Yi Kwang-su is, as far as I can tell, the spiritual godfather of the modern Korean drama. Better known as the father of Korean modern literature (for his work, Heartless), his stories are laced with love triangles, betrayals, defeats, revenges, and in the case of The Soil (흙) a spectacularly failed suicide attempt. Doomed lovers make promises they can’t keep, while wealth differentials grind people into dirt, and ‘true’ heart and dedication (according to Yi’s model) bring no rewards. In other words, you can catch a version of this most every night on Seoul TV.^^

But Yi Kwang-su’s the Soil (흙) is also strange artifact from a strange author. The first thing a reader notices is that this book is big – some 510 pages big, and that can be daunting. On the other hand, since it was originally published in serial form (this is how much of Korean fiction was published prior to the 1960s), it is broken up into convenient little chunks, with some mini-chapters barely clocking in at over a page, so it certainly can be read in little chunks. The Soil might not be the book that a potential reader of Korean fiction would start with, but it does have its charms and once a reader gets past the large cast of characters and plots, which are introduced at a lickety-split rate as the book opens, the story begins to flesh out, and despite it’s length, I read it in two sittings.

Unfortunately, and particularly at the beginning, Yi breaks the cardinal rule of authorship and “shows not tells” with non-sympathetic characters actions, even quotidian ones, being directly described as “arrogant” or improper, while sympathetic characters are described as noble, or appreciative. This is an odd shortcut in a book that has so many pages in it, and thankfully this tendency goes away a little as the story continues. In addition, there are a host of characters and getting them sorted is initially tough, but for the reader who perseveres, the melodramatic nature of the book actually becomes interesting, and the absurd saintliness of some characters and the moustache-twirling evil of others becomes fun to watch.

The plot, drama-style, is convoluted. A young man from the country, Heo Sung, leaves his hometown (and first love) to become a lawyer. His essential goodness, however, derails him, as his employer in Seoul decides that Heo should marry his daughter. So, a happy story – the quintessential success story in Korea – move to Seoul, get married well, get rich. But not for Heo, who sees the city as essentially corrupt, and longs to go back to his simple village and, as part of the Korean nation-building project, restore it to economic and social health. So, after a series of scenes in which the moral corruption of Seoul is revealed as is the evil of foreign influence (this is really odd, since Yi was necessarily drawing on foreign models for his modernism, and was very international himself, speaking both Japanese and English) Seo returns home and begins to rebuild his village in a cooperative fashion. He leaves Seoul behind to Japanese collaborator Gap-Jin, and the even more morally corrupted Dr. Lee, whose sin is to have been educated in the United States.

At first things go well, but of course the forces of reaction kick in, and the village becomes a battleground, which comprises the rest of the story, along with various love triangles, interpersonal intrigues, and didactic passages about what “should be done.”

The ending is a bit of an ideological deus ex-machina, which disappointed me a bit, but this sudden divergent ending is not uncommon in Korean fiction, and Yi more or less had to have this kind of ending, because without it, the entire social project of the book would not have made sense.

As noted above Yi himself is an odd duck, orphaned young, an early fighter for Korean independence, the father of Korean modern literature, a Buddhist convert in the early 30’s, then jailed by the Japanese in 1937 an experience from which he emerged, curiously, as a full-fledged collaborator. During the Korean war, as the North Koreans retreated from Seoul, they gathered up a group of intellectuals to take with them, and Yi was among these. He did not survive the experience, allegedly dying in a North Korean camp in 1950.

Here, I should take a minute to speculate that the amount of Korean literature I’ve already read, might have made this book easier for me, because I recognized many of the tropes and am familiar with the didactic nature of Korean literature at this time. And yet, over at Tony’s Reading List, Tony has also read it, and though a relative newcomer to Korean fiction he also liked it:

While the writing is not always as perfect as you might wish, this is a book I enjoyed immensely.  It's a novel which will be perfect for readers with an interest in Asia, post-colonial history or the fraught relationship between Korea and Japan - and it was the ideal start to my Korean literary journey.  Let's see where the next leg takes me ;)

I think, between our two reviews, you can get a sense of The Soil – if you are interested in learning about the social and economic struggles of Korea after the turn of last century, and if you are a fan of broad characters in melodramatic settings, this is an excellent book as once it has all the pins set up, it spares no time in repeatedly knocking them down, and the knockdowns come from all sides.

The translation, by the husband and wife team of Hang Sun-ae and Horace Jeffery Hodges is quite good. There is an occasional lapse into super-passive constructions, but for the most part the translated text flows in perfect accord with the story, and makes reading a pleasure.

NOTES: This book is part of the Dalkey Publishing / LTI Korea set of 10 books which were published last year, with another five scheduled to come out this year. Most of these books are quite good, with several being spectacular. You can see KTLIT’s other reviews of this series here: