The Golden Phoenix

Seven Contemporary Korean Short Stories

translated by Suh Ji-moon

The Golden Phoenix

Seven Contemporary Korean Short Stories

translated by

Suh Ji-moon

with the editorial assistance of Daisy Lee Yang

BOULDER
LONDON

Published in the United States of America in 1998 by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301

and in the United Kingdom by
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The golden phoenix: seven contemporary Korean short stories translated by Suh Ji-moon.
A three continents book.
ISBN 0-89410-862-X (alk. paper)
ISBN 0-89410-882-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Short stories, Korean—Translations into English. 2. Korean fiction—20th century—Translations into English. I. Sŏ, Chi-mun.
PL984.E8G65 1999
895.7'3010804—DC21 98-39396

British Cataloguing in Publication Data
A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

Preface

As a translator for whom translation is an avocation rather than a vocation, I am sometimes troubled to find the process addictive. Every time I work on a project of translation, I vow to myself that I will return to my vocation proper as soon as that project is completed and remain faithful to it, but when I find a seductive story, my vow of fidelity to my primary occupation breaks down. So, each of the stories in this collection represents my capitulation to the temptation of Korean literature. The temptation, however, was a temptation of nine parts agony and only one part pleasure. So, there can be no denying that I am a fool. But I take comfort in the thought that the world might be a pretty dreary place if not for people who are willing to be fools.

I am a most lucky fool, for I have been able to seduce some extremely smart people into giving their time and effort to aiding and abetting my foolishness. My friend Daisy Lee Yang has rendered me priceless editorial assistance, going over the stories many times with scrupulous attention. She has also given me her unfailing moral support, which I needed often in the course of the agonizing and frustrating work of translation. Our mutual friend Esther Arinaga, a retired attorney residing in Hawaii, also lent her superb literary sensibility to further refining the stories. The seven original authors represented in this collection deserve my thanks for their kind permission to use their stories and their helpful explanations of dialectical expressions, regional customs, and other matters. The Daesan Foundation kindly put its faith in me and aided the project with a generous grant. Finally, it was a pleasure to work with Dan Eades, Leanne Anderson, and Steve Barr of Lynne Rienner Publishers, who were friendly, efficient, and punctual throughout the process.

—Suh Ji-moon

Contents

Introduction: A Context for Korean Fiction

Suh Ji-moon

Koreans credit themselves with having five thousand years of history, dating the founding of their first state in 2333 BC. Their long past is often hailed as "five thousand years of shining history." As a small country neighboring a colossal power (China) and several belligerent tribal nations whose fortunes have fluctuated violently, however, Korea's long history has been frequently one of tribulation. It is quite amazing that a nation that has undergone so many hardships and insecurities could attain such an advanced level of culture—in law, government, philosophy, education, literature, architecture, music, and in customs and ritual.

Korean literature has traditionally been written in both Korean and Chinese characters. In native Korean, writers have produced the Sijo—sparkling little gems of short poems, which express exquisite romantic yearning, unflinching loyalty, the joys of carefree pastoral life, worldly wisdom, or any number of emotions. Then there are the Kasa—long, rambling, loose poems, also in Korean, which often run very long and can be the vehicle for a wide variety of narratives or philosophies. Poems composed in Chinese characters, written by the cultured literati, tend to be delicately romantic, elegantly philosophical, and subtly ironic, sometimes flashing devilish humor and cutting sarcasm.

Prose literature can also be divided into tales written in Korean and those written in Chinese characters. Most of the tales written in Korean are of unattributed authorship. They may have been written by discontented noblemen who did not want their authorship revealed, both because prose compositions were considered beneath their dignity and because such works frequently contained strong criticism of the establishment. An author of common origin would also have wanted to avoid the complications and hazards

that could arise from irreverent passages in the book. Even though the tales are incredibly erudite and clever, they also abound in earthy humor, zest for life, and satire—both broad and subtle. There are also many improbable but exciting adventure stories—a number of which feature female generals who save the country from ruin and teach a lesson to their spouses who neglected or underestimated them.

