Teaching Korean Culture and History through Korean Literature

By Sarah Campbell

"What am I looking for? Soul,
my blind soul, endlessly darting
like children at play by the river,
answer me: where am I going?"[1]

Written in response to Japan's occupation of Korea (1910–1945), these lines from nationalist writer Yi Sanghwa's poem convey a deep sense of desperation and uncertainty. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea and set up a colonial government that would remain in power for thirty-five years. Yi's poem expresses the alienation Koreans endured because of living under foreign rule. They constitute a lasting image recorded for close inspection and contemplation. When students in my Asian literature classroom are presented with a quality piece of literature like Yi's, they quickly begin to realize an author has a greater purpose than just simply telling a story or crafting a memorable metaphor; rather, students encounter and welcome an authentic voice that challenges them to consider a perspective other than their own.

Literature has the ability to personalize the narrative and frame the setting in a way that history textbooks often cannot. The short story has proved to be a powerful and meaningful tool for teachers wanting to address the Korean experience in their curriculums. The condensed text facilitates multiple readings and makes historical analysis more accessible for the high school and undergraduate reader. This essay highlights five Korean short stories that humanities and social studies teachers can use to enhance their study of the Korean experience during the twentieth century.

Teaching Korean Literature from the Japanese Colonial Period (1910–1945)

Most of the literature generated during the colonial period examined social problems resulting from Japanese occupation; the preferred genre was the short story, as it could be written and read quickly. Japan's control of Korea was harsh. The first decade of colonial rule is often referred to as the "dark period," as Japan dominated all aspects of Korean life. *The Koreas* editor Mary Connor writes, "The Japanese convinced themselves that despite the fact that Koreans were the same race, they were inferior people."[2] Japan stringently controlled politics, economics, education, religion, morals, health, and public welfare in their new colony. Korean children were taught Japanese language as well as Japanese customs, religion, and culture. Japan worked to efface Korean culture, language, and customs to ensure complete loyalty and obedience to the Japanese emperor.

Korean writers rapidly reacted to the oppression, inequalities, and social decay around them. Objecting to their loss of independence, Korean nationalists used literature, film, drama, and music to foster a national identity that would garner support from the majority of the Korean people. Not all Koreans adopted the same approach to eradicating Japanese rule; likewise, not all Koreans held the same vision for the future of their country once released from oppression. Writing produced during this period was highly nationalistic, and literary themes diverged into two directions: One fostered a cultural nationalistic voice, and another endorsed a radical nationalistic voice.

The differing ideologies are especially evident in the short stories generated during this time. Cultural nationalists tended to be a bit more conservative in their approach, promoting revitalization of Korean history, culture, traditions, and the nation; and the radical nationalistic writers presented the leftist or Marxist position, favoring an international classless society over restoring the former Korean nation that existed prior to Japanese occupation.

Colonial Period: The Cultural Conservative Nationalistic Voice

Born in 1897 and educated in Korea and Japan, Yom Sang-sop is often cited as the leader of the White Tide Movement that incorporated European realism into Korean literature; his nationalistic writing exposes the dismal reality of the Korean laborer after the failed March First Movement of 1919.[3]

Yom Sang-sop's short story "The Rotary Press" tells the story of a newspaper in crisis. Tensions run high while workers and management await the arrival of their paychecks.[4] Workers have not been paid in months and are struggling to feed their families; in desperation, the workers verbally and physically threaten management. Management tries to appease the workers, for fear the laborers will walk off the job, resulting in the governor-general revoking the paper's publication rights and closing the local newspaper forever. In the midst of this conflict, the workers realize the importance of the newspaper. The workers begin to understand their efforts at the newspaper mean much more than a paycheck and that their labor serves to communicate the Korean voice, the determination and strength of the laborer and the pride they feel in their national identity.

To reinforce the national voice within Yom's piece, specific events and themes in "The Rotary Press" should be related to historical facts. Drawing parallels between the literature and the historical narrative provides students with a more thorough understanding of the past. Depending on the students' ability levels, teachers can either self-select quotes from their favorite historical sources or present students with a general graphic organizer (see Table 1), so they can formulate parallels between the story and the historical record independently.[5] Reading Yom's story with history in mind will help students appreciate how difficult conditions were for Koreans under Japanese rule and provide a personal perspective not as evident from a history text.

