

# South Korea's Kwangju Uprising: Fiction and Film 韓國光州事件—小説と映画

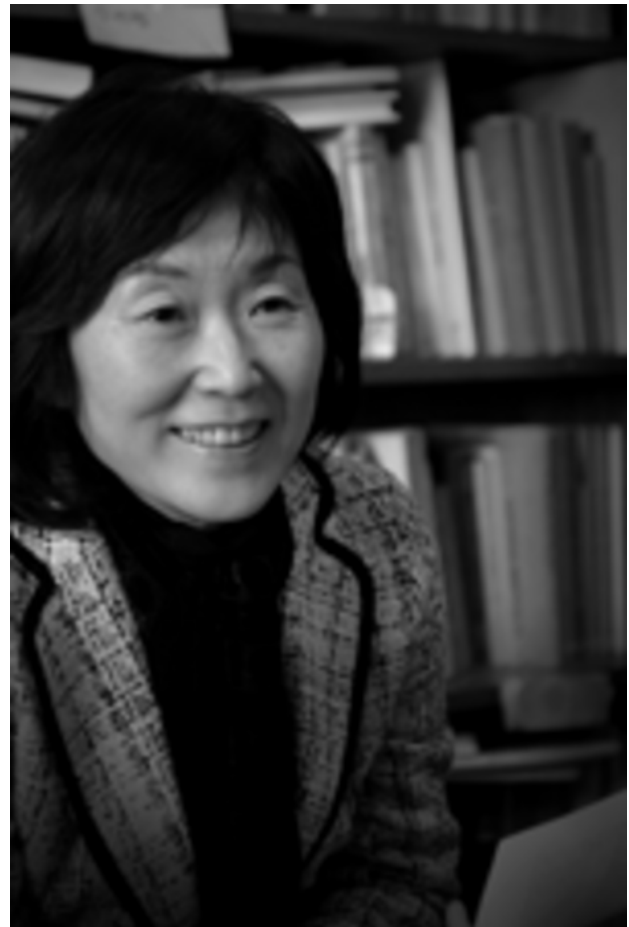
**Ch'oe Yun, Mark Morris**

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2010 will be a year of commemorations in South Korea. The 25th of June will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Korea War. Midway between 2010 and 1950 was 1980. The Kwangju Uprising of May of that year was an event almost as significant as the US-Korean War in framing the contemporary nation.

We have brought together in this section two articles, both of which look at how South Korean artists have attempted to describe, understand and represent the impact of Kwangju in the form of words, images and sound. The essay by author Ch'oe Yun looks back over her career and gives fresh insight into her novella, 'There a Petal Silently Falls', perhaps the single most eloquent literary attempt to make sense of the massacre at Kwangju. The article by Mark Morris which follows examines recent films which approach Kwangju and its aftermath in very different ways. [[link](#)]



**Ch'oe Yun**

## Ch'oe Yun, 'The Artistic Dilemmas of Writing Reality

**Introduction by Mark Morris**

**Translation by by Kim Ji-woon and Mark Morris**

The last few years have seen some significant works of Korean fiction find a home in English

translation. One of the best is Park Wan-suh's moving memoir *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) translated by Stephen Epstein and Yu Young-nan. Yu, one of the most accomplished Korean translators of fiction, had only a few years before produced an eloquent English version of one of the most important works of colonial-era fiction, Yom Sang-seop's *Three Generations* (New York: Archipelago Books, 2006). Samuel Perry's translation of Kang Kyong-ae's 1934 novel *From Wonso Pond* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2009) makes available a classic of proletarian literature. Outstanding among collections of short fiction is *The Red Room: Stories of Trauma in Contemporary Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). Here translators Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton have brought together stories giving vital literary expression to the scars left behind by the Korean War and the Kwangju Uprising of 1980.

The Fultons are also the translators, along with Kichung Kim, of the first volume of stories to appear in English by the writer Ch'oe Yun 최윤. The fiction included in *There a Petal Silently Falls: Three Stories by Ch'oe Yun* (New York: University of Columbia, 2008) includes two of the works mentioned by Ch'oe Yun in the text which follows: 'There a Petal Silently Falls', first published in *Munhak kwa sahoe* in 1988 (Summer), and 'Whisper Yet', first published in *Hankuk munhak* in November 1993. A third story referred to several times in Ch'oe's talk 'The Aesthetic Dilemmas of Writing Reality' is 'The Grey Snowman'. A convenient English version can be found in *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2005), edited by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon. As you can see, readers of Korean literature owe a great deal to hard-working, skilled translators, and probably just as much to Columbia University Press. I think that the most significant of all these recent additions to the Englished canon of Korean fiction is this collection of Ch'oe Yun's stories.

