

Introduction to Korean Literature Studies

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When the editors of *Forum for World Literature Studies* invited me to edit a special issue on “Korean Literature,” I instantly thought about four genres of literature: poetry, novel, play, and criticism. But the problem was that most of the scholars who specialize in Korean literature are not bilingual. Of the four submissions, I had to translate three into English. Another problem was how to deal with each genre, and I have decided to let each scholar choose his or her own authors of interest. The result is not that bad.

The essay “Kim Chunsoo’s ‘Choyongdanjang’” by Rhee Young Suck is a good example of Modernist Korean poetry, in which the readers can enjoy the essence of a very good Korean poet. Yoon Seongho’s essay “Inhabiting Local Contradictions, Engaging Global Mandates: In-Hun Choi and Sok-Yong Hwang in the Landscape of Contemporary Korean Fiction Writing” is a fine analysis of two good contemporary novelists of Korea, Choi and Hwang, and puts them in the perspective of the world literature. Compared with a host of young novelists, their concerns have been uniquely Korean. This article will help the readers outside Korea get interested in their novels in translations, including English and French.

Oh Tae-Sok is one of the representative Korean playwrights today. He is also interested in Shakespeare and adapted a couple of his plays and put them on stage at home and abroad. Rhee Beau La’s article “The Mystical in Tae-Sok Oh’s Play *My Love DMZ* and Shakespeare” discusses Oh’s play *My Love DMZ* in comparison with Shakespeare’s. It is interesting that Oh Tae-Sok, Hwang Sok-Yong, and Shakespeare are interested in “shamans” or magicians.

In Korea there is a unique genre, which is “literary essays”: it is considered a literary genre, and treated as importantly as novels and poems. We call them essayists. Yoon Ilhwan’s article “The Reflective Distance and Its Limits: Kim Hyun’s Reading as a Torture, Reverie, and Desire” discusses Kim Hyun, who is the best literary critic in the late 1900’s. He lived under the long military dictatorship of Park Jung-Hee and of two other military leader presidents. Kim’s writing shares something with Hwang

Sok-Yong's.

The essays in this issue cover problems of Korea in times of difficulties: the eighteenth-century governance of the people, life of Koreans under the Japanese Imperial Rule, the Korean War and the ideological warfare among intellectuals, the subsequent division of the peninsula, and the dark period of military dictatorship. The oldest and newest form of poetry is outside the influence of political conflicts or ideologies: Zen poetry and pure poetry of Kim Chunsoo. It is surprising that literature has always flourished regardless of what condition it has been laid.

In closing, let me say a few words of gratitude to the editors of *Forum for World Literatures*, and in particular to Prof. Lianggong Luo for his deep interest in Korean literature and his great help with this special issue.

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