Prose literature written in Chinese characters show elaborate plot complications and serious and learned didacticism. There are also eerie, supernatural tales in the Chinese tradition of ghost and fox tales.

An interesting feature of Korean folk and orally transmitted literatures is the appearance of funny goblins and comical tigers. Koreans believed (or hoped) that one could take advantage of goblins because they were easily offended and prone to the all-too-human weakness of wanting to get even. So, in a typical goblin story, humans first ingratiate themselves with a goblin, and tell him in confidence that they dread or loathe money above all else. And then they provoke him. The goblin is sure to try to persecute the humans by heaping tons of money on them. Tigers, on the other hand, befriended men through their generous good nature, although some tigers, like goblins, were greedy and gullible. A clever man or woman could take advantage of both types. A typical tiger story has humans convincing a tiger that it not only must not eat them, but owes them a favor. All of which indicate that Koreans tamed goblins and tigers—their most dreaded persecutors—in their imagination and turned them into their friends and benefactors. There is ample evidence to indicate that Koreans, in spite of their recurring and almost constant troubles and hardships, had abundant zest for life, fertility of invention, and buoyant optimism.

This rich literary tradition was unfortunately neglected when "modern" literature was inaugurated by a few Western-influenced writers early in the twentieth century. It was at a time of violent reaction against almost any legacy of the Chosŏn Dynasty as being benighted, inefficient, and responsible for the backward and helpless state of the country. The pioneers of modern literature were bent on making literature an instrument of enlightenment, and the dark and gloomy years that lasted almost the entire century didn't provide a favorable soil for liveliness, humor, and playfulness. It is only through an assertion of irrepressible artistic instinct and determined dedication that Korean writers could reach the kind of artistic achievement shown by the writers represented in this collection. Since the long-yearned-for and fought-for termina-

tion of military dictatorship in the late 1980s, however, Korean literature is experiencing a dynamic resurgence, experimenting exuberantly and delighting in uninhibited self-expression. Ch'oe Yun is one of the contemporary authors who is delving into the fertile inventiveness of premodern Korean literature for inspiration. In "The Flower with Thirteen Fragrances" Ch'oe, who is serious and playful by turns, uses the fairytale format to register her acute criticism of the contemporary academic climate and the fickleness of the populace.

Other forms of Korean art—calligraphy, painting, and music—also embody the lofty idealism and stately elegance on the one hand and love of fun and enthusiasm for life on the other, as well as the spectrum of moods and perspectives in between. The Korean scholar-artist's aspiration to ennoble his character to attain pure, untainted sublimity in his art is finely portrayed in the title story of this collection, written by a descendant of a scholar-literati clan. But Korean art did not always dwell in such lofty realms and was often friendly to simple folk even while satisfying the fastidious tastes of the connoisseurs.

Koreans often define themselves as a people of "*Mŏt*" and "*Hŭng*," two words that have no counterparts in English but which may roughly be rendered as "elan" and "exhilaration." Koreans still like to think of themselves as being a people "who know" Mŏt and Hŭng, but in recent years, they are much more likely to use the concept of *Han* to identify their national character.

Han is a concept quite antithetical to Mŏt and Hŭng. Mŏt and Hŭng are what Koreans have retained in spite of their sufferings; Han is a residue from the manifold and severe tribulations they bore in the course of their long history. Han covers a wide range of emotions originating from a sense of unjust injury and suffering. It is an emotion that transcends resentment toward the specific oppressor or wrongdoer, however, and which does not seek to resolve itself through wreaking vengeance on a specific person. It is rather a sorrowful brooding over one's own misfortunes and the pitiful helplessness of most human beings in the hands of evil malefactors and unfeeling fate. Thus, it contains both self-pity and bitterness, and seeks a sublimated outlet rather than an active redress. Although the energy and enthusiasm of modern Koreans would never suggest that Koreans harbor such a residue of bitterness from their past, it is true that most Koreans of middle age and older embrace this definition of themselves. Even many among the younger generations seem to feel a congenital affinity for this concept of their collective identity.

