



Faces of the American Empire Reflected in the Mirror of Korea

Island Ablaze and Other Stories: The US Empire in North and South Korean Literatures. Edited by Ruth Barraclough, Jae-Yong Kim, Jin-kyung Lee, and Sang-Kyung Lee. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2025. 290 pages. ISBN: 9781501782213.

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The mirror has long been used as a metaphor for the relationship between reality and literary text. Like the way a mirror reflects an object, literature reflects the world before it. As its subtitle indicates, the anthology *Island Ablaze and Other Stories: The US Empire in North and South Korean Literatures* focuses on “the stories of subjects of the American empire” (p. 2). Korea first established relations with the United States in the late 19th century, and during the years following Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, U.S. politics and culture exerted the strongest influence on the peninsula. In particular, post-Korean War South Korea of the 1950s lay under the overwhelming influence of U.S. culture as the country experienced Americanization. As a result, South Korean popular culture, in such industries as film, music, and fashion, mass-produced various hybridized texts as a result. Although the United States was endlessly idolized in popular culture, it cut a very different figure in the political sphere. As the world’s policeman, the United States was both the empire ruling South Korea behind the scenes of the Cold War system and its economic savior through foreign aid. As Pak Min’gyu’s story “Headlock” allegorically demonstrates, the United States could be culturally and politically likened to the figure of the American wrestler Hulk Hogan—a

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physically insurmountable and suffocating presence holding South Korea in a headlock.¹

How was the United States reflected in the mirrors of North and South Korean literature, and how are these shapes perceived by English-speaking readers encountering these texts in translation? Korean literature as a mirror reproduces images of the American empire on a surface that has been made rough and uneven by the desires of the Korean people and the circumstances of the times. *Island Ablaze and Other Stories* features 13 stories, ranging from “Dawn” by Chŏe Chŏnghŭi, which was published in 1942, making it the earliest work among them, to the most recent, “Headlock” by Pak Min’gyu, which was published in 2005. There are also two works from North Korea: “The Engineer” (1951) by Chŏe Myŏngik and “Island Ablaze” (1953) by Hwang Kŏn. Most Korean experiences of U.S. power had to do with war: among the 13 stories, only four are not directly related to war, while the remaining nine reveal the destructive power of the American empire through World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. In what follows, I focus on specific themes to examine how the faces of the U.S. empire are reflected in these stories.

Experiencing America

Following liberation in 1945, acquiring proficiency in the English language became the most important tool for survival and success in South Korean society. The most efficient way to accomplish this was to study abroad in the United States, which had also long been the most reliable and quickest route to join the ranks of the privileged establishment in South Korea. Any visit to the United States, whether residing over a given period or visiting for a short while, was considered a special experience. In addition to signifying the

1. Although *Korea Journal* follows the Revised Romanization system, the book under review employs McCune-Reischauer; that system has accordingly been retained here in all references to its content.

possession of class privileges that made it possible to obtain a visa for the United States, having an experience of American society, the most advanced society at the time, indicated that the individual had gained a broader worldview, a new perspective, along with English language skills. Among the stories featured in this anthology, the protagonists of Yöm Sangsöp's "A Western Candy Box" (Yanggwaja kap, 1948), Ch'oe Inho's "Till We Meet Again" (Tashi mannal ttaekkaji, 1977), Pak Wansö's "J-1 Visa" (J-1 Pija, 1998), and Pak Min'gyu's "Headlock" (Hedürak, 2005) have all either studied abroad in the United States or are planning to reside there for a while. Yöngsu in "A Western Candy Box," for instance, is very critical of South Koreans who live off Americans during the period under U.S. military government rule. When Yöngsu responds cynically to the landlord's daughter's request to help read a document written in English, his daughter Pobae assists her instead and is gifted Western candy in return as a sign of gratitude. Yöngsu, out of pride as the patriarch of his family, throws the Western candy box out into the yard. Later, his wife carefully picks it up and brings it back inside. Characters like Yöngsu have continued to appear in stories in many different variations. The pride of being a patriarch, or head of a Korean household, in this case, which did not allow him to grovel before Americans, clearly forms one axis of the ambivalent feelings Koreans have held towards the United States. The fact that Korean men have long suffered from these conflicting emotions can be found in other literary texts as well.

Yi Ch'anggu, the protagonist of the story "J-1 Visa," is a teacher and writer. He also suffers from such ambivalent feelings, specifically between the bit of pride he feels in having been invited to speak at a university in the United States and the servile feelings this huge country gives rise to. In other words, as the story's translator Seunghei Clara Hong points out, the "desire for recognition with his condemnation of American arrogance" (p. 223) coexist. Sunyoung Park, the translator of Pak Min'gyu's "Headlock," makes a sharp observation that the "I" in "Headlock" expresses the subimperial stance of South Korea by the way he "learns to apply similar wrestling skills in order to subdue ethnic and social minorities" (p. 245). South Korea, in fact, has long laid bare its subimperial intentions. The proud narrative of

South Korea's development, according to which the once poor, recipient country transformed into a donor country that provided aid to other poorer countries, changed the way South Koreans viewed themselves. The story "Headlock" aptly captures how South Korea's revised self-identity is based on a long-rooted envy of the American empire.

