Volume 4 | Issue 9 | Article ID 2215 | Sep 04, 2006

Writers From the Other Asia: the two Koreas

John Feffer

Writers From the Other Asia: the two Koreas

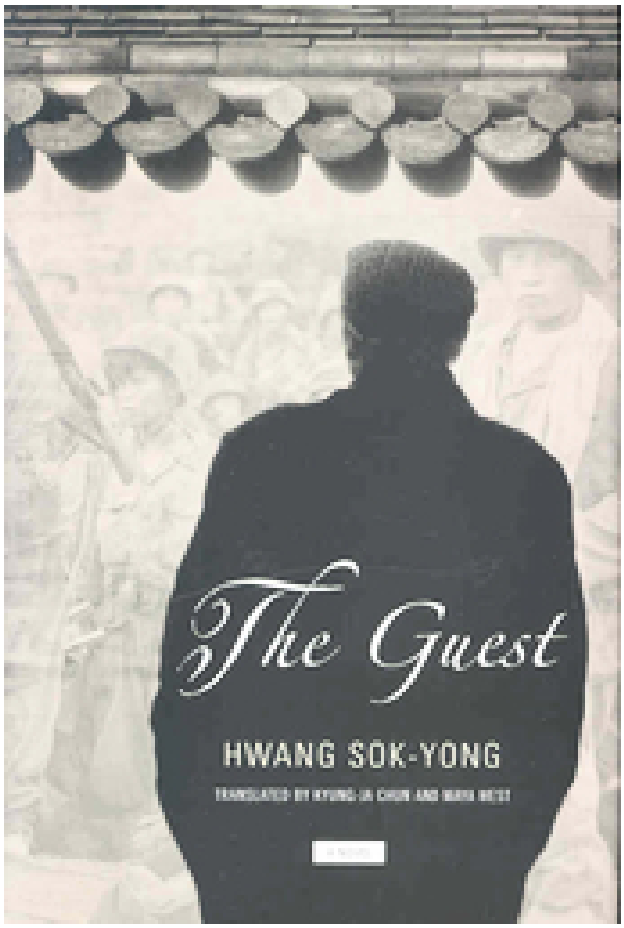
By John Feffer

According to the official North Korean version, the Americans were the culprits. In October 1950, the first year of the Korean War, American soldiers massacred tens of thousands of innocent people in the North Korean city of Sinchon. In perhaps the most horrifying incident, US soldiers led 900 residents, including 300 women and children, into an air-raid shelter. After the victims passed three days in thirst and fear, the GIs poured gasoline into the dark, confined space and threw in a match.

Today in Sinchon, the North Korean authorities have memorialized this slaughter with burial mounds for the victims. The nearby American Imperial Massacre Remembrance Museum holds tours for school groups and the occasional foreign visitor. In September 1998 I visited the Sinchon museum and listened to the guide itemize the many wartime cruelties committed by American troops. She took our delegation to the burned-out shell of the air-raid shelter and, on the basis of survivor accounts, reconstructed the atrocities. It would be another year before the Associated Press published the first revelations of the US killings of civilians in July 1950 under a railway bridge near the South Korean hamlet of Nogun-ri. But based on what historian Bruce Cumings and others had described of US conduct during the Korean War--the saturation bombings, the threatened use of nuclear weapons--the museum guide's well-rehearsed stories seemed plausible, even accounting for the embellishments of North Korean propaganda.

In the 1980s South Korean novelist Hwang Sok-Yong visited the same museum. He subsequently interviewed several survivors of the Sinchon massacre who had immigrated to the United States. Their description of what transpired in the fall of 1950 diverged so radically from the North Korean account that Hwang was driven to write about the incident. His novel The Guest provoked fierce controversy among readers in South Korea, where it was published in 2001.

Finally available in English, in a translation by Kyung-Ja Chun and Maya West, The Guest joins the handful of Korean novels published in the United States. While Japanese and Chinese literatures have established footholds in intellectual circles here--from the classics of Sun Tzu and Tanizaki Junichiro to Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian's Soul Mountain and the postmodern fictions of Murakami Haruki--Korean literature remains terra incognita. Japan and China, of course, built empires. Korea suffered the indignities of colonialism at the hands of its neighbors and now endures the frustrations of relative cultural invisibility in the eyes of the West. American novelists such as Chang-Rae Lee and Nora Okja Keller have drawn inspiration from Korean material, but no Korean author has become a household name in the United States--despite the brilliance of Yi Munyol's meditation on authoritarian psychology in Our Twisted Hero or Ahn Junghyo's blistering portrait of South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War in White Badge.



