RECOMMENDED HISTORY READINGS
(texts not provided)

For History:


Anthologies and Translations:


CLASSICAL KOREAN LITERATURE

From Ancient to End of Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910): Traditions

The first set of readings presents a selection of poetry and prose from the era before Modern Korean Literature emerged in the early twentieth century. While classical Chinese was the official written language of government and scholarship, the invention of an indigenous script, han’gul, by King Sejong and his court in the mid-fifteenth century laid the foundations for vernacular literature.

Remnants of the Three Kingdoms (Samguk yusa, 1285) is a compilation of legends, songs, histories, and stories by Buddhist monk Ilyŏn, from the earliest times. Two segments selected from this book are the legend of Tan’gun, the mythical founder of the first kingdom on the Korean peninsula, and Song of Ch’ŏyong, a son of Dragon King with mysterious healing power. These readings provide a glimpse of various belief systems and socio-cultural structures that shaped ancient kingdoms in Korea.

These earlier examples show commonalities and contrasts to readings selected from the Chosŏn dynasty, whose dominant Confucian ideology pervaded various literary forms. 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 currents that challenge them. In spite of Confucian hegemony during Chosŏn, indigenous customs and ideas (e.g., hereditary aristocracy) persisted, and personal conflicts (e.g., romance) also led to confrontations with prevailing norms.

Sijo, a three-line verse form, was the most popular type of poetry during 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 best known in the traditional corpus, were composed by Yi Pang-wŏn and Chŏng Mong-ju, early Chosŏn political figures; Hwang Chin-i, a kisaeng (female entertainer); and Yi Sun-sin, a military hero.

Prose also proliferated in vernacular han’gul and in classical Chinese scripts. Hŏ Kyun’s “The Tale of Hong Kiltong,” often touted as the first Korean novel, tells the adventures of a Robin Hood-like protagonist. “The Story of Master Hŏ” is a political satire from a reform-minded Confucian (“Sirhak”) scholar Pak Chi-wŏn. The Song of a Faithful Wife: Ch’unhyang, Korea’s most famous romance, celebrates young love, and has been rendered in numerous forms of performance including p’ansori (traditional operatic story telling), films, and dramas.


MODERN KOREAN LITERATURE


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 through the advent of industrial capitalism or Western-style education, old ways yielded 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 Sowǒl and Han Yong’un 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. Yi Kyŏng’s “A Tale of Rats” is a literary representation, of the latter (“socialist”) strain of Korean
nationalism. In contrast, Hyŏn Chin-gŏn and Yi Hyo-sŏk, through their masterful story-telling in “My Hometown” and “When the Buckwheat Blooms,” evokes nationalism through nostalgia and by reminding readers of what is taken away from Korean people during this colonial occupation.


**National Division, Democracy, Totalitarianism: 1945-1987**

The euphoria that followed Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule at the end of World War II was short-lived, as the Korean War (1950-1953) and national division soon followed. In the north a totalitarian communist state was established that 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.

The selections below offer examples of literary engagement with various settings in South Korea throughout post-colonial, post-war, and authoritarian regimes. “Cranes” is a story of two childhood friends divided during the Korean War and reunited across the ideological divide, whereas “Kapitan Ri” features a medical doctor who survives the Colonial era and Korean War through cunning adaptation. Written by an author from a generation of Koreans who grew up in liberated Korea, “Seoul, 1964, Winter” is hailed as a masterpiece from the post-colonial and post-war era. Selected from the 1970s and the 1980s respectively, and although vastly different in their setting and style, Cho Se-hüß’s The Dwarf and Yi Mun-yŏl’s Our Twisted Hero both can be seen as allegory that probes the psychology underlying authoritarianism in South Korea.


The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern bloc in 1989 reverberated around the globe, but the moment was especially poignant for Korea, for the country transitioned to “real” democracy and drew global attention with the first direct presidential election in 1987 and the successful 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. In South Korean literature, this post-Cold War environment brought major changes in subject matter (personal lives), diverse modes of representation (in contrast to the dominance of realism up to this point), and the rise of a new generation of writers that included a majority of women. The selections below by Pak, Yun, and Kim are examples of these changes, where talented young authors wrote with humor and irony about alternative family models and lives of youth in the twenty-first century. Also in the background of these three stories is the “IMF Crisis”, the Asian Financial Crisis of the mid to late 1990s, which shook the structures and hierarchies inherent in society and family.

Owing in part to the closed nature of North Korean society, little is known outside that country about its literature, and post-Soviet, post-Cold War changes, so dramatic elsewhere including in South Korea, seem to have had relatively little force in the north. One certainty is that all publications are controlled by the state, and memory and history of oppression and threats posed by the outside have been persistent themes. Among the few examples of North Korean literature that have been translated into English, two are offered below as a comparison to South Korean literary trends. While “The Son” comes across as an example of North Korea’s idealism projected in a father-son relationship from the 1970s, “A Tale of Music,” published three decades later, is a story of reminiscence about a Korean resident of Japan who moves to North Korea and the dramatic transformation that takes place in his life.

Women’s Voice

The rise of feminism and attention to human rights issues since the 1990s sparked interest in women’s voice in the field of Korean literature. Recognizing stunning achievements by woman writers in recent decades and also the unique, powerful and under-appreciated stories told by women throughout history, this set of readings samples some of the representative works by woman from both the pre-modern and modern eras.

In contrast to the lyrical and love-themed poems by female entertainers from pre-modern times, Lady Hyegyŏng’s A Record of Sorrowful Days (Hanchung-rok, 1795-1805) is an autobiographical memoir in han’gul of life at court and a rare example of writing by a Korean woman who offers an historical account. Succeeding this tradition of strong-willed women, Na Hye-sŏk, one of the first generation New Women of Korea, wrote a short story titled “Kyŏnghŭi,” which highlights challenges faced by Korean New Women during the Japanese Occupation era, the early, formative stages of modern Korea. Pak Wansŏ’s “Winter Outing” explores the tragedy of the Korean War and its personal legacies through the eyes of three women. “The Gray Snowman” is a post-Cold War era tribute to the men and women, activists and non-activists alike, who lived through political oppression. Finally, Kim Ae-ran introduces changed family and gender dynamics through the lens of a young woman in the twenty-first century.