It is a misunderstanding that Koreans harbor Han from having been poor. Poverty, simply as poverty, does not generate Han. Poverty was not a dishonor in Korea; in the Confucian ideology it had an honorable place, implying absence of greed in those who bear it uncomplainingly. However, extreme poverty, if it was so extreme that it left lasting bodily impediments (due to malnutrition or inability to procure medical attention) or brought one excruciating mortification or injury at the hands of the wealthy and powerful, could well leave one with Han. In principle, it was injustice suffered at the hands of man that generated Han. But injuries inflicted by blind chance could also be a cause of Han if it wrecked a long-cherished hope or carefully built-up plans.

Poverty and suffering, of course, were hardly unique to Korea, especially in medieval and premodern times. But Koreans lacked cosmopolitan awareness; and their suffering was enough to implant infinite sorrow and undying regret in their hearts.

From time immemorial the great mass of Koreans were poor and oppressed. On top of that, there were internal warfares and foreign invasions that caused the loss of many lives and wrecked the basis of innumerable livelihoods. The Japanese invasion of the sixteenth century laid much of the country to waste and took countless lives, civilian as well as military, before the Japanese were driven out.

Korea was defeated and subjugated by the Mongols and Manchus when they invaded Korea after conquering China. Korean kings formally surrendered to the Yuan in the thirteenth century and to Q'ing in the seventeenth century, securing a very costly peace. Being a vassal state hurt the national pride of Koreans and caused many inconveniences. Throughout, however, Korea was able to maintain her sovereignty and was able to create a unique and highly developed culture.

Moreover, Koreans formulated and developed elaborate rituals and ceremonies and observed them in minutest detail. When one considers what precarious lives they led and how deprived most of them were, Korean respect for tradition, customs, and rituals is truly remarkable, and bears witness to the stability of the Korean character and the firmness of the Korean spirit.

But the Korean spirit, which had remained resilient through so much, received a deadly blow early in the twentieth century, when Korea was "annexed" by Japan, to remain its colony for thirty-five years. Several Western powers as well as China, Russia, and Japan competed to lay their hands on Korea, but Japan won the prize by defeating China and Russia in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-

Japanese wars and bribing off the Western powers. Such a historical experience inevitably aggravated the Han in the Korean psyche.

The unfair means Japan had adopted for annexation of Korea, and its ruthless oppression and unscrupulous exploitation of the Korean land and people, triggered protest movements and armed resistance, but the ingrained tradition of patient suffering formed by their settled agricultural way of life and the influence of Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism made many Koreans endure their humiliation and extortion rather than desperately struggle against their oppressors. Shamanism, the first religion of Koreans, taught that man could attain his end by propitiating and winning over various gods and deities, rather than by fighting and subduing nature and man. Buddhism, which came next and partly superseded and partly merged with Shamanism, preached acceptance of this world's hardships and tribulations as a consequence of one's karma in past lives. Buddhism commended respect for others' rights but did not encourage fighting for one's own rights.

Confucianism, which replaced Buddhism as the state religion and ideology at the beginning of Chosŏn Dynasty, did not foster a fighting spirit, either. The main focus of Confucianism was self-discipline of the elites in preparation for looking after the spiritual, moral, and material welfare of the masses. But the masses were regarded as the herd, who were to be the beneficiaries of enlightened governance by the nobility, but who could not be trusted to govern themselves. The Confucian ideology thus called for the noblesse oblige of the literati, but provided no defense for the lower classes when the literati became collectively corrupt and became oppressors and exploiters of the powerless instead of their guardians. In this philosophy based strictly on the hierarchical concept of social organization, any improvement had to come through the good will and wisdom of the ruling class, and self-determination of the masses was regarded as an impossibility, or at least very dangerous. So, when kings and ministers were wise and benevolent, the people fared relatively well; but when kings were perverse or stupid and their ministers corrupt, the people suffered. When the governed are utterly powerless, there is always a temptation for the governing elites to abuse their power. The bureaucratic corruption and despotism reached a nadir in the first half of the nineteenth century when kings were mere boys and royal in-laws wielded powers greater than any king ever did—while the commoners and outcasts were crushed under continuing and grinding extortion.

