Introduction

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Few modern literatures have developed as rapidly as that of Korea. At the end of the nineteenth century many Korean writers still wrote in Chinese, the classical literary language, though the admirably precise native script, hangul, had existed since the mid-1400s. But by the 1920s Korean fiction writers had begun producing works in hangul that, while bearing noticeable similarities in style to Western fiction, were unmistakably Korean in tone, theme, and outlook. And by the 1930s Korea had produced several masters of the short story form. How did this rapid development come about?

The history of early modern Korean fiction, extending from the late teens to Liberation from Japanese colonial rule, must be seen first and foremost in light of the nation’s colonization by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Japanese rule offered a not always consistent blend of oppression and enlightenment whose legacy is still debated. It seems clear, though, that the Japanese presence played a significant role in modern Korean literary history, in that the modernization movement that swept East Asia beginning in the late 1800s was centered in Japan. The lure of modernization drew many young Koreans to Japan for their higher education, and it was there that many aspiring writers—indeed many of the writers represented in this anthology—became acquainted with Western forms of literature, which were widely available in Japanese translation. Hwang Sun-won, for example, Korea’s preeminent short fiction writer, read such authors as O. Henry, Maupassant, Turgenev, Balzac, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Hemingway, in addition to the Japanese authors Shiga and Dazai, while studying at Waseda University. Perhaps more important for the future of modern Korean fiction, young Korean intellectuals saw for the first
time, in Natsume Sōseki and others, the possibility of creative writing as a profession. Returning to Korea, they quickly put these experiences to use, founding literary magazines and publishing there and in newspapers as well.

Interpretations of these early developments, and of the origins of modern Korean literature in general, tend to follow two almost antithetical lines. The great majority of Korean literature specialists in Korea emphasize the native elements of modern Korean literature. They stress the literary contributions of Pak Chi-wŏn and other shir-bak (practical learning) scholars of the 1700s. It was those writers and scholars, they argue, who represent the origins of modern Korean literature and modern Korean thought. Other Korean scholars, most of them trained in Western literatures, emphasize the influence of the Western tradition. A more persuasive view is that modern Korean literature derived to an important extent from both native and foreign traditions. As Marshall R. Pihl has noted:

In seeking formative influences on writers of early modern [Korean] fiction, like Ch’ae Man-shik and Yi Kwang-su, we must consider not only historical influences (Confucian didactic materials in Korean, vernacular written fiction, Buddhist narratives, and oral literature) but also contemporary experiments in Korean composition (Bible translation; reports, editorials, sketches, and anecdotes in early newspapers; and textbooks for modern education). In addition, we must also look at the growing impact of foreign literary culture, particularly Japanese (or Japanized), and judge its role in the rapidly changing state of Korean writing during the era of early experimentation and the ensuing take-off of the 1920s.¹

The reality of the Japanese occupation, which was driven home by the brutal imperial policies that led to Korea’s March 1, 1919, Independence Movement, had the effect of popularizing hangul as a vehicle for literary expression by Koreans. After crushing the independence movement, imperial Japan tried a new tack—the so-called Cultural Policy. In this climate of relative freedom of artistic expression, Korean literature began to flower. But with the outbreak of the Pacific War, colonial policy once again became oppressive. During the latter years of the occupation, when Japan banned materials writ-

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ten in Korean, and when some Korean writers took the fateful step of writing in Japanese, the very act of writing in hangul was a courageous political statement and an affirmation of artistic freedom.

The rapid development of short fiction in early modern Korea is due in large part to its status as the genre of choice for those fiction writers who saw themselves as champions of pure literature. Novels were commonly serialized in newspapers but were disdained by the pure literature school as hack work turned out by didactic writers. In any event, distinctive short story stylists had appeared in numbers by the 1930s, and they wrote in a variety of styles. At least two of them, Yi Sang and Ch’ae Man-shik, are still among the most modern of modern Korean writers in terms of their artistic imagination and free-wheeling narrative style. The accomplishments of the early modern writers may be seen in the ironic fact that many of these impecunious authors turned out short gems instead of padding their stories to get more money (Korean authors were and still are paid by the manuscript page); whereas today financially secure writers write long, discursive stories that often cry out for editing. It is an incalculable loss to modern Korean fiction that so many early modern writers died young: Hyôn Chin-gôn at forty-two, Yi Sang at twenty-six, Na To-hyang at twenty-five, Kim Yu-jông at twenty-nine, Yi Hyo-sôk at thirty-five, Ch’ae Man-shik at forty-eight.

Korean short fiction of the 1920s tends to be strongly realistic, reflecting both the familiarity of most authors with the realist traditions of French and Russian literature, and the mood of a people whose hopes for self-determination had been crushed. The establishment of the Korean Artist Proletariat Federation (KAPF) in 1925, tolerated by the Japanese because it served to divide Korean nationalists, proved a further stimulus for the production of realist fiction, and especially works that reveal class consciousness, such as Yi Ki-yông’s “A Tale of Rats,” included in this volume.

