



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Human Decency* by Kong Ji YÅ•ng (review)

Dafna Zur

*Acta Koreana*, Volume 11, Number 3, December 2008, pp. 235-269 (Review)

Published by Keimyung University, Academia Koreana



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/805042/summary>

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

*Human Decency*. By Kong Ji Yǒng. Translated by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. Published by Jimoondang as part of the Portable Library of Korean Literature, Short Fiction no. 24.

Oftentimes, contemporary Korean fiction takes the reader, sometimes by force, down the dark memory lane of modern Korean history. Because so many works of contemporary Korean fiction are highly referential, the reader is often enticed to consider a text's social and political background. While this is not a unique phenomenon to Korea—works of literature from all corners of the world often deal to greater or lesser extents with pressing political and social issues—it seems striking that Korean works of fiction so frequently draw the attention of their readers to the political and social realities being depicted, and do so in a manner that come at the expense of poetic expression. Kong Ji Yǒng's short stories, "Human Decency" and "Dreams," included in the collection *Human Decency* published by Jimoondang, are both highly referential texts. Since her works are so fraught with political and social references, this review will first examine the historical context in which Kong Ji Yǒng writes, and will then examine the stories in greater detail.

In the collection of essays, *Twentieth Century Korean Literature*, it is noted that "an important strand of thought regarding literature in 1980s Korea was that it should interrogate social concerns and articulate communal values... the eighties were, in many ways, an era of causes. In contrast, the nineties has been called an 'era of disillusionment.'" (97) Born in 1963, receiving her higher education in the eighties, and publishing the stories "Human Decency" and "Dreams" in the nineties, Kong Ji Yǒng's works are almost textbook illustrations of the existential crisis and disillusionment experienced in the eighties and nineties. This disillusionment followed on the heels of the collapse of the Eastern European bloc, since "...the Cold War, which had served as the justification for all manners of political

oppression within South Korea for half a century, was effectively over.” (97) The shock brought on by the collapse of the Eastern European bloc is understandable when considering how greatly South Koreans had struggled to achieve freedoms of expression, and labour and human rights. Generally speaking, literature from this period is often marked by sentimentalism, as writers dwelled on the emptiness they felt when their struggle for political and social change had been rendered meaningless. Kong Ji Yŏng, and other writers of her generation, delved into their personal and collective pasts, and wrote nostalgic pieces that questioned their place in the world, and how to make sense of the past and future. Kong publishes the two short stories included in the collection *Human Decency* in the early nineties, and the stories bear witness to this particular point in history.

Kong’s short story “Human Decency” appeared first in 1993. The story is told in first-person narrative by a woman who writes for a women’s magazine, and who is deliberating between two stories for her magazine’s next edition. She is encouraged to run a story about the return of an expatriate woman artist whose success is demonstrated by her fame abroad. Yet she is drawn to the originally scheduled story about a former prisoner who had been incarcerated on political grounds for twenty years, and who now, upon release, lives a life of anonymity. The dilemma itself embodies the struggle of Kong’s generation between dwelling on the past, on memories and on the pain that these memories provoke, and moving on, celebrating freedom, and looking for new role models and new life styles.

In the opening of the story, the narrator has come to interview artist Yi Minja at her home. The artist’s demeanour, her dress, and her home and its surroundings enhance the writer’s opinion of Yi. The reader learns that the artist lives outside of Seoul “when she’s in Korea,” (7), which already implies that she enjoys the freedom to come and go as she pleases. Yi Minja looks “wilfully pure, like a long wildflower blooming in the wind... as if she possessed a magic that protected her from the wind...” (8) She is uninhibited like a wildflower, and is unaffected by the chilly wind blowing that day. This is a woman who has travelled to India and returned with what must seem like an incredible luxury to Koreans at the time: the physical and spiritual space to meditate. Even her puppy meditates. The artist is everything that the narrator, who lives alone and who is facing an existential crisis of her own, is not. The narrator confesses: “I felt a yearning to be free and fearless... [I felt] a curiosity about freedom, wandering, transcendence, the achievement of a dream.” (12) Seeing Yi in her quiet, meditative state draws the narrator to think of Kwŏn Ogyu, the man whose story had been postponed in favour of the woman artist. Thinking of Kwŏn, the narrator recalls “the rented room beside the gate of a shabby Korean-style house at the end of a winding

alley... where Kwōn Ogyu had lived since his release from prison two years earlier.” (15) But, as the photographer notes, “who cares about a long-term prisoner now that we’ve got a civilian government? Right?” (16) The magazine writer herself doesn’t bother to pick up the manila envelope with her story on the prisoner when the envelope falls on the floor of her office. But then she recalls details from her visit to Kwōn’s house, a house of concrete heaps and dark shade, and these images are in stark contrast to Yi Minja’s log house visited at the opening of the story. The artist’s house is adorned with her paintings; Kwōn’s is decorated with photos of friends who had been executed or tortured to death. One space belongs to the future, to beautiful images championed by Sotheby’s; the other is a museum that pays tribute to those with a forgotten past and who have no one to remember them. Yi Minja, the artist, finds freedom in mediation; Kwōn Ogyu is trapped in his house because he has forgotten how to open doors from the inside. After her interview with the artist, the narrator immediately comes up with a title for her article; after meeting with Kwōn, the narrator admits that “all I could think of were things that would be difficult to make into a story” (30).