The story "Till We Meet Again," which deals with the dark history of child exportation, concisely reproduces the grand narrative of the United States as South Korea's savior. The protagonist, "I," takes on the role of transporting adopted children to the United States only because the job comes with a cheap plane ticket to Chicago. Having grown up eating the powdered milk distributed in Korea by the United States, "I" always tensed up and became awkward and clumsy in front of Americans. Although the protagonist wants to go to the United States, once there, he feels daunted, like a "Lilliputian dispatched to Brobdingnag in *Gulliver's Travels*" (p. 192). The realization dawns on him in the United States that while he may be American in his own mind, his face is read as Asian.

Forms of Racism

The introduction to this anthology accounts for racism among South Koreans in two ways: first, as the resentment South Koreans felt toward white Americans displaced onto African Americans because of how white Americans treated Koreans; and second, as a straightforward imitation of the racism practiced by white Americans (p. 10). While both explanations are valid, I would like to supplement them from a slightly different angle. Racism by South Koreans clearly stems from resentment, rage, or a sense of physical alienation felt upon perceiving the different physique of Americans. However, instead of expressing this resentment and anger toward white Americans themselves, Koreans chose to conceal their sense of racial inferiority by granting themselves the status of honorary white Americans and rendering black Americans, or African Americans, who were powerless and thus placed lower than white Americans, as the Other. This

psychologically complex racism originates from Koreans' fearful worship of those with power—rather than actively resisting them—and the delusionary adoption of their gaze towards the Other. The story “Shorty K'im” (Ssyori K'im, 1957) by Song Pyöngsu well portrays this particular racism in the way African Americans are described as more despicable than white Americans. Racism by South Koreans even affects how young women's external appearances are judged: the whiter (as in Caucasian) they look, the more beautiful they are thought to be. However, this cannot be attributed solely to the influence of racism, as white skin was traditionally regarded to be a feature of beautiful women. Racism perpetrated by (white) Americans, in other words, appropriated traditional Korean aesthetics into the realm of racism and reinforced it.

Racism by South Koreans also afforded white Americans the right to observe and judge. In Ha Künch'an's story “Red Hill” (Pulgün öndök, 1964), the desire for recognition from a foreign educational mission leads to the mobilization of elementary students in a rural village. The characteristic features of these foreigners, who witness the screaming and almost seizure-like episode of a girl, are metonymically expressed as yellow hair and blue eyes, implying that they are white Americans. The introduction to the story points out that it presents the face of America as seen by those living on the margins of history (p. 130). In fact, for a very long time, foreign country meant, to ordinary Koreans, simply the United States, and any white person they came upon was taken to be American regardless of their actual nationality.

Migration, Displacement, Troop Deployment

One manifestation of the United States' influence as a global hegemon was the range of human mobility it set in motion—migration for study or livelihood, flight and displacement in wartime, and overseas military deployment. Kim Tongni's “The Hüngnam Evacuation” (Hüngnam chölsu, 1955) vividly captures the wartime flight from the port of Hüngnam, one of

the most memorable episodes of the Korean War for South Koreans and Americans alike. This evacuation, also referenced in the popular song “Be Strong, Kūmsun!” (1953) and the 2014 film *Ode to My Father*, stands out as one of that war’s most dramatic and tragic narratives, one in which a single stroke of fate divided those who escaped from those who could not. For the United States, it also offered the perfect savior trope, in which Americans miraculously rescued South Koreans in a moment of crisis. This is evident in the evacuation’s code name, “Christmas Cargo,” as introduced by the story’s translator, Daniel Pieper (p. 104). The event, however, was not just a savior narrative for Americans; it was also a traumatic wartime experience deeply imprinted in the South Korean collective memory, one for which Kim Tongni’s story provides an archetypal form.

While the history of labor migration can be traced back to Korea under Japanese colonial rule, Kim Chŏngha’s story “Letters from Okinawa” (Okkinawa esŏ on p’yŏnji, 1977) features Pokchin, the female protagonist who works on a sugarcane plantation in the 1970s on the island of Minamidaitōjima, or Minami Daitō Island, in Okinawa Prefecture. In the letters she writes to her family in Korea, Pokchin describes Mr. Hayashi, who worked in the mines of Hokkaido alongside forcibly conscripted Koreans; Miss Shanghai, who had to serve as a comfort woman for the Japanese military and ended up settling in Okinawa and running a bar; Takeo, with a scar under his eye from participating in the Okinawa Reversion Movement; and a Korean beggar boy who had been sent to Okinawa for eventual illegal adoption to the United States but who ended up rejected and abandoned in Okinawa. Samuel Perry, the story’s translator, views these Okinawans and Koreans as historical victims of both the United States and Japanese empires (p. 171) and shows how a transnational sense of solidarity can emerge from that shared experience.