In 1935 the KAPF was forced to disband. Already by then, virtually any reference in literature to socialism or to inflammatory political issues was being blue-penciled into oblivion by the colonial censors. Under these circumstances many Korean short fiction writers concentrated on refining their craft and sharpening their creative imagination. The result is some of the best Korean short fiction of the century, most of it produced in the mid-1930s. Yi Hyo-sôk’s “When the Buckwheat Blooms,” written in Korea’s literary golden year of 1936, is an example of structural perfection. Another fre-
quent type of story was the character sketch, often depicting a misfit, as in Kim Tong-ni’s “A Descendant of the Hwarang” and Yi T‘ae-jun’s “An Idiot’s Delight.” Other writers produced stylized stories that bore little resemblance to contemporary Korean realities. Kim Tong-in’s “The Photograph and the Letter,” for instance, is interesting for its subversion of gender stereotypes. Other stories reconsidered the effects of Korea’s Confucian heritage. Chu Yo-sŏp’s “Mama and the Boarder,” one of the best-loved of all Korean stories, is a poignant account, told from the point of view of a six-year-old girl, of a young widow prevented by Confucian dictates from remarrying. Other early masters returned to the Korean countryside for inspiration. Kim Yu-jŏng’s “Wife,” a brilliant first-person narrative, is written almost completely in pure Korean vocabulary, a striking achievement in that some 50 percent of the Korean language consists of Sino-Korean words. Hwang Sun-wŏn, sometimes unfairly pigeonholed as a rural writer, did produce splendid works with rural settings, among them the tragicomic “Mule.”

Like all good literature, the best of early modern Korean fiction is susceptible to multiple readings. The most obvious interpretation of many early modern stories is that their oppressiveness and gloom conceal an anticolonial subtext. But these early works can also be read as the collective record of a people whose life choices in general were severely restricted, not just by colonization, but by education (either too little or too much, as the title story shows), and by a highly structured society that left little opportunity for misfits. In this respect, many Koreans in the occupation period were restricted to a “ready-made life.” More recently, and especially since South Korea’s democratization movement in the late 1980s, when domestic restrictions on Marxist writings were lifted, Marxist readings have become popular. Freudian readings are also useful; Hwang Sun-wŏn, for one, has acknowledged his familiarity with Freud, and it is highly probable that Yi Sang, Kim Tong-ni, and Ch’ae Man-shik drew artistic inspiration from Freudian thought as well. Finally, though, in this age of rampant critical jargon, we should not forget that the stories in this book, like all good literature, can be read simply for enjoyment.

Two groups of early modern Korean writers deserve special mention: the wŏlbuk writers (those who moved from the U.S.-occupied south to the Soviet-occupied north after 1945) and women
writers. Writings by wŏlbuk writers were banned in South Korea until the late 1980s and democratization. In the years since, scholars and readers are rapidly becoming acquainted or reacquainted with the wealth of writing by such authors as Yi T’ae-jun, Yi Ki-yŏng, and Pak T’ae-wŏn, who combine pointed social observation with accomplished style.

Women writers played an important role in the development of the modern Korean short story. Kim Myŏng-sun’s “Ūshim ū sonyŏ” (A suspicious girl, 1917), for example, is among the very first modern Korean stories. Like their male counterparts, young Korean women intellectuals studied in Japan and participated in the formation of Korean literary journals and their associated circles. There is reason to believe, though, that the patriarchal nature of Korean society in general and of the Korean literature field in particular restricted the range of themes open to women writers. Significantly, early modern women writers such as Kim Myŏng-sun, Yi Wŏn-ju, and Na Hye-sŏk, who advocated freedom of lifestyle and defied Korean social conventions, were ostracized and their careers curtailed. Kim was hounded into insanity, Yi became a nun, and Na turned to painting. Other women writers, such as Kang Kyŏng-ae and Paek Shin-ae, died young. Ch’ŏe Chŏng-hŭ, represented in this anthology, and Pak Hwa-sŏng were two of the few women who lived long enough to remain active after Liberation.

Most of the authors in this anthology lived and flourished before 1945. Of the remainder, two in particular made the transition to contemporary fiction and enriched it immeasurably in the course of their long careers. Hwang Sun-wŏn went on to become Korea’s greatest short story writer, an author whose protean range defies categorization. And Kim Tong-ni came to be regarded by many as the Korean writer best able to express in his fiction that which is thought to be uniquely Korean. Ch’ae Man-shik survived for a short time into the post-Liberation era, producing satiric sketches as well as muted, soul-searching accounts of the dilemma of the artist in a colonized society. (While Hwang Sun-wŏn was evading the colonial authorities at his family home and continuing to write fiction that had to wait years to see the light of day, Ch’ae was being accused of not taking a more active role in opposing the Japanese.)

In the rush for globalization and the fervor for a Nobel Literature Prize in 1990s Korea, the works of these and other early masters tend
to be downplayed. This is unfortunate, for contemporary Korean fiction writers have much to learn from that group of writers in terms of economy of expression and command of the Korean language. It is to be expected that further study, reading, and exposure of pre-1945 Korean fiction will solidify its standing as the foundation of contemporary Korean fiction.