

Fiction and poetry **vs.** **reality and truth?**

**Contesting Korean literature's
place within Korean Studies**

International Workshop
June 13 (Saturday), 2015
Department of East Asian Studies
University of Vienna

The promotion of practical knowledge and the cultivation of utilitarian expertise within area studies has given literature a rather diminutive standing in most East Asian Studies programs. At best, literature is mostly seen as mirror or response to social reality, while its rival mediums, the media, and supra-literary prose forms, are perceived to be much more reliable and concrete.

The notion that literature is a window into realities that are inaccessible through other media is not widely acknowledged or embraced. Yet literary writing continues to generate awareness of otherwise unexamined dimensions of the human condition and the phenomena surrounding us.

Thus, the underlying premise of this workshop on Korean literature is that, while fiction speaks to the realities that make up the purview of disciplines like sociology and socio-cultural anthropology, it — like a fine-toothed comb — picks up things that they miss.

We come together as scholars of Korean fiction and poetry, looking at literature, on the one hand, as possible mirrors of developments in modern and contemporary Korea, as “tales that are telling”; and on yet another level of analysis, we will attempt to deepen our understanding of how literature imparts a sensibility of observation and self-insight, complementing and suggesting alternatives to other ways of apprehending the world.

The invited internationally recognized speakers will focus on the relationship between (Korean) fiction and (Korean) realities, sharing their very concrete examples with the audience.

Vienna, 2015
Andreas Schirmer

As his mind [...] grappled with the power of the literature he studied and tried to understand its nature, he was aware of a constant change within himself and as he was aware of that, he moved outward from himself into the world which contained him, so that he knew that the poem of Milton's that he read or the essay of Bacon's or the drama of Ben Jonson's changed the world which was its subject, and changed it because of its dependence upon it.

(John Williams: Stoner. London: Vintage 2012, 26–27)

Yi Mun-yŏl's (hi)story of Kim Sakkat: True fiction?

Miriam Löwensteinová

History has been central to Korean literature since the first preserved chronicles, generating entrenched models and patterns. Pre-modern literature influenced and defined the requisite heroes and entire narrative strategies. Confucian historiography stressed two ideas: *mujing pulsŏn* 無徵不信 (fidelity to historical sources), and *suri pujak* 述而不作 (transmission without creative elaboration), i.e. trustworthy texts un-manipulated by authors or compilers. These ideals lent reality to texts in every respect and compelled readers to believe the contents. In this regard, even the *kodae sosŏl* genre — through the use of the biographical model in which the full biography is comprehended as reality — also preserved traditional structures. Here, the author's role became decisive: he served as an authority, directly participating as a witness in the events in question. The author intervened in the stories, transposing (or refiguring) the plot into his own time and space and adding authenticity to the story (by presenting it as if he himself had witnessed it).

The presentation will examine elements of Yi Mun-yŏl's novel *Siin* (The Poet, 1991), which can be seen as a biography of the vagabond poet Kim Pyŏngyŏn (金炳淵, 1807–1863) and/or as a reconstruction and re-evaluation of his poetry. *Siin* nevertheless offers up a new mythology, countering all of the legend-based biographies produced during the 20th century. We will summarize the possible historical and legendary sources used by Yi Mun-yŏl: “veritable” and “fictitious” plot relations, affinities between Kim Sakkat and Yi Mun-yŏl, and commonalities in their experiences. This raises the question of authorial intent: i.e. what kind of novel did Yi Mun-yŏl create from the perspectives of history and fiction.

Miriam Löwensteinová, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Korean Studies at Charles University in Prague. Her research concerns mostly pre-modern Korean literature, especially chronicles, historical prose, diaries, and *p'aesŏl* (folklore). She has translated both classical and modern literature, prose, and poetry (the most recent translations being the *Samguk yusa*, Ko Ŭn's *Maninbo*, Yi Mun-yŏl's *Siin*, Yi Sŭng-u's *Saengŭi imyŏn*). She lectures on Korean literature, history, and cultural tradition, and has written books and articles on various themes in Korean literature (including essays on classical literature, historical stories from the *Samguk* and T'ongil Silla period and a volume on the history of modern Korean literature (in Czech).