The Guest

But Korean literature is finally attracting more of its rightful share of the limelight. In October 2005 South Korea was the guest of honor at the Frankfurt Book Fair. As part of the festivities, sixty-two South Korean writers gave readings to enthralled German audiences. One of those present in Frankfurt, poet Ko Un, has appeared on the Nobel shortlist for several years. A clutch of Korean translations have recently appeared, from classics like Yom Sang-seop's Three Generations and Lee Mu-young's Farmers to avant-garde short stories and the work of too-often-overlooked women writers. Even North Korean fiction, perhaps the least accessible of any Communist literature, is attracting renewed attention.

Korean culture has a certain pungency that complicates its entry into the global mainstream. Korean movies, traditional songs and fermented dishes are acquired tastes. This pungency has been sharpened by Korea's recent historical experience. The twentieth century, after all, was not kind to the Korean peninsula. The first fifty years were marred by Japanese colonialism, the second fifty by division, fratricidal war and the dictatorial politics that dominated both North and South. Famine and its attendant diseases killed as much as 10 percent of the North Korean population in a few short years at the end of the 1990s. Added to these unspeakable horrors are the quotidian but no less heartbreaking tragedies that accompanied rapid industrialization, despoliation of the environment and the cold war separation of so many families.

The depiction and re-evaluation of these tragedies, both large and small, constitute a major driving force of Korean literature. Suffering does not necessarily produce great art. Like the Irish and the Polish before them, though, Koreans have created a language of suffering capable of attracting not only world sympathy but artistic appreciation as well.

Koreans once called smallpox, one of the most homicidal pathogens in human history, their "guest." Uninvited and virulent, this guest left behind many dead and generations of scarred survivors. In The Guest Hwang has in mind two very different uninvited scourges that infected Korea in the modern era: Christianity and Marxism.

Of the two culprits that Hwang fingers at the outset of the novel, Christianity is perhaps the more surprising. Though it is difficult to recognize after fifty years of anti-religious policy, the present capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, was once known as the "Jerusalem of the East" for its concentration of churches and the fervor of its converts. When former guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung began introducing Marxism in earnest in 1946, he strategically

incorporated aspects of Christianity into the official political ideology and, later, into his personality cult (much as Christianity absorbed woman-centered pagan rituals into a Marian cult to gain adherents in medieval Europe). Between 1948 and 1950, during the undeclared war between North and South that preceded the Korean War, Christianity and Marxism battled each other for the soul of the peninsula.

Here The Guest departs from the official script. In the fall of 1950, the American army did not reach Sinchon in time to participate in any massacres. Instead, Koreans inflicted the damage on themselves. For a country accustomed to blaming others--the Chinese, the Japanese, the Americans--this history is not easy to swallow. Hwang, though, is comfortable in this role of truth-teller. His earlier fiction catalogued the human losses associated with Korea's economic miracle and its participation in the Vietnam War. He spent five years in jail for his unauthorized visit to the North. Now he is taking full advantage of the more liberal climate of free speech in the South and the warming of relations between the two halves of the peninsula to tell a story that will haunt even those who have no connection to the events described.

The Guest follows Ryu Yosop, a minister in a Korean-American community in Brooklyn, as he prepares to visit North Korea and the family he left behind as a young child. "Hometown" is a cherished concept in Korea. It is bound up not only in friendships and family relations but also in the rites of ancestor worship that have survived more than a century of Christian evangelism. For Yosop, though, his hometown conjures up decidedly mixed feelings: "The word started out with the scent of a mountain berry, lingering at the tip of one's tongue--but then the fragrance suddenly turned into the stench of rotting fish." He wants to visit his family--one of the millions of families divided by the Korean War--but he worries that his family background and religious affiliation will scotch his visa application. So he puts down the North Korean capital of Pyongyang as his birthplace on the visa form and trusts that somehow he will find his way back to Sinchon.

A few days before his flight, Yosop checks in with his older brother in New Jersey. A retired minister who has become practically a recluse in his suburban home, Yosop's brother doesn't want to talk about the old days. Yosop sees the visit to the North as an opportunity to confront the dimly remembered horrors of the past, to repent for sins and forgive those who sinned. Yosop's brother, whose memories are considerably more precise, disagrees. "Why should I beg for forgiveness," he angrily retorts. "I was on the side of Michael the archangel and those bastards were the beasts of the Apocalypse!"

Several days later, overwhelmed by guilt and anger, Yosop's older brother takes to his bed and quietly passes away. His stories, however, do not die with him. As Yosop makes his way to North Korea, he is visited by a succession of ghosts, including his brother's. These uninvited apparitions, yet another of the novel's guests, supply details about the blood-soaked days of 1950 and the events that Yosop had been too young to experience or fully understand.