The Confucian ideology strengthened the strong family ties fostered through several millennia of an agrarian lifestyle. Confucianism, with its reverence for elders and ancestors, elevated the family and the clan as the focus of one's loyalty and primary sources of one's identity. There was little room for individualism to develop, and even today, after half a century of often desperate and fierce struggles for democracy, individualism is still synonymous with self-aggrandizement for many Koreans. The valorization of and reliance on family ties inevitably gave rise to nepotism, dependency, and a host of other evils, although at the same time family ties and clan solidarity gave one a great sense of security and safe haven from the storms and tempests of the world. We see the homage Koreans paid to the Confucian values vividly portrayed in the figure of the narrator's grandfather in "The Sunset over My Hometown." The narrator's affection for the kind of figure his ancient grandfather represented is shared by many Koreans, though mixed with a bigger dose of negative feelings for the past and its legacies.

With modernization of the country, breakdown of the class structure, and opening up of economic opportunities, the situation has changed. Now, Koreans are individualistic and self-reliant as never before; still, familial, regional, academic and other ties are fostered and exploited for collective self-promotion. Modern Koreans often find themselves in the self-contradictory position of priding themselves on the strength of their kinship and other social ties while at the same time denouncing the evils generated by those very ties.

The forced opening of the country at the end of the last century after being a "hermit kingdom" for many centuries was painfully disorienting to most Koreans. There had been only a few opportunities for importation of Western thought and science through China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Crown Prince Sohyŏn (1642–1645), King Chŏngjo (1752–1800), and a number of scholars became aware of the advanced science and technology of the West and the need to reform and modernize the country. But the crown prince was eliminated by his own father; the king did not live to completely root out the conservative elite clique and accomplish the reforms and innovations he had envisioned; and the scholars were kept out of the power structure. Then, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the seed of reform was ruthlessly eradicated by the royal in-laws who monopolized power. Prince Regent Taewongun, who expelled the in-laws from power in 1863 by successfully installing his twelve-year-old son on the throne as

heir to the childless Chŏljong, was an energetic reformist but a xenophobic. His son Kojong (1852–1919) did his very best to strengthen the country through importing Western technology while soothing and stemming the big powers, but he could not reverse the current of history. It was most unfortunate that Korea's awakening came a few decades later than Japan's. Japan, under the leadership of Emperor Meiji, opened its doors and channelled all its energies into modernizing itself. A few decades of head start by Japan in opening that country led to a powerless and helpless Korea and a mighty and aggressive Japan at the end of the nineteenth century.

Thirty-five years of colonial subjugation (1910–1945) remains an open wound to Koreans, even a half a century later. Not content to simply appropriate Korea's resources, Japan sought to crush the Korean spirit by debasing and vilifying Korean history. Independence movements were ruthlessly quelled, and any "subversive" moves were extinguished with imprisonment, torture, and execution. Citizens were humiliated and taunted. Toward the end of the colonial rule, use of the Korean language was forbidden, and Koreans were required to adopt Japanese names and give up their own. The colonial exploitation culminated in massive conscription of the labor force into mines and war factories and some 200,000 young women for sex services in Japanese army camps during World War II.

Such an experience would have been enough to severely hamper Korea's forward progress for many decades, but there were more ordeals in store for Korea. Almost as soon as the country was liberated, it became a stage of conflict again. Upon the defeat of the Japanese army, the Soviet Union occupied the northern half of Korea, and the United States the southern half. The United States and the U.S.S.R. quickly turned into rival superpowers, and a struggle between Soviet-backed communists and U.S.-backed liberal democrats raged across the whole country. "The Monument Intersection" shows innocent common people caught in this struggle, many of whom left behind all their possessions and ties and made a desperate flight to the South to escape the sinister fate that apparently awaited them in the Soviet-occupied and communizing North Korea.