Living History, Writing Prose: Hwang Sok-yong, Victor Serge and Collective Agency

Anders Karlsson

Most general histories of Korea contain a section on the “culture” of various periods, describing literary trends among other things. In this context, literature functions to reinforce what political, social or economic history have to say about the period. Focusing on two novelists, Hwang Sok-yong and Victor Serge (who admittedly were many other things as well), this talk will assert that literature can be useful for historical writing in more independent and affirmative ways. Both of these writers had central roles in political upheavals and crucial historical moments, and composed prose about their experiences.

The talk brings Hwang Sok-yong and Victor Serge into comparison, because the latter explicitly argued for the historical truthfulness of prose literature and offers a useful analytical framework to approach the literary world of the former. The analysis will focus on the issue of (collective) agency in the works of these two writers and how such fictive writings, based on participation in historical events, which attempt to transcend individual experience, can inform historical research. These days, historians usually have difficulties with agency, concerned as they are with social and economic structures — unless they are engaged in political history and the individual agency of “great men”. In this respect, literature of this kind has an important role to fill.

Anders Karlsson received his Ph.D. in Korean History from Stockholm University in 2000 and is currently Senior Lecturer in Korean Studies at the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Japan and Korea, School of Oriental and African Studies, London. His main area of research is the social and institutional history of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Korea. He has written on rural unrest and rebellion, agriculture and taxation, famine and famine/disaster relief, and most recently on the ideological and social context of punishment. He also translates Korean literature into Swedish and has published five novels (with a sixth forthcoming), including the works of Hwang Sok-yong and Yi Mun-yol.



Food and Body: Expressions of Death and Life

An anthropological perspective

Antonetta Bruno

Based on the Korean novels *Vegetarian* (Han Gang) and *Tongue* (Jo Kyung Ran), I will compare how the original Korean and the Italian versions express and represent the relationship between food and body. In both novels, food is not merely something to feed one's body, but assumes multiple meanings, involving issues of gender, nationality, and collective and individual identity. These entail metaphors linked to internal and external perception and emotion, which become spaces of (past) memory, identification of (present) obstacles and expectations of (future) overcoming. Through food, procedures that take place within specific time frames are told and represented, making food a source of deeper meaning in the novels.

The identification of food with body as both object and subject is a shifting process and not a static one – a code much like a narrative structure. This bears on the nature of the relationship between food and the characters in a novel. Using this framework, this talk will inquire into the nature of the relationship between food and body in fiction as well as in society, revealing multiple layers of meaning that extend across those boundaries.

Antonetta L. Bruno obtained her Ph.D. in Korean Studies at the University of Leiden in 2002 and is Professor at the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Roma, La Sapienza. Her numerous publications focus on the exploration of shamanic language, language strategies, speech level switching, and the emotional transformation of the participants in religious contexts, verbal and nonverbal, including objects. Her interests also include Korean food, film, and popular culture. She is author of, among others: *The Gate of Words, Language in the Rituals of Korean Shamans, Sociolinguistic Perspective* (University of Leiden Press, 2002); a textbook for learners of Korean (*Corso di Lingua coreana*); a guidebook for Korean-Italian translation (*Metodologia di traduzione tra coreano-italiano e viceversa*). She is currently President of the *Association of Korean Studies in Europe* and serves on the board of many international journals.



Hyperboles in Sung Suk-je's Short Stories: Truth by exaggeration

Ekaterina Pokholkova

Sung Suk-je [Sŏng Sŏk-che] gained popularity for his short stories not only for his satirical narrative style but for satisfying the psychological demands of readers by introducing surprising, unthinkable realities and employing strange characters that make his audience laugh. Sung takes pleasure in the quaint individuality of odd, foolish, and even grotesque people who are not found in everyday reality but are nevertheless not hard to relate to. He does not criticize even the freaks among his characters, but uses them affirmatively to portray the specter of mankind.

The author employs a wide range of literary tropes, especially exaggeration, hyperbole, and excessive (if not obsessive) narration. A keen observer of his surroundings, he finds peculiar characters and presents them in all of their ambiguity, putting into question whether Sung is criticizing his characters or chastising modern society for not accepting slightly odd, yet still ordinary people, or whether he is being critical at all. Wildly tolerant of human flaws and follies — most vividly seen in his collection *Inganjeogida* (2010) — he may be called a satirist, but his humor is not the sort of militant irony that is usually associated with satire. As this talk will point out, all this makes Sung an exemplar of a literature that broadens our outlook on our surroundings — and our view of “reality”.

