



Waxen Wings: The Acta Koreana Anthology of Short Fiction from Korea, edited by Bruce Fulton and published by Koryo, is a breakthrough in the translation and publication of Korean short stories into English. It is the first collection of modern Korean short stories whose criteria for choosing works seems to have included a simple analysis of whether or not the works would be enjoyable and comprehensible to Western readers who have little innate understanding of Korea or her culture. The beauty of choosing such stories is that they draw readers in with sugar and not medicine, and introduce them to Korean culture in general.

Waxen Wings is also a bridge collection in the sense that it can be read either as an academic text, or purely for the joy of reading.

Waxen Wings covers the two canonical realms of Korean modern fiction, colonial and division, although it only briefly explicitly introduces readers to the Japanese Colonial era. The first colonial piece is “In The Mountains,” by Yi Hyoseok, the colonial importance of which is explained in a brief explanatory note which explains that the naturalist tone of the work was forced by the Japanese; Yi originally wrote political works, but the Japanese suppressed the proletarian literature movement in Korea, forcing authors to less controversial subjects. In any case the story follows a man forced out of the city to the bliss he discovers in the countryside. The second work, and more traditional colonial work, is “Constable Maeng” by Ch’ae Manshik. Manshik was an author with wide skills, from the political yet funny “My Innocent Uncle” to the coming of age story, “Chinatown.” In “Constable Maeng” Ch’ae, through the eyes of a constable, gives a snapshot of Korean history just after Japanese colonization has ended. As serious work written in a light-hearted tone (just consider the constables’ rather liberal definition of what it means to be a non-corrupt policeman!), it is marred only by a rather didactic final paragraph, the hammering of which destroys some of the light tone that has preceded it.

The collection changes gears with the allegorical “Weaver Woman” by Oh Cheong-hui. Like Ch’ae, Oh has written a well-respected novel named “Chinatown,” though hers featured the coming of age of a female protagonist, and her short story “The Bronze Mirror” is included in a previous collection, “The Land of Exile.” “Weaver Women” is a meditation on barrenness in a neo-Confucian country, a meditation that is well-served by the stories’ fractured but calm structure. In many ways this is an ‘era-less’ piece as its lessons can be applied to any era of Korean history or society.

Next up, and stepping toward pundan munhak, is the redoubtable, and unfortunately recently deceased, Pak Wan-suh and her “We Sell Shame.” In “We Sell Shame” Pak combines the two themes of her authorial life, the cost of the Korean Civil War and separation, as well as the effect on family relationships of Korean economic development. To theses she adds a look at social life in general, and ends with a scathing attack on hagwons and cram schools, which is really a scathing attack on a society that has become obsessed with status. All this in a very few pages, three marriages, and a re-union of “friends.”

Kim Won-il's "Prisoner of the Heart" is the longest work in the collection and directly focuses on post-war splits in Korea; it is also a complex story of semi-redemption. The narrator, a student rebel in 1960, returns to Korea as his brother, still a political rebel and under arrest because of it, begins to fail and die. Kim interlaces a variety of "then and now" scenes, which show how characters have developed and changed. There is a highly amusing scene in which the narrator and an old friend discuss the current (the story takes place in 1989) unrest and the friends bemoans that today's protestors won't pause their protests until yesterday's protestors are making over 10,000 won per year. Using a series of flashbacks, Kim portrays the strength of his mother in the post-colonial and civil war periods – this is a strength that is sapped by the impending death of her political son. The story contrasts bible versus socialism, youth versus age, dreams versus reality. There are lots of big ideas in this story, but Kim manages to herd them all, by placing them firmly within the lives of his characters. At the end a reader can't help but sympathize as the narrator relives his past, and in a small and personal way, returns to glories and brotherhood of his past.

In the last third of the book, Fulton moves to what might be called "post-modern" or perhaps "international" fiction. The final four stories would be right at home in any collection of modern fiction, even though the stories are quite different from each other.