With its supernatural events and chorus of spirits, The Guest would seem to belong to the tradition of magic realism. And like so much magic realism, it involves the remembrance of unspeakable atrocities. The novel that launched the genre, Gabriel García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude, revolves around a massacre of banana workers. Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children draws its considerable power from the tragic partition that divided India from Pakistan. As a trauma can provoke a derangement of the senses, so can a terrible crime push a writer toward fabulism. It is as though conventional storytelling has become incapable of conveying the magnitude of atrocity.

Yet for all its affinities with García Márquez and Rushdie, The Guest's magical elements are faithful renditions of Korea's traditional shamanic culture. And when Yosop arrives in Pyongyang, what might appear to be magic realism turns out to be straight narration. Here, after all, is a country where the first leader, though dead, still occupies the highest office, where tens of thousands of young children perfectly synchronize their movements in mass games that celebrate the system, where a mammoth unfinished (and unfinishable) hotel dominates the cityscape and, like an embarrassing goiter, is pointedly ignored by guides and minders. North Korea is truly a land of "make-believe," as Hwang has remarked in interviews.

When Yosop eventually makes it to Sinchon and his surviving relatives, the tenor of the novel changes. The carefully constructed North Korean reality of Pyongyang, with its fixed itinerary of sights and sites, gives way to a very different world. Here, in the countryside, North Koreans let down their guard. They become real characters, rather than the brainwashed automatons of the "totalitarian" model. Yosop's family reunion is accompanied by tears, accusations, explanations. As we move deeper into the reconstructed events of 1950, Hwang resists shifting the narrative to the past in order to dramatize the action. Instead, he allows a chorus of the living and the dead to step up to the microphone and testify, as if at some celestial truth and reconciliation commission. No single narrative can capture the truth of the past, Hwang suggests. We are reduced to sifting through an array of often contradictory first-person accounts.

The witnesses tell Yosop of how, in the wake of MacArthur's pivotal landing at Inchon in mid-September 1950, a Christian paramilitary in Sinchon worked clandestinely with an anti-Communist youth corps from the South to seize the county administration from the Communists. These men of God show no mercy. "In the beginning, there is no rape," one ghost relates. "Far from it. Many times, after a kill, the young men stand together in a circle to pray together." Later, as the body count mounts, there is time for neither prayer nor proscriptions against rape. When the Communist Party cadres regroup and regain control, their vengeance is equally unsparing. The wounded are shot on the spot. Prisoners are lined up against the wall and executed. Young men are dragged into military service against their will and then, when the fortunes of war shift and they fall into "enemy" hands, they are killed as surely as the true believers.

The Inchon Landing

By the time The Guest reaches the atrocity in the air-raid shelter, the question of culpability is almost beside the point. The war has become a swirl of thrust and counterthrust, and the reader can be forgiven for losing track of who has done what to whom. So much blood has been spilled, and it has stained all hands. But in Sinchon, those hands are all Korean. The Americans, for their overall stage management, barely qualify as accomplices. After the dust has settled and permanent battle lines have been drawn, the exigencies of nationalism and

group psychology have reduced this complex tale of revenge to simple anti-Americanism. The Americans, after all, were responsible for a great number of atrocities in the war, so why not add a few more in the interests of smoothing the path toward eventual Korean reunification?

A novel that so closely follows historical fact raises the question: How much literary license has Hwang taken? I asked Bruce Cumings, the foremost American historian of the Korean War and another visitor to the Sinchon site. Hwang's take is plausible and convincing, he told me.

The Guest is worthwhile not only for its heterodox version of Korean history and its intriguing portrait of North Korean society. It is a finely rendered work of fiction--disturbing yet somehow beautiful. Hwang's achievement should resonate long after the controversies over its illumination of one dark corner of the Korean War subside.