Historical fact Summarize or directly quote from primary or secondary source. **Textual quote** Direct quote from the story that parallels historical fact.	**Explain in terms of plot** Literally explain how this historical fact was presented in the story.	**Effect of the historical fact** on reader, on story's conflict, on author's theme.
Below: Student Sample Response		
In Korea Through the Ages: Vol. 2, Modern (2005), a Korean independence fighter sadly recalled that "brilliant young men have only a few paths to take, they become pessimists and immerse themselves into despair" (76). Yom (1925) writes: "I feel like an anchovy that's been dried for three years" (38).	The Korean workers are barely making ends meet. As men, they are unable to provide for their families, and this causes anger, depression, and frustration. Many of the Korean men turn to alcohol in an attempt to lessen their shame.	Readers clearly see how difficult conditions were for Korean workers under Japanese rule. Yom shows how easily an individual's sense of worth can be effaced, consequently weakening the heart and soul of the entire group, in this case, all Koreans.

Table 1.

Colonial Period: The Radical Leftist Nationalistic Voice

The leftist or Marxist-Leninist ideology also dominated short fiction produced during the colonial period. Bruce Fulton notes, "Proletarian literature [literature describing the lives and struggles of the working class] was tolerated by the Japanese colonial authorities from the mid-1920s to 1935.[6] One of the most influential leftist writers was Yi Ki-yong. Yi Ki-yong was born in Chungchong Province in 1896 and, like Yom Song-sop, was also educated in Korea and Japan. Yi helped form the Korean Artist Proletariat Federation (KAPF), a group devoted to "writing about socioeconomic inequities, the downtrodden proletariat and peasantry, and the class struggle."[7] Yi Ki-yong's proletarian fable, "A Tale of Rats," portrays the leftist's view, rounding out readers' understanding of the Korean experience during Japanese colonial rule.[8] Yi's disdain for money, skepticism of capitalism, and competitiveness are at the center of his short story. Yi's fable presents his vision of a Korea free of class conflict—an aspiration shared by leftist nationalistic writers (see Table 2).

Evaluating both Yi and Yom's stories jointly will emphasize the conflicting views among the Korean groups during this uncertain time of foreign rule. Although both camps agreed in a unified Korea, independent of foreign rule, they disagreed over what an independent Korea would look like. Working with the multiple perspectives presented in both stories will serve to establish a foundation for students' understanding of the convoluted social and political environment of colonial Korea, as well as the eventual division of the country.

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Below: Student Sample Response		
AsianInfo.org (2000) reports that the 1920 Japanese government-general controlled the release of all information in Korea and made sure that "enforcement of strict censorship was practiced on every word and phrase."	The main character of this story is a rat. He is strong, sneaky, wise, and able to out-think and out-maneuver the greedy human landlord. Reminiscent of Robin Hood, the Korean rat steals from the rich to help the poor. Papa Rat is a character to emulate—masterful in his ability to circumvent class conflicts.	Mimicking the cunning wit of his main character, Yi Ki-yong crafted "A Tale of Rats" as a fable to get around the Japanese censors. Writing a powerful story about a sneaky Korean overpowering a greedy Japanese landlord would have never been published—however, it's quite obvious the masterful rat is symbolic of the Korean leftist faction.
Yi Ki-yong (1926) begins his fable by saying, "This is the time when rats everywhere are masters of the world."		

Table 2.

Table Three Photo Credits

Left image: Korean War Memorial, Seoul, South Korea

Right image: Victorious Fatherland Reunification War Monument, Pyongyang, North Korea

Source for both images: Lesson Plan by Gordon A. Monaghan, "Comparing War Monuments in North and South Korea," The Korea Society through Asia for Educators, http://bit.ly/QVAwSx.

South Korean Literature from the Post Liberation Period

Impact of Division

After liberation from Japan in 1945, Korea tried to rebuild a strong, independent nation. Diverging internal as well as external political ideologies, specifically the actions of the USSR and the USA, resulted in Korea's division. Then, communist North Korea invaded South Korea, thus launching the Korean War (1950–1953). Postwar literature deals with the struggles and pains of the people once again trying to make sense of the uncertainty in their lives.

