



Landscape and figures on white porcelain in underglaze blue.

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Literature

Introduction

Korea's is a hardy culture of a mountainous land made harder by repeated foreign aggression and the landslides of internal factional strife.

Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism all had their effects, but theirs were of the negative quality—they taught self-control, forbearance, and even outright resignation. They did little to inspire positive self-expression, ventures into unfamiliar worlds, whether physical or spiritual, or for that matter, creative pursuits in general.

If the surrounding nations have been unkind to the Koreans, nature has not. Nature has given her beautiful mountains and clear waters, and has been good enough to throw in four distinct seasons, with the summer not very hot, the winter not very harsh, and the spring and autumn downright magnificent. The skies are always blue, except for a short rainy season. It is no wonder then that the Korean is a born poet, if with a touch of acquired melancholy.

Whatever the literary flair the Korean had, it had to remain mostly submerged due to a series of political and social upheavals on the one hand, and to the lack of means to commit his inspiration to paper in the absence of his own writing system, on the other.

Although Koreans had their distinctive spoken language for many thousands of years, it was not until the 15th century that they came to possess their own writing system. Prior to that, they had to depend on Chinese characters to write their thoughts and chronicles either

exactly the same as the Chinese themselves did or in a contrived phonetic system called *idu* which used the characters to transcribe Korean sounds.

Even today, it must be noted, Koreans use many Chinese characters in their writing. Many words of Chinese origin are used in living Korean, and even the most ardent purists cannot wholly dispense with them. The best they can do is render them in the Korean syllabary, while recalling as many ancient, medieval, and modern Korean words as they can, from virtual retirement to perform active duty.

The use of Chinese characters and the connotations and ideas inherent in this imported writing had become so widespread and deep-rooted a practice that the invention of the nation's own script did not simultaneously give impetus to the development of an independent indigenous literature. For over 500 years the Korean syllabary, *Han'gŭl*, was relegated to the lower echelons of the populace. Few literary works were written in *Han'gŭl* during this time in spite of its marvelously efficient and logical system of transcribing Korean sounds.

It was not until the latter part of the 19th century that the sap of *Han'gŭl* began to circulate through the trunks and limbs of Korea, prodding the hidden buds of her literature. This was also the time when the shooting buds were stroked by the shower of Western civilization.

In 1896, the first Korean-language newspaper, *Tongnip Shinmun* (The Independent News), was published. This was the most important single development in the history of Korean literature. The Korean script, hitherto used only by the lower social classes, now came to occupy its rightful place in the daily life of

Korea's literature started with her culture. In the absence of Korean characters, Silla Dynasty people wrote folk songs in Idu or Chinese characters assigned to represent Korean sounds. Humorous face of a clay doll, Silla (top); stoneware human figure playing a musical instrument, Silla (bottom).



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all Koreans.

But the infant buds of Korean literature were soon to shrink helplessly in the face of the onslaught of the frost that came with the Japanese, who annexed Korea in 1910 and gradually and systematically imposed their own way of speaking, writing, and even thinking upon the Koreans.

If the buds were shrunken, the sap kept on circulating, slowly, haltingly, imperceptibly. The early 20th century Korean poets and writers made it their mission to enlighten their hapless fellows through their poems and novels, which were often melancholy, never flamboyant, and always conscious of a hopeful future, however remote.

With the liberation of the nation in 1945, followed by the division of the land into north and south which reflected the diametrically opposed ideological difference between the Communist World and the Free World, and the subsequent war of 1950-53, Korean literature was to face a new chasm, from whose dizzying effect it is yet to recover even today.

But all these traumata were not without their redeeming virtues. The nation, since the early 60s, has rallied to the desperate call from the depth of the people's hearts—the call that "We too can and must make it." The ensuing decade and a half of visible economic progress has proved to their own satisfaction that they too indeed can make it.

As an old Chinese saying goes (Koreans have had the habit of resorting to old Chinese sayings for the past thousand years): an empty stomach is not conducive to moral rectitude. Nor, without doubt, is it to flourishing literature.

Given the present promise of economic



viability, which has fortified him with newly found reassurances of his own worth, the Korean is ready to give full play to his innate poetic disposition, which has for so long been held in check.

The buds must bloom.

