KOREAN LITERATURE

Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910): Korean Traditions, Confucian Values

The first set of readings presents a survey of vernacular poetry and prose during the Chosŏn dynasty. While the Koreans continued to write in classical Chinese, the creation of han’gŭl, the indigenous script, by King Sejong in the mid-fifteenth century laid the foundations for vernacular literature.

Sijo, a three-line verse form, was the most popular type of poetry during the Chosŏn. The subject matter ranged from politics and philosophy to romance and nature. The poets, likewise, came from a broad spectrum of backgrounds. The following selections, among the most well-known in the traditional corpus, were composed by Yi Pang-wôn and Chŏng Mong-ju, early Chosŏn political figures; Hwang Chin-i, a kisaeng (courtesan); and Yi Sun-sin, a military hero.

Vernacular prose also proliferated, especially in late Chosŏn. Princess Hyegyŏng’s “A Record of Sorrowful Days” is an autobiographical memoir of life at court and a rare example of writing by a Korean woman in pre-modern times. Hŏ Kyun’s “The Tale of Hong Kiltong,” often claimed as the first Korean novel, tells the adventures of a Robin Hood-like protagonist. “The Song of a Faithful Wife, Ch’unhyang” is Korea’s most famous romance.

A common thread that runs through both the poetry and prose is Confucianism. Established as official ideology by the dynastic founders, Confucianism profoundly influenced and shaped politics, society, and culture. The following selections provide examples that reflect the Confucian values, (e.g., loyalty and filial piety), as well as those that challenge them. In spite of Confucian hegemony during the Chosŏn, indigenous customs and ideas (e.g., hereditary aristocracy) persisted, and personal conflicts (e.g., romance) also led to confrontations with prevailing norms.


The annexation of Korea as a Japanese colony in 1910 brought an end to centuries of self-rule and ushered in a humiliating period of foreign subjugation. Korean writers grappled with the issue of colonialism and produced many works that promoted the spirit of national independence. The Japanese occupation period also witnessed another major transition—the birth of modern Korea. Whether it was industrial capitalism or Western-style education, old ways gave way to the new in the first half of the twentieth century. Literature was no exception, as new forms of poetry and prose made their appearance.

The poems of Kim Sowol, Han Yong’un, and Yi Sanghwa are anthologized in the Korean canon not only as pioneering works of modern verse but also as literary monuments to nationalism. In what ways do the following selections express the anti-colonial, national spirit of the Koreans under Japanese rule? In what ways are the poems open to other readings?

Nationalism during the Japanese occupation eventually developed into two opposing camps. The so-called “cultural nationalists” advocated a gradual approach toward independence that emphasized education and economic development. In contrast, the radical nationalists, inspired by Marxism, sought immediate liberation through armed struggle and social revolution. Yŏn Sang-sŏp’s “The Rotary Press” and Yi Ki-yŏng’s “A Tale of Rats” are literary representations, respectively, of these competing strains of Korean nationalism. Chu Yo-sŏp’s “Mama and the Boarder,” on the other hand, makes no reference to the political context and instead tells a love story that pits tradition against modernity.


Contemporary Korea (1945–present): National Division, Democracy, Globalization

The euphoria that followed Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule at the end of World War II was short-lived as war and national division soon followed. In the north a totalitarian communist state was established and continues to this day. In the south a succession of dictators eventually gave way to democracy, and the country also emerged as a global economic powerhouse.

Sǒ Chǒng-ju and Ko Ûn are two of Korea’s most prolific poets. Sǒ Chǒng-ju, whose life spanned almost the entire twentieth century, reflected in his vast oeuvre the shifting historical contexts while breaking new ground in imagery and language. Ko Ûn is the most celebrated poet in Korea today. A former Buddhist monk and political activist, his poetry covers an extraordinary range of subjects and themes, from Zen philosophy to national reunification.

The prose selections below offer examples of literary engagement with various settings in contemporary Korea. Pak Wansô’s “Winter Outing” explores the tragedy of the Korean War and its personal legacies. Yi Mun-yǒl’s Our Twisted Hero can be seen as an allegory that probes the psychology underlying authoritarianism in South Korea. Finally, Kim Yǒng-ha’s “Whatever Happened to That Guy Stuck in the Elevator?” is a zany glimpse into the hectic urban life of post-modern Seoul.


Notes:
• Author’s surnames are in all capitals. Chinese and Korean surnames precede the given name. Japanese naming conventions in the traditional period are somewhat complex. Sometimes an author is referred to by his or her given name, formal title, or nickname. For example, in the case of Murasaki Shikibu, or “Lady Murasaki,” Murasaki is her given name and Shikibu is her title. In modern Japanese names, the surname precedes the given name.
• The date inside the bracket is the year the piece was first published. An asterisk (*) indicates the dates of the author.
• An [F] following the author’s name indicates the author is female.
• All names appear here in pinyin romanization.