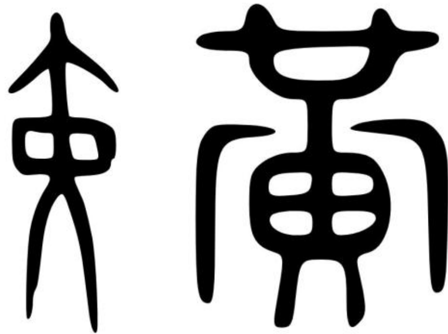
A Tale of Two Hwangs

(some notes on translation)



by Heinz Insu Fenkl

When I was in Korea on my Fulbright fellowship in 1984-85, I was sponsored in part by the now-defunct KCAF, the Korean Culture and Arts Foundation. After an initially failed attempt at collecting indigenous folktales from rural storytellers, I settled into a more practical routine of translating modern and contemporary Korean short fiction. I remember, quite vividly, how I came to translate some of the works of Hwang Sun-won—it started when I expressed interest in the works of Hwang Sok-yong. Since those days, both Hwangs have been among Korea's hopefuls for the Nobel Prize in literature. And since 1985, I seem to have come full circle from one Hwang to the other as I recently examined translations of each of their novels: *Trees on a Slope* by Hwang Sun-won and *The Guest* by Hwang Sok-yong. But let me start at the beginning:

At the invitation of the director of KCAF, I came in with a list of stories I wanted to translate. This was 1984, and I was just out of my

graduate program in Creative Writing. I had an interest in society and politics, and especially in Vietnam since I had been researching my father's role there for my first book, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*. I had also studied modern Russian (Soviet) literature quite extensively, so I was prepared to translate fiction that was socially and politically relevant. I suggested to the director of KCAF that I would like to translate two short works by Hwang Sok-yong: "Camel's Eye" and "The Pagoda." These were both stories that addressed the theme of Korean involvement in Vietnam. I was very pleased with these choices, because Hwang, I was told, was a politically sensitive writer. I was not prepared to hear from the director, in rather blunt terms, that I would not be permitted to translate those works. In fact, he took sheet of paper on which I had neatly printed my choices, and casually swept it off his desk. It made no difference that "The Pagoda" had won a major literary prize in 1970 or that Hwang Sok-yong was a bestselling writer at the time. Later, one of the junior staff at KCAF (who helped me get subversive and politically sensitive literature from underground sources) explained to me that translating Hwang Sok-yong would jeopardize my Fulbright sponsorship.

The following Wednesday (they called me "Suyo" because I always came on Wednesdays), I produced a different list of short fiction. This time, I had looked through the "suggested" list KCAF had provided, and I had spent several afternoons at the library poring through the works of those writers. Although the language was slightly dated and the style rather oddly "charged," I picked Hwang Sun-won's works because they felt familiar—the language was like what my mother and her sisters spoke, having grown up through exactly the same history. So I cut my teeth as a translator on the early prose works of Hwang Sun-won, who always denied that his work had any political content. Hwang Sok-yong, on the other hand, would make a visit to North Korea in violation of the National

Security Law in 1989. He could not return for fear of imprisonment, but lived in exile in Germany and the U.S. for four years. When he did return in 1993, he would be put in prison for seven years, five of those in solitary confinement.

Hwang Sun-won

There is no argument, in my mind, that Hwang Sun-won is the master of the short story form in modern Korea. There are writers who are stylistically more flamboyant, like Yi Sang, or others who write a more conventionally satisfying tale as far as short narratives go, but Hwang is unmatched in the sheer elegance and richness of his writing in that form. His short stories have the sensibility of prose poems even when their surface seems to be relatively simple. It is unfortunate that this goes

largely unappreciated by both the Korean and American academies, the former because it is preoccupied with classification and factionalism and the latter because the majority of early translations of Hwang's work were terribly botched. (Bruce Fulton, the co-translator of *Trees on a Slope*, and America's resident expert on Hwang, has made it his ambitious lifelong goal to translate and retranslate Hwang's collected works into English in the way they deserve.)

Hwang Sun-won was born into a Christian family 1915 in a small village South P'yongan Province (which is now located in North Korea). His father was imprisoned by the Japanese for one-and-a-half years for his involvement in the March 1st Liberation movement in 1919; after his release the family moved to Pyongyang where Hwang's father worked as a schoolteacher.