Traditional Literature

The earliest prototype of narrative fiction (short story and novel) can be found in the usually brief national foundation myths which, transmitted orally, dealt with the union of god and beast (the bear) and oviparous hero-births,

Mountain Hut

Han Yong-un

*Forsake this dusty world, they said,
And I would achieve oblivion.
So I hewed the crags to build a hut,
And delved the rocks to dig a well.*

*The clouds are entertained as guests,
Who freely come and freely go;
And the moon, although no sentinel,
Keeps watch all night above the gate.*

*The song of birds my music is,
And the wind among the pines my
lyre—
As they were wont from ancient times.*

*None but my pillow knows
My rue for love of thee, which stays
And haunts me through the sleepless
nights.*

*O solitude of the vacant heights!
Whence do you bring this silent grief?*

*Rather give me that tranquil grief
Without the song of nightingales!
O solitude of the vacant hills!*

suggesting a sun cult. The origins of traditional verse forms must be sought in the incantations and songs that accompanied ancient shamanistic rituals, and in spontaneous folk songs.

The myths, legends, and songs of ancient Korea were not fixed in written form until after the introduction of the Chinese writing system from the continent. This introduction of Chinese writing, and the culture and learning that accompanied it, was a slow process, stretching from the 7th to the 13th century A.D. As the Chinese writing system, called *Hanmun* in Korean, was absorbed by the court and upper classes, a sophisticated, aristocratic literature developed.

Though *Hanmun* is believed to have entered the Korean peninsula as early as the second century B.C., the earliest example of its use for literary purposes would seem to be the *Song of the Yellow Birds* in *King Yuri and His Consorts*, a love poem written in 17 B.C. by King Yuri of the Koguryō kingdom. But it was not

until after the seventh century A.D. that Chinese characters were used with ease.

There were early attempts to record Korean-language material in Chinese characters. Most notable of this early literature was *hyangga* poetry which emerged around the eighth century A.D. It is the foremost extant expression of Silla literature. These brief, six-to-twelve-line poems include love lyrics, incantations, and prayers—lyric expressions of events of everyday life.

Hyangga poetry reflects the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and especially, Buddhism—three ways of thought integral to the Sinitized culture that entered Korea after the seventh century A.D.. The pre-eminence of Buddhist influence was due largely to the Silla court's acceptance of Buddhism as the state religion. The court contributed directly to the prosperity of Buddhist culture. But the religious influence upon *hyangga* poetry was not merely one of Chinese Buddhist and Taoist transcendental thought, but also of native Korean shamanism.

Azaleas

Kim So-wŏl

*When you leave,
Weary of me,
I will quietly let you go.*

*An armful of azaleas
From Yaksan, Yŏngbyŏn
I will gather to strew your path.*

*Tread softly,
Step by step,
Upon the flowers as you go.*

*When you leave,
Weary of me,
I will bite my lip to stop my tears.*

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Note: "Yaksan, Yŏngbyŏn" is a place in North Korea, famous for azaleas in spring.

The use of the Korean language in these *hyangga* poems emphasizes the Koreanness of the poetry, a point already made in the word "hyangga" itself, "local song." This would be the first hint found in ancient Korean letters of a possible awareness of a native literature.

There remains also, from the Koryŏ period, a group of poems sometimes called *sogyo*, "popular songs," which were sung and danced to, and probably composed, by court entertainers who were of the lower class in the stratified society.

The dominance of *Hanmun* underwent a challenge in 1446 when the Korean script, *Han'gŭl*, was devised. *Han'gŭl* is probably the most scientific writing system ever devised. The alphabet, originally of 28 letters, is arranged in syllabic units which reflect "the correct sounds of the people." However, the Chinese cultural tradition, the property of the official class, resisted the movement to spread the use of *Han'gŭl*. For the 500 years of the Yi Dynasty, while the countries of Europe were developing

modern national literatures, Korean literature continued under the dominance of Chinese learning and literature. What Korean vernacular literature produced survived only in the diaries of court ladies and some talented authors.

Most noteworthy for the role in articulating the Korean tradition was the poetic form, *sijo*. This form typically consisted of sections totaling around 45 syllables. It has enjoyed several revivals and has exerted influence on both the form and technique of modern Korean poetry.

Another traditional poetic form, *kasa*, grew up in the 15th century. The form could be described as poetic prose. That is, while formally governed by a style with rhythmic structure related to that of the *sijo*, its content is closer to the essay, travel journal, or critical essay.