## Ch'oe Yun

Ch'oe would be unlikely, as the text below makes clear, to accept the title of spokeswoman for the 3-8-6 Generation. That term is a by-now clichéd emblem for framing the generation of Koreans, born more-or-less in the 1960s, who as 30-somethings in the 1990s looked back to the 1980s and the struggle for democracy as the key era in the formation of their generation's values and sensibilities. Yet the easing of censorship has finally made possible the publication of Ch'oe's 'There a Petal Silently Falls' in 1988. Ch'oe both formed part of the artistic and intellectual landscape of that generation and served as critical commentator on its perceived hollowing out of the earlier democratic project in favour of compromise and careerism. She has written of the appearance of her first story, still one of the most eloquent and demanding of fictions concerned with the Kwangju Uprising, that 'because of the circumstances in Korea at the time it was published - the nation's first open presidential election had taken place and Seoul was preparing to host the Olympic Games - it caused quite a stir. At the time I felt quite isolated, but the passage of time has reaffirmed my attitude toward writing, which is to strive for both timelessness and universality' \*.

The writer Ch'oe Yun is also Choe Hyun Moo, a Professor of French Literature at Sogang University, a literary critic and an eminent translator of Korean fiction into French. The talk translated below was presented at Robinson College, Cambridge, in October of 2009. It was not written as a polished work of literary criticism but as a general introduction to stories available in English versions as well as to key aspects in the artist's ongoing literary project. Qualifications aside, it is a good analysis of what Ch'oe's works try to achieve, situated between reality and writing in the imaginative, critical times and spaces of the art of fiction.

\* Quotation from Bruce Fulton's helpful 'About the Author', appended to the earlier translation of 'There a Petal Silently Falls' in *Korea Journal* 37:4 (Winter 1997), p. 239. Mark Morris

## The Aesthetic Dilemmas of Writing Reality

Ch'oe Yun

I have come here today to talk briefly about my novelistic concerns and positions, mainly in reference to works of mine translated into English.

As a matter of fact, there is a considerable difference in my style of writing now from that of my previous writings. Incidents that correspond to my childhood, adolescence and young adulthood – namely, to list a few: the Student Revolution of April 19th, 1960; the coup d'état in the following year; the Yushin 'Renovation' era of President Park Jung Hee; the Kwangju Uprising [May 1980]; and the peak demonstration of the Movement for Democracy held on June the 29th, 1987– all these I recall, just as described in the opening of my story 'The Grey Snowman' as if gazing at faded photos, lacking a sense of reality. In some ways, there are matters which I do not care to uncover. This is because, if I were to speak of them with a sense of nostalgia, it would be as if I were ignoring pains that have not yet faded from the minds and the hearts of the Korean people, from all generations who lived through these events. Their impact is still very much at the core of Korean society.

Since the latter half of the 1980s, Korean society has changed. I admit that to some degree the actual events of the past have become an abstract concept in our history. But keep in mind, in order for reality to become an abstract concept, there were many, many sacrifices along the way. However, as Albert Camus aptly pointed out in his work *L'homme*

révolté, because we cannot ignore a present when acts of resistance on behalf of a better society and acts of disobedience against injustice are being transformed into banal symbols and pathways to power, I feel all the more keenly the difficulty of going back and speaking of the complex situations of our past.

This does not mean that I simply want to criticise younger Korean readers for being oblivious to the past. I even wonder if it was forgetfulness of the extremity of the past events that actually helped Koreans to move without fear into the future and build their modern nation. Also, I can only speculate about whether being oblivious in this way was in itself a positive source of energy in a uniquely Korean way.

Much of the work of Korean writers in the 1960s and the 1970s can be said to be in certain aspects quite Romantic. This follows from the observation that at least in the literature of the 1970s and 1980s, rather as had once been the case with French Romantic-era writers and poets, literature was based on a sense of mission that it should, that it had to change the direction of history. Because Korean writers wanted their literature to contribute to changes in society, 'engaged literature' became highly valued and developed into a very masculine form of literature heavily weighted towards historical significance. Korean literature took on the shape of a literature fully devoted to analyzing rapidly changing economic and historical reality and to denouncing and bearing testimony to problems arising from such changes.

Literature was directly linked to politics, and a historically critical conscience occupied the forefront of literature. Historical novels, and interest in history in general, remained strong within Korean literature; for ordinary Korean readers, a special relationship was formed between literature and historical novels to the extent that they could be taken as synonymous.

From the 1990s, however, Korean literature began to escape from the heavy influences of reality and history and to display incomparable diversity in its depiction of various subjects. However, such advances should not lead us into mistakenly believing that facts and reality from the past no longer hold any importance. Korean literature still seeks to interact directly with historical reality in the name of realism and truthfulness.

Therefore, as far as the complex situation of Korean literature is concerned, the word 'reality' has a very special nuance. This is because as a theme, reality is directly related to contemporary Korean history as well as its political situation and, on the other hand, it is also a term which has been at the core of significant debates that have arisen within modern literature. Seeing it from a different angle, one can have the impression that literature per se does not necessarily deal with 'reality' at all; it is as if there is a certain superior reality and another, lesser reality. Political and public reality, engaged reality, rebellious reality: these are all agreeable and optimistic values and are all realities that cannot be doubted, and should accordingly be written with a capital R, like a proper noun, in that its adjectives, descriptors or modifiers become meaningless. They are what they are and are not doubted.