Hwang Sun-won, born in 1915 in Taedong, modern-day North Korea, is a well-known novelist, poet, and short fiction writer. Just after settling in South Korea in 1953, his short story, "Cranes," which humanizes the ideological and political division between the Koreas, was published.[9] Hwang's poetic short story evokes childhood memory and hopes to rekindle a bond between two long-lost friends now residing on separate sides of the DMZ. Readers cannot escape the symbolical significance of Hwang's title recognizing the division between the north and south as unnatural, because the cranes can fly back and forth unrestricted, yet these two friends cannot. The powerful theme presented in Hwang's piece will deepen readers' understanding of the Korean experience during this tumultuous time.

The division of Korea was arbitrarily imposed and divided families a well as a nation; postwar literature focuses on the ramifications of division. The website *Asia for Educators* presents an excellent lesson by Gordon A. Monaghan, titled "Comparing War Monuments in North and South

- What features do the monuments share?
- What archetypes, if any, are shown in the monuments?
- What emotions do the figures in the monument show?
- What is the message of each of the monuments?

Below: Student Sample Response

Both memorials present strong, brave men who have been victorious in battle. The soldiers seem proud of their victory and confident of their dominance. Both monuments present their side as a clear winner; this view creates a divide between the two sides.

Textual quote from "Cranes" that echoes the reactions to monuments.	**Overall, what is being said about the Korean War and the postwar era?**
Hwang writes: "But the crane could hardly walk, probably because it had been tied up for so long" (5).	Somehow both sides are going to have to concede, so the division can come to an end. Koreans must remember their past and break free of what is preventing them from achieving peace.

Table 3.

Korea."[10] In examining the photos presented in Monaghan's lesson, the stalemate clearly presents itself. Students quickly realize that, like the long-lost friends in Hwang's story who cannot find a way to breach the DMZ, the political beliefs conveyed in each monument showcase the ideological blockade dividing North and South Korea today. Pairing Monaghan's lesson with a close reading of Hwang's "Cranes" personalizes the impact of division for students in a profound way (see Table 3).

Contemporary Korean Literature

South Korea's ability to reinvent and rebuild its economy, government, educational system, and infrastructure after the Korean War understandably presented challenges. Short stories generated from the 1970s often focus on ordinary people whose hard work made the South's "economic miracle" possible. Today, South Korea has a stable democracy and a thriving market economy; their successful transformation serves as an inspiration—one that contemporary writers have embraced. Exploring the writings of two accomplished female Korean writers is the perfect way to illustrate the dynamics of Korea's postwar reformation.

The scars of Korea's past and division are deeply imbedded and serve as the driving force behind Kim Min-Suk's short story "Scarlet Fingernails.[11] This intriguing piece portrays the struggle of a Korean family fighting to overcome a complicated past. After years of living with an absent father, the female narrator, Sung-hye, finally learns her father's "red" Communist background is to blame for her growing up without a dad. She then discovers her Communist defector father has spent the past thirty years in jail, is about to be released, and wants to see her. Sung-hye is at a crossroads, unsure if she should shun her father for the shame he has inflicted on the family or be an obedient and filial daughter and work to make up for lost time. In examining the main character's dilemma, readers will investigate the complexities of Korean identity and culture that prevail today, as well as discuss the dynamics of authoritarian rule in the period before South Korea democratized (see Table 4).

An individual's search for meaning in present-day South Korea is the center of Ha Songnan's "Waxen Wings.[12] Written in 1999, this short, uplifting piece features a nameless character whose main goal is to fly like a bird. Fearing that she will do something disturbing like jump off the roof, our main character is told by her teacher that "it's impossible for people to fly," and she is therefore instructed to copy the phrase "people cannot fly" onto the blackboard repeatedly. At first glance, this is simply a story in which a young girl is made to feel foolish for her dream to fly, left only to seek out her own sense of fulfillment. But when paired with readings on Korea's postwar transformation, readers will render numerous messages from this allegory that cement their study of twentieth-century Korean history (see Table 5). [13]

Final Thoughts

Studying dates and facts have merit, but these alone will not promote historical inquiry. The Korean short stories highlighted in this article serve to contextualize the political and social history in twentieth-century Korea. With their ability to entertain and educate, these short stories possess a

Examining the Dynamics of Korean Culture: "Scarlet Fingernails" by Kim Min-suk Prereading question:

What do you think of the saying "forgive and forget"?