The collection of short tales, *Kŭmo Sinhwa* (The Myths of Kŭmo), by Kim Si-sŭp (1435-1493) is generally regarded as the first example



Ch'oe Nam-sŏn, a great scholar, historian, and writer of the early 20th century (left); Yi Kwang-su, novelist of the early 20th century (right).

of fiction proper in the history of Korean literature.

The work traditionally accepted as effecting a complete breakthrough into native vernacular fiction was a satiric novella by Hŏ Kyun, *The Tale of Hong Kil-tong*, which is believed to have been written sometime between 1690 and 1718. Hŏ Kyun is credited with beginning a new era in Korean fiction with the use of *Han'gŭl* script.

Another pioneer in vernacular fiction was Kim Man-jung who lived half a century later. Two important and representative works by him are *Cloud Dream of the Nine* (1689) and *The Story of Lady Sa* (1690). The former is a lengthy allegorical novel in the Chinese style built on the concepts of karma and transiency.

The latter years of the Yi Dynasty also saw a growth of ballads in Korea, including some of the most famous of traditional vernacular tales, such as *The Tale of Sim Ch'ŏng*, *The Tale of Ch'unhyang*, and *The Tale of Hŭng-bu and Nolbu*.

The first is a tale about a devoted daughter who offers her life to restore her blind father's vision. The second is a comedy involving a girl,

her scholar-official lover and a villain. The third is a story about a kindly man and his vicious brother, ending happily for the good man.

An important characteristic of traditional Korean fiction is the sense of the comic. In vivid contrast to the intellectually directed satire and irony of Western literature, the Korean often displays a special ability to confront the depressing misery of life with a cheerful resignation that leads toward the realm of laughter.

One further aspect pertinent to premodern Korean literature is its tradition of realism. The 18th century is sometimes regarded as the era of the Practical Learning School, *sirhak*. In response to the Practical Learning Movement, literature, too, developed new trends. Representative of the new realist writers was Pak Chi-wŏn (1737-1805). His inclination to address himself primarily to the reality about him provides a resource for modern Korean literature.

Transitional and Modern Literature

Whereas traditional Korean literature was nurtured by the influence of Chinese literature, 20th-century literature—that is, modern literature—was formed under the influence of Western literature. Beginning in the late 19th century was a period sometimes called *kaehwagi*, the Era of Enlightenment. During this period, literature embarked on its own modernization under the banner of "New Literature."

The New Literature Movement was inaugurated in poetry by Ch'oe Nam-sŏn's "new form" poem, *To Youth, From the Sea*, which was published in his magazine, *Youth*, in 1908. In the field of fiction, Yi Kwang-su's early pre-

Monument in honor of the poet Kim So-wŏl (1902-1934), with one of his poems inscribed on it.



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cedent-setting works first saw print in 1917. But even earlier, another sort of fiction called the "new novel" had enjoyed a brief period of popularity. Typical of these commercially successful pieces was Yi In-jik's *Tears of Blood* (later translated into English by W. E. Skillend). The "new novel" should be recognized for its important role in the transition from the old-style novel.

With Chu Yo-han's attempt at Western symbolist poetry in his *Fireworks*, appearing in the magazine, *Creation*, in 1919, Korea's New Poetry Movement entered into the sphere of modern poetry. From this time on the younger poets, mostly in their early 20s, began to determine the course that literature was to take.

The French symbolist poets dominated the diverse influences which were at work at this time. Emerging from this symbolist-influenced New Poetry Movement in 1922 came an important group centered around the poetry magazine, *White Tide*. Yi Sang-hwa, an imaginative poet of outstanding ability, was a member of this group. He produced some of the finest poems of the 20s, including *Does Spring Come Also to These Stolen Fields?*

Meanwhile, the 20s were also years in which modern poetry was first giving rise to a new lyricism evocative of Korea's native poetic tradition. The most highly regarded of these lyric poets has been Kim So-wŏl. His beautiful and lyric inspirations from traditional rhythms make him widely read and enjoyed even today. Representative of his works are *Azaleas* (1924) and *Flowers in the Hills* (1925).