Kong successfully uses physical spaces to reflect the state of mind of her characters. Her characters are juxtaposed in a way that brings out the inner conflict of the narrator. However, Kong’s work suffers because her narrator seems overly conscious of her audience, and keeps talking and divulging ‘too much information’ which does not contribute to the overall flow of the narrative. For example, upon meditating on one particular image of radish shoots, she says: “Why sorry like a radish root? That much I think I can answer,” (13) a flippant tone that drags the reader into the thought process of the narrator in a manner that can perhaps be done more subtly. She provides ‘too much information’ again a few paragraphs later: “Now, before I leave for work I simply have to go around back.... This is why I’m quick to use the metaphor of a radish shoot to describe that unexpected outpouring deep inside me.” (14) She ends her story with a direct appeal to the reader: “tell me!” she cries, “Now that the Eastern bloc is history, are sighs, resignation, and dissipation all that remain in our minds?” This rhetorical question seems to demand the reader’s fervent agreement. Kong insists on ‘feeding’ her readers more and more information, letting her shower of words guide the reader to a correct understanding of her story. After reviewing all the images she had used in the beginning of her story, she goes back to the chatty tone she uses with her imagined audience: “Well, I guess I had better talk one last time about the radish shoot.” (59) Kwōn’s work might have been better off with less explicit guidance. However, the work is readable, largely thanks to Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton’s poetic language which bring to life some of the imagery, such as

the “purple lilacs [that] looked like they were cringing” (7) and the “distant, wind-swept hills with their pastel blossoms.” (13)

Following on the heels of “Human Decency” is the short story “Dreams,” published first in 1993. “The stuff of dreams,” (12) claims one of the magazine writers in “Human Decency”; in the first story, dreams are implied in a sarcastic manner, hinting perhaps that some dreams are built on others’ suffering. In “Dreams,” dreams are double sides of a coin: they can be both dreams of hope and possibility, things of the future, but also dreams of the painful past, closer to nightmares. The characters in “Dreams,” like in “Human Decency,” are writers and artists. The first-person narrator is a writer suffering from writer’s block, a woman trying to burst the dam that prevents her from typing words on the screen. She is also a divorcee who, by her own admission, exists on the margins of life, a woman who lives vicariously through the stories her friends tell her and through confessional letters she receives from young women. Much of the story is set in the evening or pre-dawn hours, something which takes away the sunlight and adds to the story’s atmosphere of loneliness and despair.

“Dreams” suffers from the same heavy-handed writing as that of “Human Decency,” only in greater quantities. In this story, the narrator describes a mysterious nightmare she has: in her dream, she is driving without knowing how to drive, and ends up driving on top of a sign. Instead of leaving it up to the reader to make sense of that dream, Kong proceeds to spell out its meaning a few pages later: “As my dream had warned, I was not traveling on the road but getting lost on a sign showing the way to the road. So perhaps the time had come for me to get off the sign and begin to take the road.” (106) The reader is confronted with a great number of political explications: “What I was angry at was not my writing but my life. Maybe my generation was one that revelled in killing and despair. Maybe we did think protest slogans were literature...” (106) “Standing outside the lines of the nineties, I set myself the task of writing about the nightmares of my generation: about how the memories of our time—a time full of killing and despair—were still so vivid that they were controlling our dreams. And about the people of the nineties, who could not leave their nightmares behind even when they awoke.” (107) In the same whiny tone of the letters she receives, the narrator drones on about her generation: “Those ten years had not been easy, especially for those of us who were young. We were now simple—simple and superficial. In ten years’ time, we had become shallow.” (72) This confessional tone hinders the development of any kind of sympathy for her characters; they come across weepy and whiny rather than deeply human or sincerely sympathetic. When the narrator jokes and says “we’re Scoops owls,” one listener, Pak, is

amused while the other, Kim, is puzzled, and suddenly the narrator bursts into tears—a moment which does more to leave the reader perplexed than moved.

“Dreams” experiments with a potentially interesting structure for its narrative—it is divided into six distinct time sections that jump back and jerk forward. Yet ultimately, its sentimental and heavy-handed style, and the writer’s insistence on glossing and interpreting the text on the reader’s behalf, stymies its effectiveness as a short story. To their credit, and despite minor glitches, translators Kim Miza and Suzanne Crowder Han breathe life into the narrative with poetic expressions such as, “His face [was] blurred by nostalgia” (62) and “I could feel my nerves oozing out between the seams.” (63). While both “Human Decency” and “Dreams” are acclaimed pieces of fiction in Korea, and while both stories were lucky to come alive in English through fine translations, one would hope to see more translated Korean fiction that stands on literary merit, and not just as a supplementary tool to learn about political history in Korea.

DAFNA ZUR

*University of British Columbia*

*Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaö̃m Synthesis in Silla Korea.* By Richard D. McBride, II. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008. xiii, 229 pp. (ISBN 978-0-8248-3087-8, hardcover \$52.00)

In recent years there has been somewhat of a surge in scholarship on Buddhism in Korea. This scholarship has gone a long way towards clarifying many facets of this important religious and intellectual tradition, which has been an integral part of Korean society for centuries. Works such as *Currents and Countercurrents: Korean Influences on the East Asian Buddhist Traditions* have critically reassessed the role of Korean Buddhism in shaping broader East Asian Buddhism and works like *Religions of Korea in Practice* have provided essays on soteriological dimensions of Buddhism in Korea. Yet another blossoming field is that of translation, which has built on seminal translations of Wö̃nhyo, Chinul and Kihwa’s works and is unfolding in the numerous translation projects now taking place. Richard McBride’s *Domesticating the Dharma: Buddhist Cults and the Hwaö̃m Synthesis in Silla Korea* is a further contribution to the growing body of scholarship on early Korean Buddhism. McBride’s work adds to this field of scholarship by exploring the contours of Buddhist practice in Silla, focusing on the worship of particular Buddhist deities, the domestication of Buddhism and its practices in Silla, how the aristocracy and elites adopted elements of Buddhist symbolism for their own