The conflict divided the country in two, struck terror into the mass of simple folk, and culminated in the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The material damage and loss wrought by the war was nothing compared to the psychic wound it left. The ideological split resulted in brother killing brother and friend killing friend. Having cherished and relied so heavily on human ties from time

immemorial, Koreans were traumatized. "The Rainy Spell" demonstrates the human cost of the Korean War most poignantly, through the confrontation of two old women who are in-law counterparts, with sons in the Republic's (South Korea's) army and in the Communist guerrilla troupe. The confrontation is tragic, but the story ends with the two old women's reconciliation through their common loss, thereby holding out a possibility of national healing. Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic, was, however, bent on eradicating all communist sympathizers and retarded rather than promoted the healing of the wound. The hostile acts and rhetoric of North Korea also kept the threat of another communist invasion alive and reinforced the concept of communists as criminals, or ogres, in the popular consciousness. The Syngman Rhee government was also corrupt, and economic recovery from the devastation of the war was very slow. The 1960 Student Revolution seemed to promise a new beginning, at least politically, but an explosion of suppressed desires and demands drove the country to the brink of chaos, providing a pretext for General Park Chung Hee to seize power in a coup d'état the next year.

The military government of Park Chung Hee vigorously implemented economic development plans, and the long-repressed energy of Koreans seized the new opportunities opened thereby, resulting in an economy that grew by leaps and bounds. The reverse side of economic growth, however, was political oppression and curtailment of citizens' rights. Park Chung Hee ruthlessly squelched all opposition. Many dissidents who criticized and resisted his rule were imprisoned, tortured, or died of "accidents." Park seemed to have firmly installed himself as the country's head for good. But in 1979, after eighteen years of dictatorship, he was assassinated. There followed a brief "Spring of Seoul," but the illusion of a big swing toward democracy was shattered with the brutal suppression of the Kwangju Uprising in May 1980 and the emergence to the foreground of military strongman Chun Doo Hwan.

Chun's reign of terror lasted for seven years, and those were the darkest years of modern Korean history. Park Chung Hee, even though he was a dictator, led the country out of poverty into prosperity, and all Koreans, even those who hated him, acknowledged that fact. But Chun Doo Hwan came to power through a massacre and stood for nothing virtuous. Koreans hated him and despised themselves for living under his dictatorship, even though any active resistance to his rule meant danger to their lives and limbs. So, in the 1980s, Koreans lived under the oppressive sense of their

own helplessness, powerlessness, and cowardice. The lassitude and lack of self-determination of the narrator of "The Girl from the Wind-Whipped House" reflect the mood so many Koreans were in during those dark years, even though the original wound dates all the way back to the Korean War. "The Mural" portrays a painter who tries to be a painter rather than a professional dissident during the 1980s but who finds himself without an aim in life when the object of resistance was gone.

Fortunately, Chun Doo Hwan stepped down at the end of his seven-year term as he had promised, though not all Koreans had believed he would. When he tried to install a crony of his as his replacement, nationwide protests and demands for the restoration of the system of direct presidential election won out. Chun's capitulation to that demand, in June 1987, marked the end of military dictatorship in Korea.

The problems Koreans have to cope with are complicated and manifold. The legacy of the Confucian past; injuries and humiliations suffered as a vassal state to the courts in China and as a colony of Japan; postliberation ideological conflict; national division; the Korean War; and finally the three-decades-long military dictatorship—all of these left painful memories and practical problems needing to be addressed. Resolving these problems is especially difficult because the Koreans have been shaped by historical experience into sufferers rather than doers, endurers rather than redressers. Moreover, the government and the ruling powers were traditionally not objects of resistance but rather of loyalty and obedience. Ingrained mental habits had to be overcome and physical courage mustered. But the spread of the ideas of democracy, equality, and the duty of fighting for justice and the rights of citizenship gradually penetrated the Koreans' consciousness and convinced them that they owed a duty to themselves and their posterity to fight for those ideals.

The influx of Western civilization was another source of mental and psychological conflict. Western material civilization as well as some Western ideologies and institutions such as democracy and constitutional government inspired profound reverence. But Western customs and mores, as well as much of Western pop culture, were perceived to have a corrupting influence on Korean morality and manners. Koreans are still torn between nostalgia and shame for their legacies. Many Koreans still praise and defend their heritage in one breath and blame and denounce them in the next. And many do the same to Western culture as well. The economic opportunities that mobilized national energies and the

resultant prosperity resolved many of the conflicts but, at the same time, aggravated some of the old problems while ushering in new problems.