Hwang Sŏgyŏng’s story “Camel’s Eye” (Nakt’a nukkal, 1972) follows the story of a soldier on his way home from deployment to Vietnam. Many South Korean literary works of the 1970s are inextricably linked to the Vietnam War. Sang-Kyung Lee, one of the editors of the anthology, points out how this story is significant in the way it deals with the posttraumatic

stress disorder (PTSD) suffered by Korean troops in the Vietnam War. PTSD, which is referred to in the story as “psychoneurosis,” emerged in the United States during the 1980s largely in relation to Vietnam War veterans.

Interestingly, while the American empire is the direct cause of all human mobility in these stories, there is no significant American character in any of them and they barely mention the United States. The only American who does appear is the black American soldier in “Camel’s Eye” who is mocked by a young Vietnamese girl. In Song Pyöngsu’s story “To Trust in Humanity” (In’gan shilloe, 1959), a Chinese soldier named Ch’weyu has been deployed to a foreign place where he is taken prisoner by the U.S. military, and then to survive becomes a companion with a black American soldier described derisively as “Darky.” These subaltern subjects are moved to unfamiliar places as if being chased, whether by migration, troop deployment, or evacuation, unaware that they are no different from chess pieces under the control of U.S. power.

Camp Towns and Misogyny

The anthology’s introduction also points to the misogyny distinctly featured in the stories “Shorty K’im” and “Camel’s Eye” (p. 9). Forms of misogyny are easily found in modern and contemporary Korean literary works and take even more violent forms in the literature produced after liberation. This is, above all, related to how Korean men’s military experience became widespread and commonplace after the Korean War, particularly how exaggerated forms of masculinity were learned and disseminated through army life. In addition, the macho military regime that began to rule South Korea in 1961 caused military culture to infiltrate people’s everyday lives.

These two stories, categorized in the anthology’s introduction as “camp town fiction” (p. 9), present extreme manifestations of misogyny. Sexual tension and violence were endemic to areas around U.S. military bases in South Korea, serving as channels for the transmission of American culture. In fact, the roots of Korean popular music from the 1950s can be found in

the clubs of such camp towns. However, the camp towns that “Shorty K’im” describes have no room for culture and are depicted only as spaces of everyday violence and the sexual abuse of Korean women by American soldiers. Korean teenage orphans such as “Shorty” survive by living off these areas surrounding U.S. military camps and picking up violence from an early age.

Anti-Americanism and Heroes

War also generates heroic narratives. In the volume’s North Korean stories—Ch’oe Myōngik’s “The Engineer” (Kigwansa, 1951) and Hwang Kōn’s “Island Ablaze” (Pul’anūn sŏm, 1953)—the subject that records and remembers is North Korea. At the time of the Korean War, other socialist states treated North Korea as a hero that had fiercely fought the gigantic American empire. Similarly, both stories feature resolutely determined protagonists who die while resisting America. “Island Ablaze,” which recounts the Battle of Wōlmido, the opening phase of the Inch’ōn landing operation, or Operation Chromite, features Myōnghŭi, a female radio operator, and Taehun, captain of an artillery unit. Feelings of love clearly exist between the two characters. Even when American troops swarm on to Wōlmido, however, both Myōnghŭi and Taehun do not retreat in face of this urgent crisis but remain there to the very end, bravely dying in battle, thus displaying the sublimation of their feelings of love into patriotism. Ch’oe Myōngik’s “The Engineer” revolves around the protagonist, Hyōnjun, who is forced to work as an engineer after being taken prisoner by American forces. He later ends his life by deliberately derailing a locomotive. The solemnly determined and noble deaths of these characters function as the typical anti-American propaganda of North Korean literature during the Korean War.

Ch’oe Chōnghŭi’s story “Dawn” (Yōmyōng, 1942) captures the hostility toward the United States that hung in the air in colonial Korea while Japan was at war with the United States. Given that “Dawn” is one of Ch’oe Chōnghŭi’s representative pro-Japanese literary works, this anti-American

sentiment among Koreans was likely instilled by the Japanese. Although Koreans were officially barred from enjoying American culture toward the end of colonial rule, it is difficult to say that anti-American sentiment was commonplace among Koreans. “Dawn” was written during a unique period when being anti-American was effectively synonymous with being pro-Japanese.

This anthology is arguably a self-portrait, composed through Korean literature, of the faces of the United States during the 20th century, a period also called the “American Century” (p. 3). This is an excellent anthology that uses literary texts to depict the various problems and transformations the United States, as an empire, has brought to Korean society. Reflecting existing perspectives, the book is composed of very typical and familiar themes. There are diverse facets of the United States as refracted through the mirror of Korea, and the image of the United States itself continues to shift; I look forward to the publication of another anthology that captures these diverse facets and changes as well.