CGP provides support for US-Japan and multilateral exchanges at the grassroots level that enable citizens of each country to work collaboratively on global issues of common concern and to build networks, with particular emphasis on youth exchange projects and exchanges to develop the nonprofit sector in both countries. Support is also provided for projects that seek to increase public awareness and understanding of issues facing the United States, Japan and the world.

Grassroots Exchange

For a copy of our **Grant Application Guidelines** and further information about these and other grant and fellowship opportunities, please see our website at <http://www.cgp.org/cgplink> or contact CGP directly.

The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership, 152 West 57th Street, 39th Floor, New York, New York 10019
Tel: (212) 489-1255, Fax: (212) 489-1344, E-mail: info@cgp.org