Kim Young-ha's "The Pager" is an amusing and sad story of a nondescript, nearly sad-sack man who, after his fiancée leaves him for a new man and education overseas, makes a bold, amusing and completely out of his normal comfort zone move on a woman he meets in the subway. This woman, he feels, is more his type. Over the next few days Kim follows the lives of both characters as the "will they meet, won't they meet?" tension begins to build towards a climax. Kim ends with a neat and surprising reveal, and then ties the story together with one last little flourish.

"Corpses," by Pyeon Hye-yeong, is a combination whodunit/horror story that works its way right under the skin of a reader. An extremely uncertain narrator is repeatedly being called out of work to identify various body parts that might belong to his wife; a wife who drowned most mysteriously while on vacation with the narrator. As the story continues, reader and narrator seem pulled down by the same aquatic suction, and the end is appropriately water-logged and creepy.

"The Glass Shield" by Kim Chung-yeok is creepy in its own way. It begins as a lark – a tale of two inseparable friends who prank the art world and society. By complete accident the hapless two become famous performance artists. As the story concludes, however, it becomes something different; a meditation on friendship and separation. These two disparate sections are well melded together, and while the conclusion of the story may be a bit of a downer, it still rings with truth.

The title story is reviewed last here, because it is the most powerful story in the book (I think Professor Fulton agrees, as it is the title story). "Waxen Wings" by Ha Seong-nan is a powerful fable with obvious references to the fable of Icarus in

its title. *Waxen Wings* can be read in many ways: it can be seen as a fable of over-reaching, like Icarus, its predecessor; it can be read to mean that you should be careful what you want, for achieving it might come in forms you don't expect; it can be read to demonstrate that even the most noble goals can have unexpected and sometimes tragic outcomes; it can be read to mean that your goals should be reasonable, in fact; it can be read in all these ways and no doubt more. Told in short sentences and flashbacks, it begins with the present, "Your watch says 3:14," and then quickly cuts back to childhood memory, "This is very dangerous. Who started this?" "*Waxen Wings*" follows a nameless narrator through her quest to defy gravity, ignoring the obvious signs of danger that she passes on the way.

The conclusion is unexpected and poignant and one of the beauties of this story is that no matter how you read its 'moral,' that reading will apply, nearly seamlessly, to Korean history. It is another of the beauties of this story that most readers will also recognize its moral (whichever one they take) to be appropriate somewhere in their own lives. A revelation of a short story, "*Waxen Wings*" raises hope that somewhere in this world a skilled translator is busy working away on Ha's other stories.

A note about the introduction is also in order. In just over nine pages, Fulton manages to neatly outline the history of Korean modern literature in a way that should make it accessible to the naïf reader. The introduction is worth reading on its own merits. I should also note that the translators and translations are varied, but all quite good. The only thing that can sometimes be difficult is that Fulton does not use the revised Romanization rubric of Korea, instead using McCune-Reischauer, which can be a bit difficult to the English-reading eye.

But that is a minor point in the face of what is a triumph on every other ground. **Waxen Wings** proves a fun book to read and there are very few volumes of translated Korean literature about which that can be unreservedly be said. Fulton should be praised for going outside of the canon for themes, even if he did rely upon familiar authors, at least in the first few stories. In addition, these all seem to be relatively new translations and so Fulton avoids the ongoing problem of re-presenting stories considered canonical within Korean culture (e.g. the relentless re-translation and republication of "Buckwheat Season"). In the past, when asked what to recommend for beginners at Korean literature I have, with some reservations, recommended *Land of Exile*, or *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology*, sometimes even suggesting a complete reading of the KLTJ/Jimoondang Korean Library of Translated Literature. All of these are noble collections and good works, but **Waxen Wings** immediately replaces them as the best introduction to modern Korean translated literature, particularly for the reader who comes to the table with no previous knowledge of Korea. This outstanding collection should serve as a model for other anthologists; a collection of interesting works, well translated, and well presented.

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