Pokholkova Ekaterina, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Korean Studies at the Translation and Interpretation Department of Moscow State Linguistic University (MSLU) and head of the Russian Association of Korean Language Professors. Her research addresses philology, specifically lexicology, language and discourse, and translation theory and praxis. She has also translated modern Korean prose (Yang Gwi-ja, Sung Suk-je, Gong Ji-young, Kang Byoung Yoong) and poetry (Moon Chung-hee) and has served as coordinator of KLTI projects held in Moscow. She has devoted several presentations and articles to the satire and comicality of Sung Suk-je, mostly from the point of view of translation challenges.



Between Historical Reality and Fictional Truth: Genre Conventions and Narrative Strategies in Korean Literature

Grace Koh

Building on the rich tradition of literary culture and the diversity of prose and lyrical forms dating from Korean antiquity, Korean fiction emerged as a popular genre in late Chosŏn (1392–1910). Then during Japanese imperialist encroachment, new forms of fiction, such as the short story and novel from the West, were introduced to Korea through Japan and became major ‘literary’ genres, quite distinct from historiography and other literary forms. Much of modern Korean literature came to be characterized by realist modes of fiction writing, which literary scholars linked primarily to the socio-political contexts of colonial occupation, civil war (1950–1953) and division, military rule and socio-economic development (1960s–1980s), democratization, and late modernity. Indeed, the weight given to contextualizing literary works among scholars, critics and publishers has privileged socio-historical relevance over literary form, and reinforced the categorical boundary between ‘history’ and ‘literature’.

Yet, while many Korean literary works confront the turbulence of twentieth century Korea, they are not simply socio-historical reflections and critiques. Thematically and stylistically, modern Korean literature is much more extensive and diverse than it might seem. This presentation seeks to (re)consider conceptions of ‘history’ and ‘literature’ in relation to Korean narrative strategies and genre conventions, and to discuss the role of cultural memory and the aesthetics of reception in defining historicity and fictionality. It will focus on theoretical premises and problematics, and introduce case studies (interactive reading of different text types), which audience members will be invited to discuss.

Grace Koh received her BA in Comparative Literature and French Studies at the American University of Paris, and her MSt in Korean Studies and DPhil in Oriental Studies (Korean Literature) at Oxford University. She is Lecturer in Korean Literature at SOAS, University of London, where she has convened the MA Korean Literature and MA Comparative Literature programmes and teaches courses on Korean literature, literary theory, and translation. Her research interests include Korean and East Asian literary traditions, critical theory, comparative literature, literary and intellectual history, and travel literature and cultural encounters. She is currently completing an edited volume on encounters between Korea and the West in travel literature (1700–1910) and a critical study and co-edited translation of the *Samguk yusa*.



Extracting the Marginalised Voice through Literary Analysis

Jerôme de Wit

Western scholarship on modern Korean history generally addresses the ebbs and flows of social, economic or historical events, focusing mostly on major institutions and intellectuals. While this provides insights into how and why North and South Korean society have changed, it has difficulty framing the lived experience of those who witnessed or were touched by certain events. Giving voice to those who are repressed — not just those who actively confront political power — is very difficult.

Literary analysis provides the means to deal with this, by helping us draw this out of texts to give us insight into how marginalised and suppressed groups manage to negotiate repression and find ways to resist authority. The very complicated limitations historians face in interpreting and giving space to such voices make this very significant. This talk will provide two examples of how tools from Literary Studies can be used to mine literary texts, exposing these (sometimes very subtle) voices of resistance. One example concerns the North Korean wartime short story “Mother” (“Ömöni”, 1951) by Han Bong-sik. It exemplifies how critiques of the state even found their way into propaganda texts, despite the severe constraints imposed on writers and what they were allowed to write. The second example is taken from Kobau (Kobau yŏnggam), a South Korean *manhwa* (comic series) by Kim Sŏng-hwan. Critical analysis of this cartoon reveals how the voice of the marginalised is depicted visually through the figure of the main character Kobau. It tries to get its intended message across to the reader, while evading censorship.