After his elementary and high school years in Pyongyang, Hwang, like many Koreans, went to Waseda University in Tokyo. He majored in English Literature and graduated in 1939. Into the mid 1940s, Hwang was living with his own family not too far from Pyongyang in Pingjangni, his original home town. By 1946, after enduring the instability and dangers of Communist attempts at land reform in the north, Hwang moved with his family (and his parents) to Seoul, where he took a job as a high school teacher. Having learned from his father's experience and the suffering it caused the family, Hwang did not get politically involved. During the Korean civil war from 1950-53, Hwang's family evacuated farther south to Taegu and Pusan, where they lived the unstable lives of refugees. Having moved back to Seoul at the end of the war, Hwang took a position at Kyung Hee University, and he taught Creative Writing there until his retirement in 1993, 78 years old.

When Hwang died in 2000, it was a terrible blow to Korean letters. Although his work had waned in popularity toward his later years, he had

probably been Korea's major chance at a Nobel Prize in literature. (The prize is only given to writers who are still living.) What had made him a viable candidate was not only the scope of his thematic engagements during his half century as a prose writer, but also the aesthetic qualities of his writing, which began to become evident in newer translations of his work into English, German, and French. Hwang not only depicted a wide spectrum of modern Korean history in his 100-someodd short stories and seven novels, he did it in such a way that the themes were integrated into the language of the stories—they were not rhetorically obvious but elegantly layered with symbolism and wordplay in a way characteristic of Hemingway's best works. Although Hwang had always denied political intention in his stories and novels, their depiction of political realities was more than evident to the reader, especially foreign readers.

I would classify myself as a semi-foreign reader of Hwang Sun-won. In 1984 and 1985, while I was translating some of his short stories from the *Nŭp* collection, I would spend full days working on four-page sections. I was entirely at a loss—in a kind of writerly speechlessness at the impossibility of translating his sentences, let alone entire stories. Because they were woven together like poems, even the shortest ones, the three-page "Snow," posed tremendous challenges to simple issues like word choice. Let me give you an example.

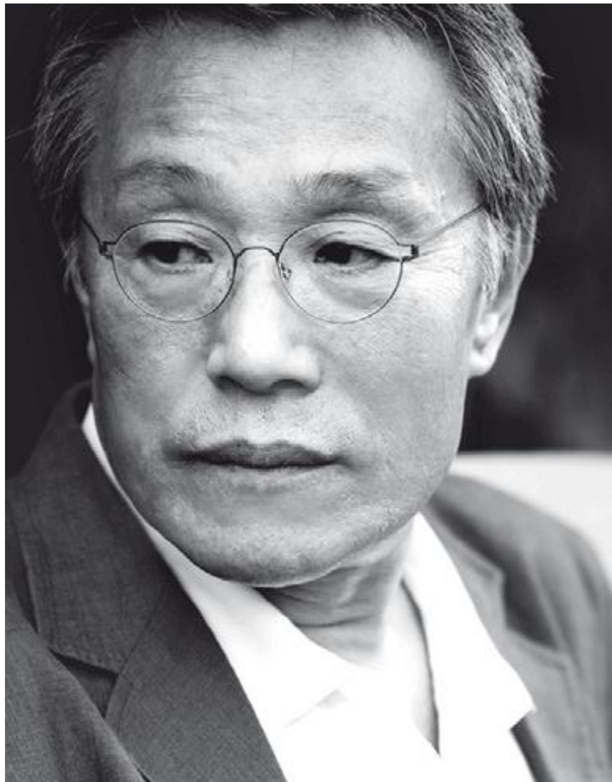
Toward the end of "Snow," a man on his way back home, after being kept away by harsh weather, meets a stranger at an inn. He learns, accidentally, that this man had just spent the entire winter snowbound inside a single room with his wife. Instead of being outraged, angry, or jealous—instead of assuming the stranger had slept with his wife during that time, which is what one might expect—the man "congratulates" the stranger for having survived the winter with his wife. One of the themes of "Snow" has to do with unusual camaraderie in the face of common

oppression (by the elements, under Japanese occupation) so the man's behavior is thematically consistent and also teaches a moral lesson. But it is decidedly odd. There is clearly some sort of dramatic irony involved.