Another significant poet of the 20s was the Buddhist monk-poet, Han Yong-un. In his volume, *Your Silence (The Meditation of a Lover)*, translated by Kang Yong-ill, he intro-

duced an element of Oriental meditative poetry in a very modern form and context.

Yi Kwang-su was the founder of the modern Korean novel. He continued his contributions throughout a 40-year literary career. Influenced in his literary works by Tolstoy, Yi Kwang-su stressed his didactic social function, so that some critics have dubbed his novels "sermon literature."

For Koreans, the decade of the 20s that followed the tragic failure of the Independence Movement of 1919, was a period of sadness. But even when desperation and dark thoughts permeated the whole of society due to Japanese policies, it was a period of great activity in modern Korean fiction. Many talented writers were beginning to appear. The naturalistic novel grew, and with it grew a real facility in the use of *Han'gŭl*. Among the many short stories of real merit of the period is Hyŏn Chingŏn's *A Lucky Day* (1923).

Under the stimulation of Socialist thought, "proletarian literature" began to appear from 1923 on. For a while its writers called themselves the "New Trend," but in 1924 a formal organization, the Proletarian Writers' League emerged. For some 10 years, proletarian ideas strongly characterized literature in Korea.

During the 30s, the political ideologies of proletarian literature were replaced by esthetic considerations. Two leaders of this movement were Yi T'ae-jun in prose and Kim Yŏng-nang in poetry. As a writer, Yi T'ae-jun had a unique grasp of the native genius of the Korean language, and Kim Yŏng-nang gained recognition for his poetic use of a particularly Korean diction.

In 1933 a literary group called the Nine-Man Circle was formed. Yi Hyo-sŏk, who had

Flying fairy, on a Silla bell (cut); one of Yun Sŏn-do's (1587-1671) many reclusive poems (below).



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been identified with the proletarian writers, now assumed the stance, as he described it, of a "lyric writer." The same tendency toward a more lyrical, less argumentative prose was reflected in the works of many others of the better prose writers of the time. The critic Kim Hwan-t'ae, himself a member of the Nine-Man Circle, rebelled against proletarian literary criticism and stressed the importance of the work itself.

Many talented young writers made their appearance during the 30s, including several women. One exceptional poetess was No Ch'ŏn-myŏng.

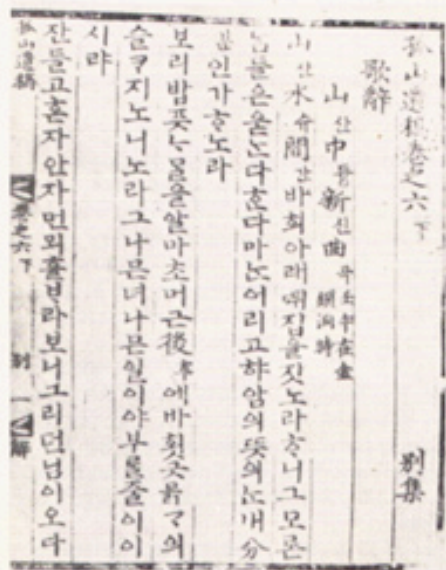
The 30s also saw the introduction of post-

World War I European literary trends into Korea. Among them Imagism, represented by the works of Pound and Eliot. The poetry of Chŏng Chi-yong and Kim Ki-rim are among the well-known works of these years.

The critic Ch'oe Chae-sŏ introduced the works of T. E. Hulme and Aldous Huxley in translation, and the term "Intellectualism" came to be a by-word in referring to works stimulated by these sources. Yi Sang was the greatest exponent of this kind of advanced modernity for the time, both in poetry and prose. His story, *Wings*, caused a sensation in 1936 with its revelation of the inner life of its hero's nightmare world.

But in the late 30s, and particularly in 1937, there was another turning point for both the condition and direction of literature. The year 1937 marked the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War. At that time the activities of intellectuals and the trends expressed in literary works fell more and more under the surveillance of the Japanese police. Freedom of expression was nearly obliterated.

In the war years the older prose novelists and poets turned toward the rural scene. In a sense, this was a retreat from contemporary reality into local color and local customs. In this connection, some young writers' literary roots in native grounds should be noted. Representative stories are *A Picture of a Shaman Heroine* (1936) and *A Rock* (1937), by Kim Tong-ni, and *Sŏnghwangdang* (The Shaman's Hall) by Chŏng Pi-sŏk. Poets also turned in direction; Sŏ Chŏng-ju set the model for the same times.





