



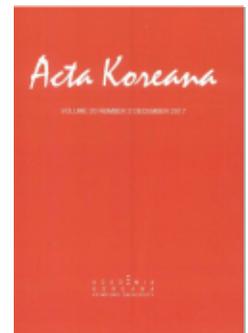
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*The Colors of Dawn: Twentieth-Century Korean Poetry* ed. by  
Frank Stewart, Brother Anthony of Taizé, Chung Eun-Gwi  
(review)

Charles Montgomery

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Especially sobering is the paragraph in chapter 2 on the “martyrs”—the Columbans who lost their lives during the Korean War, including three victims of the 1950 massacres in Taejŏn whose remains have yet to be recovered.

We have to go back to 1964, and the publication of *Korean Works and Days* by Richard Rutt, an Episcopalian clergyman and also a translator of note, to find a memoir of similar scope and significance by a Western resident in Korea. If you like what you read and hear in *My Korea*, you’re in luck: help yourself next to one of the dozens of book-length publications of O’Rourke’s translations—his most recent, *The Book of Korean Poetry: Chosŏn Dynasty* (2014), earned him the 2017 Daesan Foundation Translation Award—and feel for yourself the metaphorical tug on the string of your fishing pole.

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*The Colors of Dawn: Twentieth-Century Korean Poetry*. Edited by Frank Stewart, Brother Anthony of Taizé, and Chung Eun-Gwi. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2015. 192 pp. (ISBN: 9780824866228)

Upon its publication, *The Colors of Dawn: Twentieth Century Korean Poetry* immediately takes its place as the indispensable introductory volume of Korean modern poetry. The collection originated as an edition of the bi-annual journal *Manoa*, published by the University of Hawai‘i. It was first printed in 2015, and is now reprinted, with corrections, as a book. It is edited by Frank Stewart, Brother Anthony of Taizé, and Chung Eun-Gwi. Chung and Brother Anthony are also the primary translators for the book. Other translators include Susan Hwang, YoungShil Ji and Daniel T. Parker, Kim Jong-gil, Myung-Mi Kim, Lee Hyung-Jin, Lee Sang-Wha, Jinna Park, and Yoo Hui-sok. *The Colors of Dawn* offers a comprehensive but not overwhelming survey of 20th century Korean poetry. Beautifully adorned with botanical watercolors by Hye Woo Shin, *The Colors of Dawn* also includes an essential introduction by Brother Anthony.

The book is arranged in three sections arranged in reverse chronological order: Poetry of Today, Survivors of War, and Founding Voices. *The Colors of Dawn* contains the works of forty-four poets, twenty-one from today, six survivors, and seventeen founders. The uniting principle behind these works and Korean poets in general is the “conviction that poetry was a means to keep ... humanity in a world that [is] absurdly cruel and unjust.” (p. 18)

It is often difficult to describe to a non-Korean reader exactly how political and tied to history Korean literature, including poetry, is. A 1987 statement by Shin Kyeong-nim, represented by nine poems in *The Colors of Dawn*, sums it up, “Expressing sentiment is important ... (but)... the most important problems in Korea are democracy and reunification of North and South Korea. Without dealing with these problems, you cannot call yourself a poet.” Ko Un, one of Korea’s best-known poets, and also represented in *The Colors of Dawn*, echoes this sentiment. “The role of a poet in Korea is not just to write about sentiment, but also to write about movements in history. Poetry is the song of history.” By beginning in the here and now, it is far simpler for a novice reader to recognize the meaning of the poetry. By working backwards, *The Colors of Dawn* allows a reader to pick up the themes of Korean modern poetry in more recent branches of poetry, then explore back towards the roots of the Korean poetry tree.

And reading reveals that the roots and the tree are tightly bound together. To set the tone, *The Colors of Dawn* begins in the present with Kim Sunwoo’s “Playing Dead” calling upon up the ghost of Palestinian poet, and notable writer on dispossession and exile Mahmoud Darwish:

Mahmoud Darwish died. That was in August.  
I turned the page of my diary and wrote:  
“One journey has ended and another journey has begun.” (p. 4)

Of course dispossession and exile are also strongly Korean themes and as *The Colors of Dawn* wends back in time these notions are visited again and again, culminating in the last (first?) poem of the book Sim Hun’s canonical, “And When That Day Comes”:

If that day comes, when that day comes,  
Mount Samgak will rise and dance joyfully.  
....  
And if my skull shatters to pieces,  
why should I have any regrets, since I will have died for joy? (p. 167)

There is a clear consistency throughout this book, and it is the consistency of art formed under pressure. In “Founders” the pressure is from Japanese colonialists which, as the introduction notes, “was dangerous: the slightest expression of defiance against Japanese rule could result in torture, prison, and even death.” But a similar pressure exists in each era. For Korea the application of pressure would move from colonial rulers, to native rulers, and then to economic determinism and Korean poetry would follow at each step.

“Poetry of Today” focuses on the current human condition in a partially post-modern Korea. Jin Eun-Young’s “Extinction” alludes to the “tilt”ed condition of the modern world (p. 10). Song Kyung-Dong’s “Lyrics, Too, Have Class Structures” laments the move away from the ‘real’ world of “Carpenters, painters, laborers, / low life, lower life,” to a world of “books, science, and reason” (p. 30). Song Kyung-Dong’s “Beyond the Border,” contemplates the role of the individual in a globalized world, “It is morally wrong for me/being such a borderless thing, to be obsessed with a single idea” (p. 31). This last lyric demonstrates both the international scope of these poems and their essential Korean nature as well. Being ‘beyond’ borders has a very specific meaning for a nation currently split at the 38th parallel, but is also applicable to the entire, shrinking globe. These poems serve as bridges between poetics, internationally relevant issues, and Korean politics.