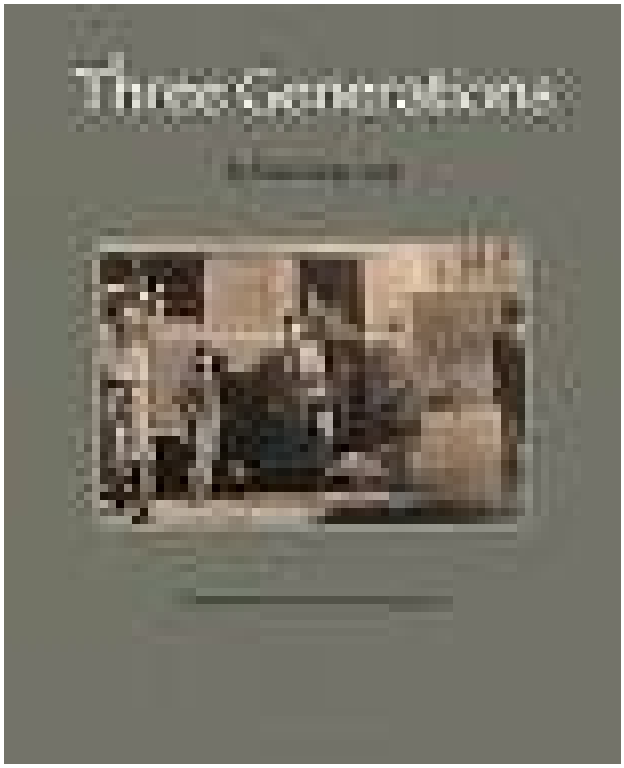
The preoccupations of The Guest are not peculiar to Hwang Sok-Yong. Pak Wanso, one of Korea's most celebrated postwar women authors, tells a very similar story in "Mother's Hitching Post" in the new collection Modern Korean Fiction, translated by Kim Miza and Suzanne Crowder Han. The guilt-ridden relationship of the two brothers in Hwang's novel is transposed in Pak's 1980 story onto a mother and daughter. Now in her 80s, the mother has repressed a horrifying memory from the Korean War, when she was fleeing with her children from war-ravaged Seoul. Her son, conscripted into the North Korean army, has deserted. The mother cannot save him from the cat-and-mouse games of the North Korean officer who discovers the family. Nor, when the son dies at the hands of the officer, can she bury him properly in the family's burial ground, which lies over the border in the North. While the suppressed guilt destroys Yosop's brother in The Guest, the mother in Pak's story manages to relieve some of her burden by revealing the painful memories to her daughter.

Koreans call this experience of suppressed guilt and suffering han. The epiphany of the traditional short story in the Western canon can often be found in Korean fiction in the cathartic unburdening of han. Though painful, it is a powerful source of creative energy. Writers who explore the theme of collective oppression and its psychological consequences, from the Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki to Toni Morrison, would have no difficulty translating han into their own tongues.

The tragedies of Korea are not confined simply to times of war. The short stories in Modern Korean Fiction are full of the language of hunger and sickness, of the poverty of workers and farmers. The stories from the colonial period are particularly poignant, published as they were under difficult circumstances. Between 1919, when the Japanese authorities brutally suppressed a national uprising, and the late 1930s, when the colonial administration imposed Japanese culture and a forced labor system, Koreans were granted a measure of breathing room. During this interregnum, characterized by the more ordinary debasements of colonial rule, Korean writers were still able to place short stories in the daily newspapers. Even as late as 1938, Ch'ae Man-shik could publish in a Seoul daily his satiric story "My Innocent Uncle," about an oafish collaborator with the Japanese.

In the 1930s, too, Yom Sang-seop published what is considered one of the masterpieces of early modern Korean fiction, Three Generations, which recently appeared in a new translation by Yu Young-nan. Far from describing the atrocities of Japanese rule, Yom's novel depicts a stultified society in which the old depart from Confucian values and the young cannot build a new world for themselves. Several characters engage in an almost

halfhearted conspiracy against the colonial authorities and inevitably fail. A father who fails to honor his ancestors or set a proper example for his son is brought low by his misdeeds. Characters speak to one another with a bluntness that seems awkward when set against, for instance, the Japanese aesthetic of indirection. The structure of the novel is uneven, the prose unremarkable. Nevertheless, in its way, Three Generations successfully portrays a society throttled by the "modernization" that Japan inflicted upon the peninsula. This delayed development, as much as the more violent policies of the era, constituted the tragedy of the colonial experience.



Yom Sang-seop's
Three Generations

Ko Un, Korea's most renowned living poet, remembers the privations of the colonial era. Figuring prominently in his poems is the "barley hump" of the spring, when the winter stores have been eaten, the new barley crop has yet to ripen and the annual starvation sets in. As a young boy during the Korean War, Ko Un watched the deaths of friends and family and could do nothing to save them. At the end of the war, he worked as a gravedigger. Fertilized by all this death, his poetry bloomed:

Mow down parents and children
This, that, and the others,
everything else.
Knife them in the dark.
Next morning
the world is piled with death.
Our chore is burying them all day
and building a new world on it.