One of the 12 figures of the zodiac found in a Silla tomb (cut); self-portrait of Yi Sang (1910-1937), a modernist poet-novelist-architect, with Dadaistic tendencies (below).

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In 1937 two literary magazines, *Munjang* (Writing), edited by Yi T'ae-jun and *Inmun Review* (Liberal Arts Review) edited by Ch'oe Chae-sŏ, were published. Many young poets and writers emerged through these two magazines. Among them Cho Chi-hun, Pak Tu-jin, and Pak Mok-wŏl are eminent persons. They have since been called "The School of Blue Deer" signifying their pro-nature attitude.

By the time the United States entered the Pacific War, literary publication in Korean was nearly at a standstill, and it was not until the end of the war and liberation in 1945 that what can rightfully be called literature again emerged.

Postwar Literature

With the emancipation of the nation in 1945, the spirit of the Korean people burgeoned. Of course, this was reflected in the literature of the Liberation period. As the poem which follows shows, a kind of neo-romantic rejoicing in the possibility of a new national spirit was typical:

As I stand on the beach and behold the waves,
My eyes run faster than the waves,
And my mind is bluer than the sea.
(From Kim Kwang-gyun's *As I Stand on the Beach*, 1947)

This neo-romanticism was short-lived and was soon overshadowed by grim political reality. The confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union split the country between north and south. The Korean War of

1950 was the result.

We can now glance at the latter half of the 50s up to the beginning of the 70s. The Korean War had a tremendous impact on the Korean psyche, and resulted in a school of "postwar literature." This is particularly important as the origin of many trends continuing and developing into the 70s. Close examination reveals four main characteristics.

First, humanistic themes predominate. Since all the writers suffered the consequences of the war, whether as soldiers on the battlefield or as refugees buffeted by the war's vicissitudes, they were tormented by the same question—why were Koreans killing their fellowmen, their fellow countrymen, their own brothers? Many



impressive stories were published with this theme. Among them, *The Martyred* (1962) by Richard Kim was the most successful, becoming a best-seller in the United States. The agony of the young hero of the Korean War story was existentially humanistic.

In the second place, the work of this period often takes the form of a protest against the anti-humanitarian nature of communism. *Partisan* (1956), a short story by Pak Hong-jun, and *The Descendants of Cain* (1952), a full-length novel by Hwang Sun-wŏn, are examples of works containing this humanitarian theme.

Thirdly, the bitter nature of the struggle impressed on the minds of the writers of this period a deep pessimism. The war symbolized the dark fate of mankind. Works that belong to this group are Kim Tong-ni's *Evacuation from Hŭngnam* (1954), Sŏnu Hui's *A Blaze* (1957) and Ch'oe In-hun's *The Open Square* (1960). In this category we may justifiably include some other works which, while they do not concern themselves with actual hostilities, describe the disruptive effect of the war on the uprooted Korean people: for example, An Su-gil's *Pukkando* (name of a Manchurian province) (1959) and Pak Kyŏng-ni's *Dr. Kim's Daughters* (1961) which describes the sufferings that can afflict family life when a nation is divided by war.

Finally, sexual themes are not uncommon in the works of this postwar period. *The Code Map* (1956) by Sŏ Ki-wŏn, describing a triangular sexual relationship is one example. Han Mal-suk wrote a novel where the heroine is an emancipated woman who fails to follow conventional sexual morality.

However different, all four themes present an underlying unity in their protest against es-

Korean literature, like its cousin arts, attempted to reconcile reality with ideal, based on Oriental thought and Korean traditions; "Summer Landscape" by Yi Sang-bŏm (Ch'ŏngjŏn), an early 20th century painter who was one of the connecting links between old traditions and modern art.

tablished society. Mainly as a result of the tragedy of the Korean War and the attendant social evils which persisted after the war was over, the writers of this period felt alienated, and what they wrote was often a bitter indictment of society. Thus, for example, the theme of *Walking on a Dark Night* (1954) and *Babido* (1954) by Kim Sŏng-han is corruption. Similar themes are found in An Su-gil's *Stray Bullet* (1969). This awareness of the real world is also expressed in the form of satire. Chŏn Kwang-yong's *Capitan Lee* (1959), and Yu Chu-hyŏn's *General Chang's Family* (1949) and *Caricatures of Four Morals* (1949), are satirical comments on the harshness of reality. Many writers found the realities of the postwar period so depressing that their attitudes became very defeatist, as in the case of Son Ch'ang-sŏp's *A Chronicle of Death* (1954), *The Rainy Days* (1956), and *The Superfluous Man* (1957). But whatever their particular reactions, all these writers had a common subject-matter: the world of reality.

