

BOOK REVIEWS

The Rainy Spell and Other Korean Stories

(Revised and Expanded Edition)

Translated and edited by Suh Ji-moon

ARMONK, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 1998
PREFACE + 285 PAGES

By her own admission, Suh Ji-moon, the compiler and translator of these fourteen stories by some of Korea's best-known modern writers, did not make her selection in accordance with any set literary standard. Her choices reflect her desire to share her favorites, namely those centering around typical Korean situations most readily accessible to readers unfamiliar with Korean customs and traditions.

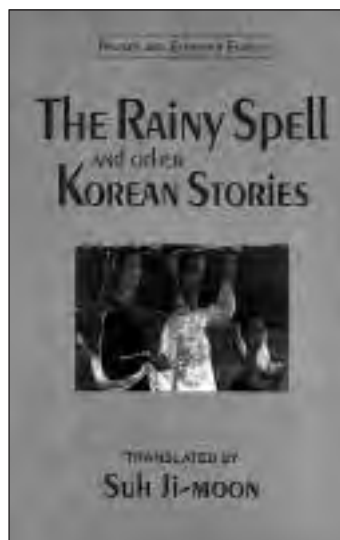
Ranging from the 1920s to 1990s, the stories relate common, core experiences drawn from Korea's recent and turbulent past—from its development as an isolationist Confucian state to its agonizing years as a Japanese colony culminating in World War II, from the scarred and charred aftermath of the Korean War and the unnatural division of the Korean peninsula, to its struggles to cope with rapid modernization.

Many of these stories are infused with suffering and resignation as well as the struggle for material and spiritual survival. In addition to poverty and political exploitation, characters endure illness, alienation, and difficult relationships. This provides the collection with a similar and unifying tone.

Nonetheless, there is a variety of themes, and some endings are even subtly optimistic. In "His Father's Keeper," a young narrator, a South Korean man pursuing a Ph.D. in Paris, is visited by his father, who defected to North Korea before his birth. The narrator has felt a lifelong anger at his father for deserting his family (in fact if not in intention), causing them to suffer the hardships of a defector's family in the post-Korean War period, but his anger dissipates when he and his father visit communist graves in a Paris cemetery. In the poignant final scene of "Pierrot," a refugee family facing eviction copes with such a humiliating situation by bursting forth into a circus-like performance in a show of their stoic acceptance of hardship.

Some stories refer obliquely to past and present events. The title work, a novella written in 1978, is considered to be one of the best stories portraying the Korean War experience. Two grandmothers with sons in opposing camps bear painful testimony of a divided people. Told from the point of view of a child caught up in these adult animosities, the story is evocative of the brother-vs.-brother conflicts of America's own tragic Civil War.

In the amusing "My Idiot Uncle," the title character is ridiculed by his nephew, the narrator, for being a socialist. Ultimately, however, it is the nephew who, at the expense of his Korean identity, flatters and submits to his Japanese bosses in an



attempt to "rise" in a colonialist society, and proves to be a fool. "Eroica Symphony" depicts the relationship between a female disc jockey and a male patron of the tea-room where she works, and revolves around the political and social significance of the music requested by the patron. Published in 1965, just when Park Chung Hee was beginning to tighten his grip on power, the story presupposes the reader's familiarity with Korean history and that particular period.

More accessible are those stories that deal with human relationships and feelings. "The Underground Village," while filled with highly specific details, also explores such universal themes as poverty, illness, and human relations. Specific circumstances—unrequited love, urchins rudely mocking a beggar boy—bridge cultural gaps.

The treatment of women in a number of stories will be disturbing, even anger-producing to the postfeminist reader. Seemingly passive and entrapped by families along with antiquated customs, these stoic and hard-working women do not express sadness, much less rebel. While it might be difficult for some contemporary readers to understand why women who are subjected to such abuse do not revolt or protest, others might find these women noble in spite of their ignoble lot (and lack of feminist consciousness).

Although there really isn't much room for rebellion, there are some very powerful matriarchs. In the blackly humorous "A Pasque-Flower on That Bleak Day," the oldest woman in a village where all the men have joined the war or taken refuge "to preserve the male lineage," dresses up as a young beauty and offers herself to American soldiers to protect the virgins and younger matrons from "defilement." When the soldiers discover her true identity, they have a good laugh, then send her home with enough food and sweets for all the women.

Those familiar with Korean social interaction and nuance will not be surprised when, in "Halmom," characters laugh at things, or for reasons, incomprehensible to others. Embarrassment, not mirth, drives this laughter. Halmom, literally "grandmother" in Korean, has come from the countryside to work as a servant in Seoul to earn a little money and also to make herself missed by her children. While those in the know are all too aware that she's failed in the latter objective, she can't hold herself away from them. So she insists that she'll go home to her children come winter, even though it would be a lot smarter for her to remain with her affable employers and earn money.

Just as the ambiguity found in many of the stories is not unusual in modern Korean literature, often references to various characters can be confusing. "His brother" or "her husband" may refer to several characters. Readers may have a hard time identifying characters that have no proper names. Further,

the translator's caveat bears repeating: these works share a certain "artlessness" that can result in a lack of refinement in expression and looseness of structure. While this creates a sense of immediacy and candor, readers unfamiliar with Korean modern fiction may be confused by relatively loose, unstructured plots coupled with frequent narrative comments on events and ideas.

Characters and narrators explore their myriad mixed feelings, with little sense of closure or resolution. This can only frustrate readers who expect pat endings. Such is the case of the young man in "That Winter of My Youth," who finally embraces life, not suicide, after a long and harrowing journey across snowy fields to the sea. The life he ultimately chooses, one devoted to the pursuit of beauty, is not entirely happy; yet neither is it sad.

The language of these stories is reserved and a bit formal, perhaps more reflective of the translation than of Korean usage or the writing style of the authors. Supernatural events sometimes occur in otherwise realistic works, such as in "The Image of Mija," in which a man who dies has been summoned by the ghost of his wife, or when an old woman speaks to a snake that embodies the spirit of a dead youth in "The Rainy Spell." While this may be perfectly acceptable to most Korean readers, it may not work for some Western readers.

Even though many of these stories are widely read in Korea, and some, such as "My Idiot Uncle" and "The Underground Village," are recommended readings for Korean high school students, other selections may be inappropriate for precollegiate students not only because of their unfamiliar style and content, but also because of references to such sensitive subjects as sex and wife beating.

Finally, despite many helpful footnotes explaining aspects of Korean culture—such as the structure of houses, kinship customs, and historical and geographical references—even experienced readers may find it difficult to appreciate the nuances and innate Korean nature of many of the stories without additional background.

Nevertheless, readers should not be deterred from experiencing this very clear and readable translation. But, success in teaching this book to students with no knowledge of the Korean language and little familiarity with Korean history and culture will depend, as always, on the experience and ability of the teacher, who can provide the cultural context. However, with such a teacher, students will learn a great deal about Korea and its people, past and present. ■

Namji Kim Steinemann

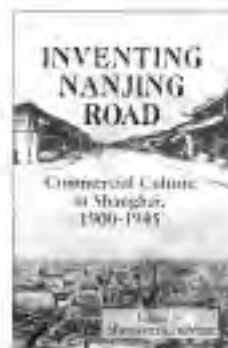
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