On second reading of the text:

- Highlight sections of the text that indicate Sung-hye's attitude about her father.
- List any questions you would ask the characters.

Questions for discussion:

- How would you react in Sung-hye's situation?
- What assumptions can you make about Korean culture from "Scarlet Fingernails"?
- Why is Sung-hye struggling with meeting her father?
- Describe the varying viewpoints presented throughout the story. What is the view of Sung-hye's mother in the story?
- What is the view of Sung-hye? What is the view of the father's family? What is the view of Sung-hye's husband? How do the various perspectives relate to the major themes of the story?
- How are the roles defined in Sung-hye's family? What does Sung-hye's mother do to prepare for the father's visit? What is expected of Sung-hye? What do the actions of the characters reveal about Korean family values?
- How do the reactions of Sung-hye's children reveal Kim's theme?

After discussion: Possible topics to investigate

- Korean Confucian values
- Gender roles in Korean society
- Attitudes toward Korean unification
- South Korean national security law

Table 4.

Sample postreading questions for "Waxen Wings"

1. List as many synonyms and/or associations as you can for the story's title; then, explain how those ideas relate to the story's theme.

"Waxen"	"Wings"	Explanation of how this concept is presented textually or thematically in the story.

2. This story deals with "gaps"—in meanings, words, memories, and reality vs. dreams. What do these gaps represent? How do they relate to the meaning of the work?
3. Does it make sense to think of "Waxen Wings" as an allegory of South Korea's postwar transformation?
4. How well do the main character's failures/successes line up with the internal and external politics of postwar South Korea?
5. How important to understanding the allegory is understanding the similarities between Rhee Syngman's educational policies and the main character's achievements as a gymnast?
6. How does the story convey, through the event with the Japanese tourists and dead pigeon, that Koreans are empathetic, resourceful individuals who prevail?
7. How does "Waxen Wings" convey the view that the strength and resolve of the South Korean people resulted in their country's miraculous transformation?

Table 5.

unique voice, one that resonates with readers and encourages them to *want* to learn more about the Korean experience. In asking students to analyze historical documents and formulate personal opinions in relation to short stories they read, their overall understanding of the writer's purpose becomes evident, and historical reasoning becomes clearer. History teachers can easily use the popularity of the short story genre to expand students' study of colonial and postcolonial Korea. ■

NOTES

1. Yi Sanghwa, "Does Spring Come to Stolen Fields?," *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Peter H. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1926), 80.
2. Mary E. Connor, *The Koreas: Asia in Focus* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 34.
3. On March 1, 1919, the Korean people engaged in nonviolent protest, expressing their desire to be free and independent of Japan.
4. Yom Sang-sop, "The Rotary Press," *A Ready Made Life*, eds. Kim Chongun and Bruce Fulton (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1998), 32–45.
5. Pairing the story with an accessible historical text, such as sections from *Korea Through the Ages: Vol. 2 Modern* (2005) by the Association of Korean History Teachers and Lee Gil-sang, provides a sound basis for historical literary analysis, as it contains both primary and secondary sources for students to review.
6. Bruce Fulton, "Modern Literature," *The Koreas: Asia in Focus*, ed. Mary E. Connor (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 259.
7. Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon, *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
8. Yi Ki-yong, "A Tale of Rats," *A Ready Made Life*, eds. Kim Chong-un and Bruce Fulton (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1998), 23–31.
9. Hwang Sun-won, "Cranes," *Shadows of a Sound,* ed. J. Martin Homan (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1990), 1–6.
10. Gordon A. Monaghan, "1950 to 2000: Korea, Comparing War Monuments in North and South Korea," *Asia for Educators*, accessed July 18, 2011, http://bit.ly/PTs7KY.
11. Kim Min-suk, "Scarlet Fingernails," *Wayfarer*, eds. Bruce and Ju-chan Fulton (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1997), 79–114.
12. Ha Songnan, "Waxen Wings," in *Waxen Wings: The ACTA Koreana Anthology of Short Fiction from Korea*, ed. Bruce Fulton (St. Paul, Minnesota: Koryo Press, 2011), 161–182.
13. "Inter-Korean Relations: Rivalry, Reconciliation, and Reunification. Fall Unit: For Secondary and College-Level Students" on Stanford University's website, last modified 2010, http://spice.stanford.edu.

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