This awareness of the real world soon propagated a belief in actual social involvement. Mere observation was replaced by active participation in reality. This trend in Korean realism was deeply influenced by the April 19 Student Revolution in 1960 and the gradual absorption of existentialist philosophy of the Sartrean type. Among those who advocated this participation were novelists Yi Ho-Ch'ŏl and, Chŏng Ul-byŏng, and poets Sin Tong-mun, Kim Su-yŏng, and Sin Yŏng-yŏp.

However, it must be admitted that some of the trends of the postwar period were not at all closely related to the Korean War, nor is it true that a realistic commitment exhausted the possibilities for postwar writing. In fact there followed a great deal of experimentation that had



little to do with reality.

During the 1960s this experimentation chiefly characterized poetry. All modern Korean poets have been, though in varying degrees, experimentalists. We have no space to touch on even their most important works nor to attempt a classification of their various trends. To put it briefly, there was a group of modernists which included such figures as Pak In-hwan and Chŏn Pong-kŏn, whose main characteristic was total obscurity. Besides them, there was another group of poets, for instance Cho Pyŏng-hwa, who have used modern lyricism to make a more general appeal.

An overall review of postwar literature identifies two major categories, Western and Oriental. While the Western trend was dominant, and still is, it seems that the Oriental trend nevertheless is the more significant. Beginning in the early 60s, and continuing to the present, there has been a kind of Oriental revival. Critics and the theorists alike have been calling for a return to tradition. Moreover, a number of writers have had some success in bringing about an essential redirection of Korean literature by developing Oriental thought and by revitalizing the techniques of ancient Korean literature. It was characteristic of these tradi-

tional techniques to see life through the natural world of the senses. These techniques are revived most strikingly in the poetry of the 1960s.

Many youthful poets could be named in connection with this revival, but the trend is more pronounced in the works of the older, mature poets. Sŏ Chŏng-ju, for example, immersed himself in the ways of thinking of ancient Silla, and Pak Mok-wŏl used traditional Korean folk songs as the inspiration for some of his works.

To bring this survey of the modern literary scene up to the present day, we must mention recent debates in literary circles. One of the debates was held in December 1967. The subject was whether or not literature should be socially committed. A large number of writers and critics, all with varying views, publicly allied themselves with one or the other of the viewpoints. After the discussion, the topic of new realism was raised, aimed at resolving the problem of today's social involvement in literature as opposed to the level of literary technique. This debate marks a change in the Korean literary scene, and is no doubt indicative of the future direction that modern Korean literature will take.

There are reasons to believe, however, that



Traditional scholar's paraphernalia; scholars in the olden days were invariably poets and essayists: duck-shaped celadon water dropper, 12th century Koryŏ (top left); water dropper composed of a monkey and pomegranate, 12th century, Koryŏ (bottom left); white celadon brush holder, Yi Dynasty (below top); hen-shaped water dropper, Yi Dynasty (bottom).



Korea's literary world will soon revitalize itself and emerge as a worthy chapter in world literature. First, literary magazines are growing steadily, providing poets and novelists with channels to introduce their works, and at the same time expanding their readership. Second, the emergence of young writers has stimulated older writers to resume activity with freshness and renewed ardor. Third, the literary departments of various universities are turning out literature specialists and young aspirants who are well versed in literary theories and foreign trends. They help Korean literary circles keep abreast with developments in the outer world. Fourth,

there are businessmen and people in other walks of life who have become able contenders in their respective international arenas of competition. Their rise on the world stage affords an excellent stimulus for their fellowmen engaged in literary pursuits. Finally, there are the traumata, both ancient and recent. The deep emotions carved by the past trials and tribulations are now bottled up in the heart of the Korean literary man. But they are bound to find a way of forceful expression. The Korean literary man is about to give full play to his innate poetic disposition as he begins to write the epic of a new, awakened nation.