These are the factors and conditions that modern Koreans have to deal with and struggle against, to arrive at a viable self-image and way of life. Political development and the advancement of democratic institutions will relieve some of these problems, but there are other issues that every Korean has to work out and find a solution for on his or her own. This is the background against which the characters in these stories have to live and make something of their lives.

The Golden Phoenix

Yi Mun-yol

Yi Mun-yol (b. 1948) has been a reigning figure in Korean literature since the late 1970s. He has won both high critical acclaim and huge popular following. But he has not always been so lucky. In fact, he was extremely unhappy throughout his childhood and youth, his family having been on the police surveillance list as the family of a communist defector to North Korea. So, he had to struggle against poverty and social prejudice, and he repeatedly dropped out of school for financial and psychological reasons. However, throughout his boyhood and youth he read omnivorously, and his vast store of reading as well as his early sufferings became his great assets as a writer. And his vigor matched his creative fervor as well, so he has produced a dozen novels, several collections of short stories, and two collections of essays, besides two ten-volume translations of classical Chinese romances and other writings. Like most serious Korean writers, Yi criticized the economic inequality and political oppression that existed in the Korean society under military dictatorship. But he is more concerned with the national heritage and what it means and does to modern Koreans, and how modern Koreans could deal with it. So, he is a "must" read for those who want to understand the Korean culture and the burdens contemporary Koreans carry.

"The Golden Phoenix" (1981) reflects his serious interest in the Oriental heritage and its modern applicability. In this story, Yi explores the love-hate relationship between an old calligraphy master and his rebellious disciple, who stand for the traditional Oriental and the modern aesthetics, respectively. The gifted disciple rebels against the teacher's overly ethicized and ascetic principles, in preference for a more formal concept of beauty. The conflict results in a painful rift between the two, and their reconciliation is achieved through the teacher's last wish to have his disciple write the banner on his coffin. However,

though not an ascetic himself, the disciple turns out to be as rigorous about his art as his old teacher in the end. Yi's thoughtful approach to tradition, his in-depth knowledge of the Oriental heritage, and his serious and measured prose style are all finely showcased in this story.

Kojuk woke up, as if hit by a strong and swift stroke of light. He thought he had heard the morning bells of the nearby church only a moment ago, but already it was broad daylight. The lattice of the sliding door facing east looked dark against the lit-up panel of the rice paper. He tried to look around. Perhaps stirred by that tiny movement of his head, a faint fragrance of India ink spread into his nostrils. It must be the ink rubbed with the Taiwanese ink stick presented to him by Professor Pak, a self-declared "disciple" of his, upon the latter's return last spring from a tour of Southeast Asia. As Kojuk was already bedridden at the time and unable to use the brush and ink, the gift had made him rather more sad than happy. So, when the professor told him he bought it for him "so he could at least enjoy the fragrance," Kojuk had snubbed him with, "Do you take me for a ghost already?" But he did enjoy the fragrance. His daughter Ch'usu rubbed ink on the ink slab every morning to preserve the atmosphere of a calligrapher's room. Kojuk appreciated her thoughtfulness as much as the rare fragrance of the ink.

The fragrance of the ink told Kojuk that Ch'usu had already been in the room. The stroke of light was probably the sunlight that stole in when Ch'usu opened the paper door to go out. Kojuk tried to raise himself. It wasn't easy, because half of his body was nearly paralyzed. He thought of calling for someone but changed his mind and turned over. He did not want the peace and quiet and the solitude to be disturbed by cumbersome inquiries after his health and fuss over his comfort.

How often—Kojuk mused, gazing at the pattern of plywood on the ceiling—yes, how often have I awakened to this kind of quiet, solitary morning, with no one beside me? Yes, with no one beside me. It began in his childhood numerous years ago. One morning when he was five or six, he woke up to see a paper-covered window brightly lit. From outside came the sound of muffled sobbing. He was about to cry, feeling deserted, when his mother came in and fainted on him. She was clad all in white and her hair was dishevelled. Then there was another morning when he was seven or eight. He had gone to bed the night before with his mother beside him but woke up alone. After a while he felt a sudden dread at the