On the contrary, trivial matters, fragile matters, never dominant but peripheral matters all have modifiers to describe them - psychological reality, internal or inner mental reality, feminine reality -- they all have modifiers. It seems that in such public, masculine senses of reality, the word aesthetics is a troubling term.

Such cases are found to some extent in the history of any literature and have caused certain associated literary tendencies in response. However, when dealing with a brutal and desperate reality, reality can actually

become an anti-literary environment for the writing of reality. This is because the momentary utility of literature is always situated in conflict with a more universalizing, literary sense of time which seeks to leap beyond the limited, representational time which literature possesses. I believe that it is from the dilemma of the two temporalities, the two objectives - the writing of reality and the creation of reality through writing - that in fact all genuine literature which writes reality has been born. This is what I attempted to create in my earlier works such as 'There a Petal Silently Falls', 'The Grey Snowman', or 'His Father's Keeper'.

Not only for me but for many writers, the Kwangju Uprising was like a gigantic pool into which poured all the anguish of past eras of Korea's modern history. It was a reality which could be not gotten past without being written of, a reality that exceeded the real. One of the great powers which literature always possesses is that of writing a reality which cannot be spoken. In the context of the Korean political situation, however, Kwangju was like an enormous hole into which poured all debate, unable to be assimilated through reporting or testimony, cries or tears. In it they mingled and smouldered.

I chose a form of narration that would escape time. How could you conceive a way of writing fiction which could recollect (narrate) a form of time which was unendurable except through oblivion? Perhaps by presenting a passageway through the generalized violence and suffering which had occurred within the time of Korean politics, a passageway by which we might observe ourselves more concretely. Many kinds of such novelistic concerns are reflected in 'There a Petal Silently Falls'. In a sense, the story is my particular response, both aesthetic and political, concerning the problem at a time when Korean literature took upon itself perhaps the greatest burden of bearing historical witness.



I do not wish for Kwangju to be an easy read, like a popular novel. The work was written so that, read in Korean, the rhythm of the language will convey anguish in just such a way that a reader is called upon to hesitate, stop and be forced to reflect. Just as Kwangju had an impact on me, the girl in the novel traverses the landscape of Korea and infects those she meets with Kwangju. The individual violence inflicted upon some innocent 15- or 16-year-old parallels the political violence which devastated the innocent citizens of one city. Following the way that public, political and historical violence is rendered visible in a single individual is crucial for the work.

At the peak of an era of unrivalled change for a changing Korean society, the language and structure of the work were determined by an attempt to write in such a way as to capture the vital energy of residual memory, concerning both the internal (a single historical moment is experienced on the level of the individual and defines the pattern of a life) and external (a form in which, within actual history and culture, a single public event is experienced as exceeding time and as a result influencing the time of the future) meanings of Kwangju. The question of aesthetics in the novel, as is often the case in the above considerations concerning style, one understands as stylistic variation or experimentation intended to support the main substance of the work. Yet, in truth, that is all a novel can do.

With the style of 'The Grey Snowman' or structure of 'Whisper Yet', I tried to depict new methods for communicating with society within the works. The method of narration and characters in 'The Grey Snowman', which I've referred to as 'style as permeation', was a new linguistic proposal for people nauseated by a masculine and heroic view of language.

The two kinds of whispering in 'Whisper Yet' – the whispering between the narrator's father, a man who had fled to the South from his hatred

of communism, and the character Ajaebi, who had attempted to escape to the North but been arrested in the South, and the whispering of a mother to her eight-year-old daughter, speaking to her of the future in the form of a monologue of mother to unborn child -- these two kinds of whispers in 'Whisper Yet' sought to expose the unresolved relationship between North and South Korea, always confronting each other through 'dialogue', in order to suggest a different language, the language of whispers. For novels, the only way to respond to the questions posed by reality, is to come up with new ways of writing. This is more than a mere symbol or a reaction to the merciless challenges of reality.

I believe that in some ways the dilemma between writing about reality and turning writing into reality has presented me with an important opportunity to respond in literary form to the lack of points of contention in traditional Korean literature. In this sense, it can be said that all dilemmas posited between writing and reality have always been opportunities for the discovery of a dynamic aesthetics to explore new foundations for writing.

The language of fiction does really change reality our perceptions of reality. Unfortunately, however, contemporary literature has lost such an active, future-shaping capacity. This is the very focus of the current concerns of my writing. How in your works do you go about reinstating the linguistic dignity of fiction? I have gradually begun work on this task in *First Encounter*, a collection of stories published in 2005. I foresee that this path will become crucial to me as I conceive and bring to light the true beauty of our 'colourless, odourless' era.

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