Jerôme de Wit, Ph.D, is Assistant Professor (Juniorprofessor) at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He received his Ph.D. from Leiden University, Netherlands, and has been a research fellow of the Asiatic Research Institute (Korea University) as well as the *Kyujanggak*. He has published numerous articles in the *Memory Studies Journal* and in several Korean journals addressing modern Korean culture and North and South Korean wartime literature. His focus on public discourses of history and society exposes various viewpoints of nationalism, identity, and history. His most recent work deals with North Korean children’s cartoons, postcolonialism in contemporary South Korean revisionist history novels, and social representation and identity in the films and literature of ethnic Koreans in China.



Antipolitical poetry: Kim Soo-Young's contradictions to trivial common sense

Andreas Schirmer

This talk will address the work of Kim Soo-Young [Kim Su-yǒng] (1921–1968), the iconic poet of modernism who is popularly associated with engaged literature in South Korea, while in fact he provocatively claimed that a poet's only responsibility is to recognize another poet and busied himself countering popular beliefs about what makes poetry “matter”, what makes it communicate “truth”, what “responsibility” a poet has, and what commitment poetry owes to (commonly taken-for-granted) “reality”.

While criticizing the obvious lack of freedom of his time, pointedly noting that one could not publish an innocent poem for fear that it might be judged inflammatory, Kim Soo-Young circumscribed, in a duly complicated way, his idea of “free” and freed poetry in his own poems and essays on poetry and also in carefully chosen Western poetological texts that he himself translated.

This talk will point out how, by claiming “silence” to be his ultimate aim and refusing to judge poetical enunciation as “assertions”, Kim Soo-Young deliberately refused to be trapped in the opposition between either “being relevant” or “retreating into a private shell”. It will show how this poet ardently resisted being cast as an ivory-tower *l'art pour l'art* aestheticist, while opposing the simplistic demand for “engagement” and defending an individuality that is not obliged to crusade for public action. Pursuing a spiritual and “chaotic” freedom made him a natural, but not trivial, opponent of the ruling dictatorial regime. As the talk will make clear, all of this makes Kim Soo-Young a provocative case of how, as many writers and defenders of literature claim, literature gives access to a reality that is not featured in common daily discourse.

Andreas Schirmer holds a Pd.D. in German Philology from the University of Vienna and completed a Ph.D. program in Korean language and Literature from Seoul National University. After serving as an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School for Translation and Interpretation of the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and an instructor at the Korea Literature Translation Institute, he has been engaged in teaching, writing a Korean language textbook, and carrying out research in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna since 2010. He serves as a vice-director of an “Overseas Leading World University Program for Korean Studies” and oversees exchange between Central and Eastern European Korean Studies programs as a CEEPUS-coordinator. Complementing his practical work as a translator, he devotes part of his academic research to issues that arise in the translation of Korean literature.



Copy-editor for this brochure: James P. Thomas, Ph.D.

Time:

June 13 (Saturday), 2015, 9:30–18:00

Location:

Seminarraum Koreanologie

Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna

Spitalg. 2, Campus Hof 5

1090 Wien, Austria

Initiator & Coordinator:

Andreas Schirmer

Speakers:

Antonetta Bruno (Università di Roma “La Sapienza”)

Anders Karlsson (SOAS, University of London)

Grace Koh (SOAS, University of London)

Miriam Löwensteinová (Charles University Prague)

Ekaterina Pokholkova (State Linguistic University, Moscow)

Andreas Schirmer (Universität Wien)

Jerôme de Wit (Universität Tübingen)

Interested students, colleagues, and members of the general public are welcome to participate.

Program:

As befits a workshop, there will be no fixed schedule for the individual presentations. The idea is that a productive workshop should evolve organically. Each speaker will present for a minimum of 30 and a maximum of 50 minutes. Audience (student and public) participation is highly encouraged, with the extent of interactivity depending on each speaker. Each presenter will be given a minimum of 20 minutes for discussion following his or her presentation. The schedule of presentations and coffee breaks will be adjusted as needed. And a small lunch buffet will be prepared.

This workshop was made possible through support by the Academy of Korean Studies, Korean Studies Promotion Service, funded by the Korean Government (MOE). Core University Program for Korean Studies, grant number AKS-2011-BAA-2105.