During his varied life, Ko Un has been a youthful scalawag, Buddhist monk, drunkard, teacher, political activist, jailed dissident and, now, Nobel Prize contender. He has published more than 100 books of poetry and prose. But his greatest claim to fame is Maninbo, or Ten Thousand Lives, which the American poet Robert Haass has described as "one of the most extraordinary projects in contemporary literature." Ko Un conceived of this project holed up in a military prison with other prominent dissidents. He vowed to write a poem for every person he had ever known, from his closest relatives to historical figures he'd only met in books. Green Integer has published a one-volume selection of this vast work for the first time in English, translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé, Young-moo Kim and Gary Gach.

Ko Un

Missing from the collection, unfortunately, is Ko Un's original introduction, in which he issued a declaration of independence from all foreign literary influence. No longer would he be seduced by graceful Chinese evocations of nature or the cryptic modernism of the West. In their place, Ko Un has constructed a rustic vernacular, apoetry of the Korean countryside as earthy as the mountain vegetables that deepen the flavor of Korean food. In these poems, a woman has "a laugh like cold bean-sprout soup," a man is so dull that he is "cousin of water,/or of watered-down soy-sauce." Each poem resembles a miniature folk tale, expressed with koan-like simplicity, cautious of metaphors or abstraction. Much of South Korean history is poured into this folkloric mold, from the partisan fighter who gave birth in her cell before being hanged at the scaffold in the early 1950s all the way to dissident Kim Dae Jung, "the embodiment of suffering/at a time when suffering was needed," who became president in the 1990s.

This commemoration of Korean history and countryside, freed from strictures of form and diction imposed from the outside, follows in the tradition of minjung, or "people's" culture. Ko Un has "gone to the people" for his inspiration, much like the narodniks, the Russian radicals of the nineteenth century, and the South Korean student movement activists of the 1980s who emulated them. But Ko Un has not summoned up some ethereal concept of the People. Maninbo, his masterpiece, is the People made flesh. Thanks to Ko Un, they continue to walk among us, all 10,000 of them.

Ko Un's counterpart has not yet emerged--or been allowed to emerge-- in North Korea. The Soviet bloc was rich with the samizdat of dissident poets and the semi-official work of writers during one thaw or another. North Korea has none of that. Even among the several thousand North Koreans who live in South Korea, no literary work has appeared (though one defector has written a musical about the North Korean prison labor camp at Yodok). Very little of the official literature has even been translated into English. One novel, Han Sorya's Jackals, has appeared, as have several short stories. Since North Korean author Hon Sok-jung's novel Hwangjini won a prestigious South Korean prize in 2004 and official North Korean literature is more available in the South, some of this work might soon make its way into English.

In the meantime, we are left with a tantalizing glimpse of literary changes afoot in North Korea in a 1999 story nimbly translated by Stephen Epstein and published in a recent issue of the online magazine Words Without Borders. Han Ung-bin's "Second Encounter" draws on the usual North Korean boilerplate about building a strong and prosperous nation. But Han also alludes to the hardships of the famine years of the mid-1990s. And most of the story involves an encounter during a 1989 youth festival in Pyongyang between a foreign journalist and a literal-minded North Korean,

mediated by the story's narrator. The misunderstandings are nearly comic, for the journalist can't quite believe that this average North Korean might live an ordinary life with an ordinary job and family, in a society with functioning schools and hospitals, with soft drinks for the kids and trips to the amusement park.

Such an ordinary existence was once within reach. North Korea's social system suffered enormous strains during the famine years. Schools and hospitals did not function as before. The merry-go-rounds rusted. "We have lost nothing," the narrator reflects upon the intervening years, referring more to patriotic fervor than material comforts. But North Koreans might read wistfulness or even concealed anger into Han's story. "Second Encounter" lends itself to more than one interpretation, which suggests a movement from simple propaganda toward actual literature.

It is still a far cry, of course, from an appraisal of North Korea's labor camps, extrajudicial killings, history of purges and the like. This catharsis, whenever it comes, will be unspeakably painful. Korean novelists, poets and short-story writers have mined the atrocities of the colonial period, the Korean War and the South's authoritarian era. These are, unfortunately, rich veins. When North Koreans can openly testify like the ghosts of The Guest, when the han of North Koreans is given proper voice, when a North Korean Ko Un can tell us about the people and not just the People, Korean literature will have a fresh infusion of horror and inspiration.

John Feffer, co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus, is the editor of The Future of U.S.-Korean Relations
(Routledge, 2006)

This article is reprinted with permission from the September 18, 2006 issue of The Nation. Visit
for subscription information or to read other articles. Posted at Japan Focus September 6, 2006.