The verb Hwang uses in this scene is *ch'ihahada*, which translates according to the dictionary as "to congratulate." We might take this to suggest a kind of praise in the context of the story. Hwang could have used other verbs here, but he was very specific about his word choice, which even in Korean (I think) is slightly odd. A closer examination of the Korean shows why: *ch'iha* has another meaning—"under the rule of." And probably not by coincidence, the next word in the dictionary happens to be *ch'ihan*, which translates as "a sex maniac" or "an amorous fool." *Ch'ihwan,* which is two words down in the dictionary, means "replacement." Hwang has elegantly layered one of the major themes of the story (living under the rule of Japan) with an anticipation of the reader's expectations of the husband (that he would assume the man had sex with his wife, that he was a "replacement" husband). All this under the surface of the morally and thematically positive "congratulation." He did this with a single word, which I know he had labored over quite consciously. Imagine translating a story with this sort of richness in much of its vocabulary.

Four hours of Hwang a day left me mentally exhausted. But I believe I learned more about writing—about word choice, sentence structure, symbolism, rhythm, associative layering—than I did in all of my previous education or personal experience as a writer. Working on my own prose, after Hwang, was like flying. By the time I was finishing my first novel in 1995, my own style had entirely changed. I remembered, with great nostalgia and fondness, how Hwang, just past his 70th birthday, could drink a whole bottle of *soju* and only then joke with me about how I was reading too much meaning into his work. But when I suggested certain

literary tricks—a sort of subliminal layering—he would often have a wry smile on his face.



Hwang Sok-yong

According to some critics, Hwang Sok-yong is currently Korea's most recognized and respected writer, both domestically and abroad. Bruce Fulton says that "More has been expected of Hwang Sok-yong than almost any other Korean writer of the past quarter century."

Hwang was born in 1943 in Manchuria, where his family had settled during the Japanese occupation. In 1945, after liberation, he moved to Hwanghae Province (currently in North Korea). Hwang also moved south following the Korean War, and he worked a range of menial jobs that allowed him to experience, first hand, the oppressive conditions endured by the Korean working class. He was politically active from the start, and he was briefly imprisoned when he was 20 for protesting against South Korea's dealmaking with Japan. In 1966, he was drafted and sent to Vietnam, where he was assigned to various "clean-up" details, hiding evidence of military wrongdoing against Vietnamese civilians. (His story, "The Pagoda," is based on his experience of hiding civilian bodies, and his 1985 novel, *The Shadow of Arms*, also comes from this background.)

By the mid 1980s, with the ten-volume epic, *Chang Kilsan*, selling millions of copies, Hwang was a celebrity. He had been an active participant during the Kwangju uprising in 1980, lending his writerly skills to the voice of political dissent against the dictatorship, but it was his 1989 trip to North Korea as a literary diplomat that got him into trouble with the government. The KCIA considered Hwang a spy, and when he finally returned from his voluntary exile, he was imprisoned for seven years. He was pardoned by the democratically-elected Kim Dae-jung in 1998.

Hwang Sok-yong's prose is not as densely layered as Hwang Sun-won's, but Hwang Sok-yong also uses wordplay and the relationship between the sound and appearance of Korean words to great effect. Titles have always been a particularly rich expression of layered meanings, so let me give an example by explicating the title of Hwang's novel *The Guest*.

Hwang refers quite specifically to one of the meanings of his title in his brief introduction to the novel. "When smallpox was first identified as a Western disease that needed to be warded off, the Korean people

referred to it as…'sonnim'…which translates to 'guest.'" Smallpox had the same terrible effect in East Asia as it had on the Native Americans. There was no cure, and the results were devastating. Even today, with smallpox under control, Koreans of my mother's generation bear multiple vaccination scars (I have seen as many as seven on one of my uncle's arms) as a reminder of that particular unwelcome guest. The only thing a helpless population could do was perform a ritual exorcism in which a shaman sent the guest away after the appointed duration of its stay. Hwang doesn't say, but that time was traditionally known to be thirteen days—twelve days and the day of departure, permitting an exorcism on the thirteenth day. So the use of *The Guest* as title also explains why the novel is structured into a twelve-part shamanic ritual or *kut*. Only the guest in the context of the novel is not smallpox—it is other foreign invaders. "Christianity and Marxism," says Hwang, "both were initially as foreign as smallpox." The most recent guests in Korean political history, then, were brought by the Soviets and Americans.

But the main character of the novel, Ryu Yosop, is also a guest. He visits his old hometown in North Korea. In fact, his given name is also a "guest," since Yosop is the Koreanized "Joseph." Meanwhile, there are other guests in the novel—these visit from the world of spirits: the ghosts of his brother Yohan (John) and the many people he murdered. Hwang shows us a series of thematically-related inversions: North vs. South, ghost vs. human, propaganda vs. history, present vs. past, East vs. West, Christian vs. Marxist. The structure of the novel, Hwang admits, is explicitly to suggest an exorcism, or a *kut*.