One of the key works in this collection is Kim Chi-ha’s (Survivors of War) epic “Five Bandits”. “Five Bandits”, a satirical take on post-war Korea, was initially scorned by critics. Over time, it began to gain a foothold as one of Korea’s best-known poems. In the poem, which is written in the form of a pansori, a traditional Korean Kim identifies five predatory bandits who live parasitically on the Korean people: ConglomerApe, AssemblyMutt, TopCivilSerpent, General-in-Chimp, and HighMinisCur, all described as “ferocious under Heaven.” This poem, it is interesting to note, has achieved a kind of cultural rebirth in light of current events in Korea, including the recent Sewol tragedy.

Another classic poet and moral touchstone is found in *Survivors of War*, in the form of Ko Un. Ko has been a brave and relentless chronicler of Korean modern history in poetry. Ko’s poems untitled poems not only consider pain and persistence, two important aspects to Korea’s survival as a nation, but also the role of the poet in that world. In *Untitled Poem 148*, Kim writes:

I will live as a walking song.  
I will walk along as that song,  
Wanting nothing more  
for the remaining days  
if there are days remaining. (117)

Lines that neatly catch Ko’s mix of Buddhist resignation and burning desire for creation. Other poets sound similar themes, as in Ra Heeduk’s “Banksias”

When forest fires erupt  
some trees begin to propagate

Banksias' ovaries are hard until seared by flames  
Then they spew seeds

Though being immolated  
banksias drop their eggs on the wasteland

Loaded with bullets, yet  
their ovaries won't activate until ringed with flame

After everything is charred  
they germinate a tender shoot through black ash (41)

These examples only begin to touch the surface of the varied works here. Choi Jeongrye responds to Shakespeare in "Shall Time's Best Jewel From Time's Chest Lie Hid"? Kim Seung-Hee takes on the myth of Sisyphus in a formal way, and Ko Un expresses the problem differently:

The sun is rising.

Today, too, I will fight.  
Today, too, I will lose the fight (121)

And, of course, the Korean poetic appreciation of nature is expressed in multiple works including Bak Du-Jin's "Sun".

The poems here work well when translated into English, and are also well translated. As an example it is worth revisiting the satirical grace and on-the-nose nature of those translated names given to chaebol owners, vice ministers, ranking officials, military generals, and cabinet ministers in Kim Chi-ha's "Five Bandits". Clever, descriptive portmanteaus aptly represent their original counterparts in Korean. This is clever translation, but more than just that it is apropos. Modern poetry, particularly, must have been difficult to translate, but all the works here will withstand scrutiny, whether judged as translations or not.

No volume of this sort can be comprehensive, and each reader might find some small thing lacking. One might note the absence of the relentlessly modern early poet Yi Sang, whose experimentation was often astounding, ranging from experiments in form (Poem Number 4), experiments in repetition (13ChildrenRushdownaStreet), and torrents of stream of consciousness (Crow's-eye view: Poem number eleven). Another notable absence is foundational modern feminist poet Kim Hyesoon (Sorrowtoothpaste Mirrorcream). In the case of these authors, however, ample translations already exist, and perhaps these exclusions

were conscious decisions on that basis. And there is enough good poetry in *The Colors of Dawn* to keep any reader satisfied, and certainly interested in reading more.

These poems shine not only as artifacts of Korean engagement with occupation, colonialization, brief freedom, a civil war, military dictatorship, forced modernization, industrialization, extreme capitalism, and now post-modernity (that list alone should demonstrate the daunting task facing Korean poets in the course of only one century), but also as works of literature when presented in the English language. This is a worthwhile collection for scholar and poetry aficionado alike.

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*The Analects of Dasan Volume 1: A Korean Syncretic Reading*. Translated with Commentary by Hongkyung Kim. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 260 pp. (ISBN: 97801906254996)

Dasan (Tasan 茶山) is the pen name of Jeong Yak-yong (Chŏng Yagyong, 丁若鏞, 1762–1836) who became arguably the most celebrated cultural hero in recent Korea and the most prolific writer during the late Chosŏn Dynasty. However, until recently, Dasan was known primarily for his two well-known works, *Heumbeum sinseo* (*Hŭmbŭm sinsŏ*, 欽欽新書, New book of judicial prudence) and *Mongmin simseo* (*Mongmin simsŏ*, 牧民心書, Treasured book of nurturing the people), because of his socio-political concerns in dealing with practical matters. For this reason, Dasan was known as a scholar of “practical learning” (*silhak*, 實學) in Korea. Hongkyung Kim’s *The Analects of Dasan Volume 1: A Korean Syncretic Reading* clearly puts the status of Dasan beyond the general perception of “practical learning.” This does not mean that the author rejects or denounces the idea of “practical learning.” Rather, what Hongkyung Kim does in this book is to expound the deeper and authentic meaning of “practical learning” by going back to Confucius’ *Analects*.

This book is the first of the six-volume series of Hongkyung Kim’s translation and commentary of Dasan’s *Noneo gogŭm ju* (*Nonŏ kogŭm chu*, 論語古今註, Old and new commentaries on the *Analects*) which Dasan completed in 1813. The author’s introduction to this volume elucidates Dasan’s *Noneo gogŭm ju* by providing the chronology of Dasan’s life, his government service, his association with