Like many political writers after the Kwangju massacres of 1980, Hwang turns back toward Korean folk tradition as a unifying principle. In fact, this is also hidden in the very words of the title, to which he might have performed a series of inversions in the way writers like Yi Sang

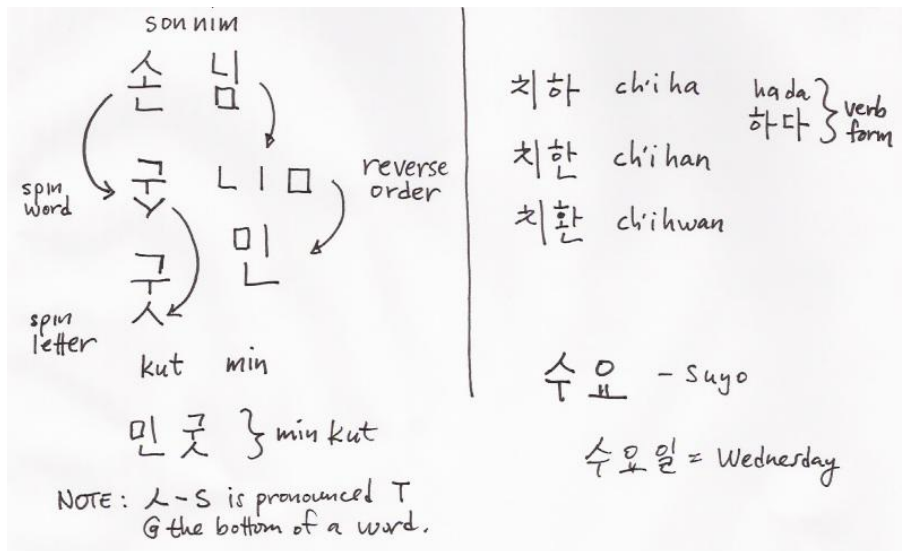
played with the appearance of Korean words written in *hangul*. For Hwang, this wordplay was not mere cleverness, it was integral to the theme of inversion and dichotomy.

The words in the Korean title are *son* and *nim*—*sonnim*—meaning "guest" quite literally. But if one turns the *son* upside down and rotates the lower letter (two inversions), one gets the word *kut*. *Nim* by itself can have a meaning similar to "beloved," and so one has "Beloved Kut," as in a beloved rite of exorcism that gets rid of foreign "guests." But Korean used to be read right-to-left in recent memory. If we perform that inversion and also take the three letters of *nim* and arrange them in reverse order (another inversion), we get *min*, meaning "the people." *Min Kut*—The People's Exorcism. Read left-to-right in that form, we have *Kut Min*, which can be read as "The People who Exorcise." In the course of the story, we learn who the people are, why they must perform an exorcism, and what they must exorcise. (I'm using the term "exorcise" here not in the sense of the stereotypical kind of exorcism we're exposed to in the media, but in the Korean traditional sense of performing a *kut* to allow unhappy spirits to move on and relieve the stress their lingering causes for the surviving community. Keep in mind that this is only one of many different kinds of *kut* in Korean tradition.)

Hwang says, "During the Korean War, the area of North Korea known as Hwanghae Province was the setting of a 52-day nightmare during which Christians and Communists—two groups of Korean people whose lives were shaped by two different 'guests'—committed a series of unspeakable atrocities against each other." Many American reviewers were predictably put off by this explicit rhetoric, especially coming in an introduction, but to Koreans this allegory has a profound resonance. *The Guest* as a novel works very much as a *kut* for a Korean reader, though its structure to an uninformed Western reader may seem a piece of clever

artifice. Having attended several *kut* when I was a child, I could feel that same visceral quality in the novel, and its introduction of ghosts did not at all read like a nod to magical realism or horror fiction—it was a glimpse of the hidden truth. (Rumor has it that based on the strength of *The Guest*, which had been translated into French, Hwang was a contender for last year's Nobel Prize.)

Hwang is still dwelling on the Korean shamanic tradition. His next novel is based on the legend of Princess Pari, the virtuous outcast daughter who must travel to the land beyond the living to save her royal parents from death. Princess Pari is the mythic ancestor of Korean shamans.



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